

A MARRIAGE PROPOSAL

PROVERBS 31:1-31

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**CHOOSING WORLDLINESS OVER GODLINESS IS AS DISASTROUS
AS CHOOSING THE WRONG SPOUSE**

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A MARRIAGE PROPOSAL

PROVERBS 31:1-31

Here we are at the last chapter in Proverbs. I hope you have enjoyed studying through this type of poetic literature. It is a lot more difficult than reading through and studying straight narrative. I know that I have enjoyed it. The poets have made their case. Following God leads to wisdom and all its rewards. Following the world leads to folly and all its misery. They now make it clear that the choice is up to us.

In order to demonstrate how important our choice to follow God is, the author compares the choice as important as a prospective husband's choice on who to marry. That one choice will affect the rest of his life. A good choice will bring him years of happiness. A poor choice will bring him disaster.

I'm not saying that this incident happened here. After all, I need to protect the guilty. A couple of years back, a young man got sick. The doctors just couldn't seem to find out what was wrong. Finally, his doctor sent him to Northwestern Hospital to see an infectious disease expert. After several tests, the doctor called the wife and me into his office. He said to the wife, "Your husband has a rare form of anemia. Without treatment, he'll be dead in a few weeks. However, the good news is that it is treatable. With good nutrition, he should make a complete recovery.

You'll have to be sure to get up early each morning and make him a good healthy breakfast, eggs, bacon, oatmeal, and whole grain toast. You should pack him a nutritious lunch. Remember to make everything yourself. Bake the bread and make the tuna fish. For dinner, make sure he gets plenty of meat and vegetables.

Oh, and one more thing. His immune system is weak so you'll have to keep the house spotless. Do you understand? Do you have any questions?"

She said, "No, I understand."

The doctor said, "Do you want to tell your husband or should I?"

The wife said, "I'll tell him." So we went into the room where her husband was waiting.

He was anxious and he said, "It's bad isn't it?"

She nodded, and then broke out into uncontrollable sobs. She looked at him and blurted out, "The doctor said you're going to die."

Making a bad choice in marriage can be devastating. Making a wrong decision in regards to following God can be worse.

The main idea of this morning's text is meant to be the conclusion of the poets' reasoning throughout the whole book. **CHOOSING WORLDLINESS OVER GODLINESS IS AS DISASTROUS AS CHOOSING THE WRONG SPOUSE.**

In other words, the wisdom writers have presented their case for following God. A decision to follow God leads to a lifetime of peace. A decision to reject God leads to a lifetime of misery. But in the end, God created us with freedom to make that choice.

Let me just make some opening remarks as to the structure and context of this chapter. The book of Proverbs started out by a father giving advice to a son. The last chapter of Proverbs ends up with a mother giving her son advice.

Next, this chapter is meant to be a continuation of chapter 30. The word king is used 4 times at the end of chapter 30 and it is used 4 times here at the beginning of chapter 31. Chapter 30 verse 1 starts out, "The sayings of Agur son of Jakeh - an oracle," or an oracle could be read, "of Massa." Chapter 31 verse 1 starts out almost identical, "The sayings of King Lemuel - an oracle," or again oracle could be read, "of Massa."

And lastly, I am going to take a much different approach to verses 10-31. I think in order to understand the "Proverb's chapter 31 woman", we need to compare her to Lady Wisdom in chapters 7-9. I want to warn you that my approach is not held in any commentators I have read. So I invite you to check me very carefully.

I. AVOID LADY SEDUCTION (VS 1-9)

Choosing Worldliness Causes Us To Forget Who We Are And What We Are Truly Destined For

Let's get started with the first section. In verses 1-9, King Lemuel's mother warns him to avoid Lady Seduction. For us the warning is this. **CHOOSING WORLDLINESS CAUSES US TO FORGET WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE ARE TRULY**

DESTINED FOR.

A. WE ARE ROYALTY (1-2)

Verses 1-2 remind us that we are royalty. This section is addressed to King Lemuel. First of all, it is not a Hebrew name, but it probably means, "One who is devoted to God." Wisdom, God, His salvation, is meant for all people.

Next, this is an oracle, a prophetic word. In other words, these instructions are not some ideas that originate with human beings. These are inspired directly by God.

And thirdly, God has chosen to speak these words through a woman, Lemuel's mother. Now here is where it gets interesting. We have seen that for the most part, the parallel thoughts of poetry came in two's. Here it comes in three's. Lemuel's mother describes herself three times. She addresses Lemuel as her son. In other words, Lemuel is her child to care for. She is charged with his nurture. Secondly, Lemuel is the son of her womb. In other words, Lemuel is her child by birth. And thirdly, Lemuel is the son of her vows. Lemuel is her child by faith. Lemuel is part of the royal family by birth. This is a royal family. This is a godly family.

