

Proverbs 31:1-9 “The Greatest Gift a Mother Can Give” ^{**1}

Main Idea: Proverbs 31:1-9 shows us two sources of influence that a mother has and the Lord uses to prepare her children to live for God in the real world.

Key: The greatest gift any mother can give to her children is to prepare them to live for God in the real world.

- I. The Lord uses a mother’s character (1-2).
 - A. The first clue is in the name (1).
 - B. The second clue is in the repetition (2).
 1. She took motherhood seriously.
 2. She took her vows seriously.
- II. The Lord uses a mother’s counsel (3-9).

She talked frankly to her son about four areas of life...

 - A. She talked to her son about women (3).
 1. She warned him about the wrong kind.
 2. She informed him about the right kind (10-31).
 - B. She talked to her son about integrity on the job (3b, 4a).
 1. She prepared him for job pressures ahead of time.
 2. Because of her, he was ready.
 - C. She talked to her son about alcohol (4-7).
 1. If we are going to help our young people to live wisely, we must give them more than “do’s and don’ts.”
 2. We need to equip them to make wise decisions when we’re not around.
 - D. She talked to her son about how to treat people (8-9).
 1. Like us, our children will tend to be self-focused.
 2. We must teach them to be servants.

Caution: Beware of two common myths about motherhood.

 1. Being a mother is not a real job.
 2. A mother shouldn’t impose her values on her child.

A concluding challenge to moms (and dads, grandparents, and the rest of us too):

 1. Don’t settle for immediate gratification.
 2. Make an investment for God’s kingdom that will continue after you are gone.

Scripture Reading: Proverbs 31:10-31 (read by Wilson children)

Audio interview: Two mothers in their 90s (June Conley, 96, Jean Kohart, 92) answering the question, “What’s the most important thing a mother can give her children?”

We turn our thoughts towards mothers today. I want to commend our mothers. The role of the mother has not received its due honor in recent years. Yet God’s Word honors mothers. And so should we.

Yet there’s a reality we need to face. This day affects people in a host of ways, for the Body of Christ is made up of people in a variety of stations in life. There are moms. There are step-moms. There are grandmothers fulfilling the role of mom. There are moms who are raising kids (or have) in shared custody situations. There are those who aren’t mom, but wish they could be mom. There are those who could have been mom, but chose not to be for various reasons. There are moms who have lost their children. There are moms whose children are still living, but they seem just as lost since there’s no meaningful relationship. Then there are moms who due to diseases like Alzheimers aren’t the persons they used to be.

This is the challenge on Mothers Day. This is Mothers Day in the real world. We don’t live in a Hallmark greeting card world. Yet because of the gospel of Jesus Christ,

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For a previous look at this passage, see WBC 5/13/01.

we can talk about this reality with hope and compassion. Yes, we honor mothers today, for God's Word exhorts us to "give honor to whom it is due." But we do so recognizing a person's identity isn't ultimately summed up by the term "mother" (or "father" for that matter). There's another term that trumps mom, or dad, or doctor, or republican, or any other label we might use.

It's the phrase the New Testament uses all over the place, as does Paul in Galatians 3:28 (ESV). "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one **in Christ Jesus.**"

In Christ Jesus. That's who we are now. When it comes to our identity, that's the most important reality, the one that matters for eternity. To be able to say that we are *in Christ Jesus*.

We didn't use to be. We entered this world *not* "in Christ Jesus." We were "in Adam," meaning we inherited Adam's problem, the sin problem, that separated him and all of his offspring from God.

But God provided a way for sinners to change their identity, to move from being "in Adam" to being "in Christ." How? Not by doing something (like being a good mother, or a good *anything*), but by putting their total trust in the only One who is truly good and in what He did for them. This is the gospel. Jesus lived the life we should have lived, died the death we should have died, conquered death in our place and for our benefit.

So this is who we are today. If we have repented of our sins and believed upon the Lord Jesus Christ, we are in Christ. That's our identity. That's where we find our worth, our significance, our joy, our acceptance, our hope. *In Christ*.

This reality means we can be honest about another reality. Our past. We can face it, and learn from it, and God intends for those in Christ to do this together. In fact, we want to do this, for now that we're *in Christ*, it's our privilege and joyful responsibility to help each other become more and more *like Christ*.

We can even face hard realities on Mothers Day, as well as the joyful ones, for being in Christ changes everything. He makes everything new.

So, here's the question of the morning. What's the greatest gift a mother can give her children? Moms need to know the answer to this, but so do dads, and kids, and grandparents, and singles.

A mother gives many things, but once again, what is the *best thing* a mother can give her children? What does *God* say the best thing is that a mother can give her children?

We'll find out this morning. We're going to examine the very special relationship one biblical mother had with her son. She was an incredible mother, and ironically, we don't even know her name. Yet God saw fit to preserve the record of the gift she passed on to her son. Let's turn to Proverbs 31.

You say, "Oh boy, I know Proverbs 31. Another message from Proverbs 31 about the virtuous woman."

Wait a minute. Most of us associate Proverbs 31 with the description of the ideal woman. But that description doesn't begin until verse 10. Most of the time we ignore verses 1-9, yet it's there we find the record of an amazing woman we seldom consider.

I am referring to Lemuel's mother. She was a remarkable woman. And she gave her son the best gift a mother can give a child. What is that gift?

We mustn't miss it. She prepared her child to live for God in the real world. There's the mark of a successful mother (and father, too).

Key: The greatest gift any mother can give to her children is to prepare them to live for God in the real world.

You may wonder, “How does a mother do that? In a world with so many destructive influences, like drugs, bullying, sexual temptation, how can a mother influence her children to live a godly life?” Lemuel's mother shows us how.

Proverbs 31:1-9 shows us two sources of influence that a mother has and the Lord uses to prepare her children to live for God in the real world. By the way, even if your children are grown, you can still exert these two influences. What are they?

I. The Lord uses a mother’s character (1-2).

“The sayings of King Lemuel—an oracle his mother taught him: ²“O my son, O son of my womb, O son of my vows.”

The book of Proverbs is the Wisdom Book of the Bible. God gave this poetic book to Israel. He gave them the Torah, the Law, to reveal for them His character and will. The Torah is full of commandments. The book of Proverbs fleshes out those commandments with practical counsel for real life situations. The book of Proverbs addresses the question, "How can I be wise in life?"

And of course, this all points out our core problem. We need more than commands and practical counsel to live God’s kind of life. We fall short of God’s kind of life. We need Christ.

Solomon wrote most, but not all, of Proverbs. Who wrote Proverbs 31? King Lemuel. Who was he? We don't know. This is the only place he is mentioned in the Bible. There is no record that Israel ever had a king by the name of Lemuel.²

Where did Lemuel obtain his wisdom? Apparently, he got a lot of it from his mother.³ Whoever she was, we know this mother had a great impact on her son. Her first source of influence was her godly character.

How do we know she exhibited godly character? Notice two clues in the text.

A. The first clue is in the name (1). Notice the name which was given to her son. Lemuel means "belonging to God." Lemuel's parents recognized that their child came from the Lord, and belonged to the Lord.

This is so vital for parents (and grandparents) to affirm. This child isn’t ours, not ultimately. This child came from and therefore belongs to God.

B. The second clue is in the repetition (2). I see this clue in the repetition Lemuel's mother used in verse 2, “O my son, O son of my womb, O son of my vows.” Or as the ESV puts it, “What are you doing, my son? What are you doing, son of my womb? What are you doing, son of my vows?”⁴

My first thought is that this is a mother who is getting back at her son for all the questions he asked her when he was a toddler! Not really.

² “Most suppose he was not an Israelite (which is consistent with the fact that the words for **son** in 31:2 and **kings** in v. 3b have Aramaic spellings, and with the absence of the special name Yahweh...” *ESV Study Bible*, p. 1189.

³ One Jewish legend identifies Lemuel as Solomon, and says the advice came from his mother, Bathsheba. But there is no evidence for this.

⁴ Here’s how the *Young’s Literal Translation* renders the text, “What, my son? and what, son of my womb? And what, son of my vows?”

Those three phrases tell us that here was a mother who took two things seriously.