Listen to how the Apostle John describes our entrance into God's royal and holy family,

"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God; children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God"

(John 1:12-13 / NIV).

The Apostle Peter refers to us as a nation of priests. The Apostle Paul refers to us as Ambassadors of the royal family.

We are God's children by a spiritual birth. When we received Jesus, we were born again. By faith and by spiritual birth we became God's children. We are now under the care and direction of God's Holy Spirit. We must remember that we are all princes and princesses of God's royal and holy family.

B. THE NATURE OF SEDUCTION (3-7)

Verses 3-7 paint a pretty clear picture as to the nature of seduction. Verse 5 negatively states what our purpose in life is as part of God's royal family. We are to remember, follow, teach, and live the word of God. And we are to work for the oppressed. I

started this year by reading books on prayer by Richard Foster and Bill Hybels. I've just finished a book called *Unceasing Worship* by Harold Best and I am presently reading *Practicing the Presence of God* by Brother Lawrence. It seems to me that the common thread all these books have is that as children of God, we are to intentionally live in God's presence. In other words, the fact is that we are always in God's presence. Successful Christian living comes as we intentionally live and make decisions based on that reality. Our energy should be spent loving God and others. Jesus spent His life in close communion with the Father as He went about setting people free from sin, Satan, and death. He was not distracted from His mission.

As Christians, we are to continue on with the mission of Jesus. We are not to be distracted by worldly things. There are many worldly things that draw our attention away from our purpose in life, but Lemuel's mother points out two of the most obvious - sex and alcohol. The two things about worldly distractions are that they promise excitement and immediate gratification. Look at the warning in verse 3. It is addressed to men, but women are to equally warned. Spending energy on illicit sex will drag you down physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Think about two of the greatest kings in Bible history, King David and his son, King Solomon. David committed adultery and had the woman's husband killed. David lost one of his best and most loyal soldiers. And after this, David's personal life went down the toilet and his kingdom went into chaos for the rest of his life. King Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines. The Bible says that these women led him astray and turned his heart away from the One True and Living God to many other destructive false gods. If it could happen to such wise and godly kings as David and Solomon, surely it could happen to us. We need to be very, very, very careful about remaining sexually pure in thought and in behavior. Just so I won't overstate this, I will use the word almost. In almost every case of demonization I have run into over the years, there has been some sort of sexual immorality or sexual abuse involved. Sex is powerful. It bonds a married man and woman together physically, spiritually, and emotionally. It has the power to create life. But it is equally powerful to destroy lives as well. Remaining pure in thought and in deed is important.

Verse 4 reminds us of the seductive nature of alcohol. How would it look if the press caught a party in the Oval Office where President Bush, Vice-President Cheney, and other staff members we bombed out of their minds? Would it look very presidential to see these people laughing, giggling, slurring their words, and stumbling around? No. It would look horrific. You and I are princes and princesses. We will someday rule the universe with Christ. We are to be dignified, royal, and holy. Our minds are to be clear and focused on the Kingdom of God.

The purpose for drinking or taking drugs is to alter the mind so people can forget about what their lives are all about. Verses 6-7 are not condoning drinking and drugs. They are merely observations of how depressing and hopeless peoples' lives are who don't know Christ. People escape their fears by getting high. They need to escape or they will go crazy. They want to forget their misery.

But as God's children and representatives, we are not to forget their misery. We are called to love them and lead them to peace and contentment. We are not to be sidetracked by worldliness. Think about the things that distract us from our mission. We get caught up in the computer, or video games, or television, or shopping, or all sorts of other things.

C. THE NATURE OF ROYALTY (8-9)

Verses 8-9 bring us back to our mission. It describes the nature of royalty. We have a great calling in life. We are called to set people free. We are to care for the poor. We are to speak up for those who cannot speak up for themselves. We are to care for the needy. We are called to work for justice.

Here is the point of this section. We are God's children. We have been given the mission of setting people free from the bondage of sin, Satan, and death. If we are all caught up in living sensual lives, we will lose sight of what is important and we will spend so much time and energy chasing worldly pleasures, we will not have enough time and energy to work for God's kingdom. **CHOOSING WORLDLINESS CAUSES US TO FORGET WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE ARE TRULY DESTINED FOR.** To me that sounds sad that we could possibly not fulfill our destinies of greatness.