1. *She took motherhood seriously.* "My son", she said. "The son of my womb," she called him. And...

2. *She took her vows seriously.* What vows? Obviously, she had made a vow before God, like Hannah did with Samuel. The phrase could be translated, as it is in the NIV footnote, "the answer to my prayers."

She also had made a vow to her husband. Unlike the "strange woman" in Proverbs 2:16-17 who treats sex like a toy, Lemuel's mother was a woman who took her vows seriously. She taught him that he was no product of chance. She taught him that he was "the son of her vows."

Think of the impact that had on this young man. He grew up knowing he had a mother who had asked God for him, and had committed him to God. He grew up influenced by a mother who took her relationship with God seriously.

Here's where real influence starts. With character. That goes for fathers as well as mothers. If we want our children to grow up to live for God in the real world, they must see it in us first.

Robert Ingersoll, a notorious skeptic, gave a lecture, and two college students went to hear him. As they walked down the street after the lecture, one said to the other, "Well, I guess he knocked the props out from under Christianity, didn't he?" The other student said, "No, I don't think he did. He did not explain my mother's life, and until he can explain my mother's life I will stand by my mother's God."⁵

This is the first source of influence the Lord uses. A mother's character.

II. The Lord uses a mother's counsel (3-9).

Listen mothers. Whether for good or bad, you are in a position to be the most influential counselor your children will ever have in life. You are molding your little ones by the counsel you give them, so much so that even grown men are known to say to their wives, "Well, my mom didn't do it that way!"

You have to admire Lemuel's mother. Her aim as a parent was to prepare her son to live for God in the real world. She knew her son needed to know how to put God's wisdom to work in his life.

Know this. Children don't just "turn out." They need counsel, starting young, until they leave the nest (and beyond). Lemuel's mother knew that. She talked frankly to her son about real life. Lemuel recalls four areas. Guess what the first area was about?

A. She talked to her son about women (3). "Do not spend your strength on women, your vigor on those who ruin kings."

This is quite a conversation for a mother to have with her son. Blunt. To the point. She talked in down to earth language to her son *about women*.

Young people, next to your decision to trust Christ, there is no more important decision you will make in life than choosing your life mate. It's unwise to make such an important decision without receiving counsel from godly sources, starting with your parents.

Lemuel's mother let him know there are two kinds of women.

⁵ James S. Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited*, Tyndale, 1972, p. 381.

1. *She warned him about the wrong kind.* Remember, Lemuel would one day be king. What is it that destroys kings? His mother warned him in verse 3, "Do not spend your strength on women, your vigor on those who ruin kings."

Solomon was a great king, indeed, the wisest man who ever lived. Yet who can forget what led to his downfall? "But King Solomon loved many foreign women," says 1 Kings 11:1. One thousand women, to be precise, and Solomon isn't the last man to struggle in this area. The numbers of men who have fallen prey to their passions, who have given their hearts to the wrong kind of women, are countless.

Over one hundred years ago, the German commentators Kyle and Deilitsch made this observation, "But whoever will place himself amid the revelry of lust, is wont to intoxicate himself with ardent spirits; and he who is thus intoxicated, is in danger of giving reins to the beast within him."⁶

It's tough to grow up as a young person in this sex-crazed world. Lemuel had this in his favor. He had a mother who warned him beforehand about the wrong kind of woman. Proverbs is full of practical counsel in this regard.

5:2-3, 8 "For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil, but her end is bitter as wormwood...Remove thy way far from her."
6:20, 24-26 "My son, keep thy father's commandment, and forsake not the law of thy mother...it shall keep thee from the evil woman, from the flattery of the tongue of a foreign woman. Lust not after her beauty in thine heart, neither let her take thee with her eyelids. For by means of an unchaste woman a man is brought to a piece of bread."

Whose responsibility is it to talk to our children about lust and sensuality? Another generation is growing up in America that desperately needs for dads and moms to tell them the truth that *MTV* is not telling them, the truth that *Planned Parenthood* is not telling them. The truth that Lemuel's mother told him.

She warned him about the wrong kind of women. And then...