Verses 1-9 told us what to avoid. Verses 10-31 tell us what to embrace. We are to embrace Lady Wisdom. **CHOOSING GODLINESS WILL LEAD TO RICH, FULFILLING LIVES.**

II. EMBRACE LADY WISDOM (VS 10-31)

Choosing Godliness Will Lead to Rich, Fulfilling Lives.

Verses 10-31 form an Acrostic in the Hebrew. It progresses through the Hebrew alphabet. So it must be translated as a poem. Here is where I am going to part company with all the commentaries and scholars I have read and studied. Most scholars believe this is a model of a godly wife. I think this section primarily is a marriage proposal by

Lady Wisdom. So please let me warn you up front that I have not found any commentary that takes this position so please weigh carefully as I preach through this section.

A. WHO CAN FIND HER (10)

Verse 10 starts out, "*A wife of noble character, who can find her?*" Well if we are looking for the wife described in the rest of the chapter, I would say, "Nobody can find her, because she doesn't exist." I think these verses have virtually imprisoned women who take the Bible seriously. Let's even take it a step further. Let's equally apply these verses to husbands. What man could live up to these standards? None. Look, as great a husband (tongue-in-cheek) as I am, even I can't meet all these qualifications. So if these verses are the model for the ideal wife, when the poet asks, "Who can find her?" I would say, "Nobody."

However, if these verses refer to Lady Wisdom and her marriage proposal, then the answer to the question, "Who can find her?" would be, "Everybody." I think this is a continuation of the personification of Wisdom in chapters 7-9. In those chapters, we were all, both men and women invited to put ourselves in the role of a young man. We were approached by Ladies Seduction and Wisdom. Both women approached us, trying to win our attention, our affection, and our loyalty.

Here is what I think is going on here. Again, we must all put ourselves in the shoes of a young man planning to get married. We need to ask ourselves, "What would it be like to be married to a woman like the one described here? What would life be for us if we found a woman like this to marry?" If you women are having a hard time wrapping your minds around this principle, then try to forget this is a description for the model women. Make the Proverb's 31 woman the Proverb's 31 man. Ask yourselves, "What would it be like to be married to a man like the one described here? What will life be for us if we find a man like this to marry?" I think that's bad poetry, but it will work. The ideal is for us to put ourselves in a young man's shoes because we will have to decide who we will ask to marry us, Lady Seduction or Lady Wisdom.

Now to be sure, we as believers are to imitate and demonstrate the wonderful character qualities described in these verses ... we cannot be all that Lady Wisdom is.

B. HER CHARACTER (11-31)

1. TRUSTWORTHY (11-12)

Her character is described in verses 11-31. First of all, Lady Wisdom is trustworthy. So

we are to ask ourselves, "What would life be like if we were married to a spouse that was completely trustworthy?" In other words, can you imagine how good married life would be if we were married to a spouse who was never selfish or self-centered? Can you imagine what our home-life would be like if we knew our spouses unconditionally loved us and always set aside their wishes and desires for our benefit?

Well the answer is in verse 11. We would have full confidence in our spouses. We would not be afraid of anything. We would consistently be thankful.

But ah, there's the rub. I don't know anyone like that, man or woman, do you? I think the poets are after this idea. If we embrace Lady Wisdom, in other words if we embrace God's ways for living, we can be sure that God always has our best interest at heart. God loves us unconditionally. He has even given up His own life to redeem us. As we embrace Lady Wisdom, we can have full confidence that God has plans to prosper us and not harm us. We can live in peace, knowing that God will ensure we are cared for and that He will never leave us nor forsake us.

2. DILIGENT (13-15)

Next, verses 13-15 portray Lady Wisdom as diligent. This spouse is described as working tirelessly to provide the best food and household goods for her family. She is up at the crack of dawn preparing meals for her family work for the servants. Her family will lack for nothing.

The Bible says that God never sleeps. He never slumbers. Jesus is pictured as constantly interceding for us in prayer. He is as diligent at preparing for us as the ants were pictured gathering food and working for the good of the community. Jesus traveled a long way to provide salvation for us. He left heaven and made the long trip down to incarnation on this earth. He made a long trip from His throne in heaven to a dirty cross, here on earth to provide freedom for us. God has given us the best the entire universe has to offer, His Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. God has been diligent in demonstrating His love and care for us.

What would our daily lives be like if we were married to a spouse that was completely diligent working to make our lives enjoyable, filled with peace and provision? We would be happy and we would feel safe and secure.

3. SHREWD (16-19)

Verses 16-19 cause us to ask, "What would it be like to be married to a spouse who was a shrewd business person?" We would not be worried about our finances. We would know that through their hard work, frugal spending, and good business deals, we

would have plenty of money for today and the future. God is always busy providing for our needs and He is constantly providing us with opportunities to act out on.

4. LOVING (20-24)

In verses 20-24 we are introduced to a truly loving spouse. Not only does this spouse demonstrate a tremendous love for her family, she loves her neighbor, especially those in need. A quality person is one who loves both God and neighbor. We have run into this over and over again throughout the book of Proverbs and Jesus saw it as a high priority as well. Just think about this. If your spouse loved God passionately, loved you unconditionally, and loved those around her so much that she cared for the poor, how would that make you feel? We would feel proud, honored, and respected. We would feel loved and in love with such a noble spouse.

5. POWERFUL (25-27)

Verses 25-27 portray this wife as powerful. She is clothed with strength and dignity. She is wise and prepared to handle all problems. Think about a house filled with Lady Wisdom. She teaches God's word and is a living example of God's ways. Because she is so wise, strong, and dignified, her family is blessed and they feel secure. We are invited to keep this thought in mind. Not only does God make promises to us, He is able to keep them. God is able to do for us more than we can think or even imagine.

6. PROVEN (28-31)

Verses 28-31 paint the picture of a proven spouse. This is a person who has stood the test of time. This spouse was not just on her best behavior during the courtship time. She has proven herself day after day, week after week, year after year. Her children and spouses call them blessed and noble. Her character has been proven over the years.

Now here is what I have been saying. God and His wisdom are trustworthy. God does not lie. What He promises, He delivers. He is diligent. He created us to be in a relationship. When we fell into bondage, He didn't give up. He redeemed us. He continues to provide for us and care for us. God is shrewd. He knows what we need and knows how and when we need to receive it. He loved us enough to send His own Son to die so that we could be in a right relationship with Him. He is powerful. There is nothing that God cannot do. And He is proven.

Through a marriage proposal by Lady Wisdom, God is inviting us to embrace Him and His way of life. People today are frightened, confused, and unhappy. God's desire is that we find peace, joy, contentment and fulfillment in life. But that only comes by first being at peace with God. The only way we can be at peace with God is if we confess to Him that there is nothing good in us and that we accept the truth that we can only be in a

right relationship with Him through placing our faith and trust in Jesus alone. The only way we can find joy and fulfillment in life is to live life as God designed it as described in the Bible.

The alternative is to follow the world or other false religions. That's what it would be like to hook up with and marry Lady Seduction. She promises a life of excitement and pleasure, but all she delivers is misery, disillusionment, and death.

C. WE ARE BLESSED (23, 28, 31)

But if we marry Lady Wisdom, if we fully embrace God and His ways, we will be blessed as verses 23, 28, and 31 describe. Here is a nice little twist on this metaphor. The Bible says that when we marry someone, we become one flesh. When we marry Lady Wisdom, we start to embrace and imitate her character. The closer we get to her, the more trustworthy, diligent, and shrewd we become. The more we unite with wisdom, the more powerful we become in our love towards God and others. And over a period of time, God will prove our character. We will become respected among God's people. Our children and our spouses will feel blessed because we are in their lives and they will identify us as a source of God's blessings to them. We will be respected by unbelievers as well. If we choose the right spouse, our lives will be rich and fulfilling. We will grow as individuals and we will grow as a couple. **CHOOSING GODLINESS WILL LEAD TO RICH, FULFILLING LIVES.**

Here we are at the end of the book of Proverbs. It's a marriage proposal by God to us through Lady Wisdom. Life can be good with the right spouse but it can be downright miserable with the wrong one. **CHOOSING WORLDLINESS OVER GODLINESS IS AS DISASTROUS AS CHOOSING THE WRONG SPOUSE.** Look, the choices we make today will set our lives on a course that will have a great effect that will continue on for years to come. Think of the decision to embrace God with all our hearts, souls, minds, and strength as marrying a wise beautiful, classy woman. We will find love, joy, contentment, and fulfillment for years to come. Rejecting God will be like marrying a loud, obnoxious, self-centered tramp. There will be years of misery waiting for us.

III. EPILOGUE

What I want to leave us with this morning is this thought. The choice we make this morning to follow God will have wonderful results for many years down the line.

Listen to what Arnold Toynbee says about people who find themselves in a catastrophic situation. He says,

"I am not a determinist. But I also believe that the decisive choice is seldom the latest choice in the series. More often than not, it will turn out to be some choice made relatively far back in the past."

We have spent the greater part of 2004 diligently studying what the Hebrew poets have said about the benefits of following God and living wisely. We have also seen what awaits the fools who reject God and follow the world. This morning they are calling us to choose. I am hoping that the arguments presented by these wise theologians and philosophers have convinced us to follow God.

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight"
(Proverbs 3:5-6 /NIV).