2. *She informed him about the right kind (10-31).* Notice verse 10, "Who can find a virtuous woman?" We don't know for sure who wrote verses 10-31. Maybe these words are not Lemuel's, and did not come from his mother. But isn't it interesting that verse 3 warns about the wrong kind of woman, and verses 10-31 commend the right kind of woman? I don't think it's too big of a jump to assume that if Lemuel's mother warned him about the wrong kind of woman, she also had a lot to say about the right kind.

In fact, verses 10-31 are an acrostic poem. Each verse begins with a successive letter in the Hebrew alphabet, from "aleph" in verse 10 to "tav" in verse 31—22 letters, 22 verses, 22 virtues of a godly woman. In plain terms, verses 10-31 tell us how to identify the right kind of woman, everything from A to Z!

The point is this. Lemuel's mother offered him godly counsel, even about a delicate subject like women. Moms (and dads), are you helping your kids in this area? We need to start early.

B. She talked to her son about integrity on the job (3b, 4a). Notice the phrase that appears in verse 3, "those who ruin kings." And notice the repeated phrase in verse 4, "It is not for kings...not for kings...not for rulers."

That's significant. One day, Lemuel would have a job, an important job that would entail great responsibility. He would be a leader, a ruler. He would be the *king*. That job

⁶ Keil & Deilitsch, p. 320.

would involve great privilege. As king, he would have at his disposal power, pleasure, and the best of earthly blessings.

And great temptation. He would face constant pressure to compromise his integrity. Sensual pressure, which we just saw, and another we will see in a moment.

But the point is this. He had a mother who gave him practical counsel about integrity on the job, *before* he ever got the job.

1. *She prepared him for job pressures ahead of time.* And apparently...

2. *Because of her, he was ready.* By his own admission, he's telling us that his mother helped him know how to honor God on the job.

We're learning from this, aren't we, that being God's kind of parent requires communication? It does, and lots of it. This kind of quality conversation won't happen unless we carve out time for it. And initiate it, which is what Lemuel's mother did.

C. She talked to her son about alcohol (4-7). Listen to verses 4-5, "It is not for kings, O Lemuel—not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer [ESV 'strong drink'], lest they drink and forget what the law decrees, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights."

You talk about a practical mother-to-son talk! Here it is...

Mother: "Lemuel, it's not for you to drink alcohol."

Lemuel: "Why not mother? Others do."

Mother: "For three reasons, son. One, you're going to be a king, and alcohol will make your leadership challenges even greater (that's verse 4). How so? Two, as king, you will be responsible to uphold the laws that promote justice (that's verse 5a), so you must never allow anything to impair that ability, and alcohol can do that. And three, as king, you are responsible to maintain the rights of your people, particularly the oppressed (that's verse 5b), and you don't want anything to cloud your judgment."

Do you see the balance here? This wise mother didn't say, "Because I said so! That's why you don't drink." Rather it was, "Son, let's talk about alcohol, and why you need some conviction in this area."

Parents, we can learn two key principles right here...

1. *If we are going to help our young people to live wisely, we must give them more than "do's and don'ts."* Granted, there's a place for do's and don'ts. I don't believe that a four-year-old needs an explanation every time you ask him to do something. But if all we do is say, "Do it because I said so!", especially as they grow older, we're not preparing them for life in the real world.

2. *We need to equip them to make wise decisions when we're not around.* They need reasons. And we need to give them reasons, ones they can digest for themselves and use once they leave the nest.

But Lemuel's mother didn't stop there. She offered more counsel about alcohol in verses 6-7, "Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish; ⁷ let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more."

That sounds like unusual counsel. She tells her son, "It's not for you," but then tells him to give strong drink to others. Is she inconsistent? No. Consider two questions:

Question #1: To whom did she instruct Lemuel to give the drink? She mentions two groups in verse 6. First, to those who are "perishing," that is, people who are dying (the terminally ill; condemned criminals). Second, to those who have "heavy" hearts, as the KJV puts it (NIV "those who are in anguish"; ESV "those in bitter distress").

Question #2: Why would those two groups benefit from a substance like alcohol? She tells Lemuel in verse 7, to erase their pain and misery. We take aspirin when our head hurts, and tylenol when we have a fever, and nyquil when we can't sleep. When we experience pain, we take medication to help with the pain. They didn't have tylenol in Lemuel's day. But they had alcohol.

You ask, "What is the biblical view of alcohol? Can I drink?" Proverbs says, "That's really not the best question to be asking. There's nothing inherently wrong with a glass of wine, and in Jesus' first miracle He made a lot of it. But a better question is this, 'Is it wise to drink?'" It's a wisdom issue. There are things I may be allowed to do that are not wise to do.

I googled the question this week, "How many people die from alcohol related deaths annually?" And the answer? 88,000 people, making alcohol the third leading preventable cause of death in the United States.

Listen carefully. In a culture where drinking-water was often contaminated, and where drug stores did not exist as we know them, alcohol is one thing. But in a society where alcohol is the top contributor to traffic fatalities, domestic violence, and a host of other social ills, is it *wise* for God's people to drink? If so, when? If not, when?

For kings, no, not wise, said this mother. For the dying, yes, she said.

And that's the point. Lemuel's mother taught him how to make *wise* decisions. Life is full of things I *could* do, and othes may do, but I choose not to do because of wisdom.

D. Area #4: She talked to her son about how to treat people (8-9). "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

Remember, in a monarchical society, the king is in control. He has power. The day was coming when King Lemuel would rule. Early on, his mother instructed him, "Use your position to serve others, not yourself. Resolve to help others, particularly those who are vulnerable. Don't hoard your power, Lemuel. Use it for good."

To put it as Jesus later did, "To whom much is given, much will be required." This wise mother taught her son how to treat people, especially the weak, the "dumb," as the KJV describes them, in the ESV the "mute," people who can't speak up to defend themselves, the destitute, and the poor and needy.

How was Lemuel to treat these groups? His mother gave him three instructions.

First, "Speak up." Get involved. Open your mouth.

Second, "Judge fairly ("righteously" in the ESV and KJV)." Make decisions based on what is *right*, not on what is expedient.

And third, "Defend the rights of the poor and needy." Get out of the palace once in awhile. Go to the slums, rub shoulders with the poor. And go to bat for them.

This is so practical. Moms, dads, are you teaching your children how to treat people? How to talk to people? How to respect people, especially the helpless? Lemuel's mother did. Again, I see a couple of lessons we can learn from this...

1. *Like us, our children will tend to be self-focused.* They tend to think the world revolves around them. It doesn't. And it's our job to teach them it doesn't. Love God, yes, and love neighbor too.

2. *We must teach them to be servants.* How can I use what I have to help you? At this point we teach better by our *walk* than our *talk*.

A teacher asked a student the question: "Suppose your mother baked a pie and there were seven of you--your parents and five children. What part of the pie would you get?" "A sixth," replied the boy. "I'm afraid you don't know your fractions," said the teacher. "Remember, there are seven of you." "Yes, teacher," said the boy, "but you don't know my mother. My mom would say she didn't want any pie."⁷

Apparently Lemuel had a mother like that. She didn't let her place in the palace go to her head, and she wanted to make sure her son didn't either.

A Caution: Beware of two common myths about motherhood...

Let me be frank. There are two common misconceptions about motherhood that Lemuel's mother exposes.

Myth #1. Being a mother is not a "real" job. This myth is widespread (even in churches). Someone goes up to a young mother who has chosen to invest in her family instead of a career, and says, "When are you going to get a *real* job?" Friends, let's learn from Lemuel's mother. If God gives us children, then raising those little ones to live for God in this world is a real job, and we should encourage one another in it.

Myth #2. A mother shouldn't impose her values on her child. According to this second myth, "A person's faith is a private and personal matter. I just let my children find their own way. I don't want to impose my ideas and values on them."

Do you know what Lemuel's mother would say to that? A faith that is so private that it doesn't impact your life isn't much of a faith! Parents, our children are like sponges. They'll soak up their values from someone. If not us, who?

This is the best thing a mother can give her children. Prepare them to live for God in the real world. How? By using these two powerful, God-ordained influences. Godly character. Godly counsel.

Did you have a mother like Lemuel's mother, a mother that prepared you to live for God in the real world? If so, thank God. And if possible, thank your mother today.

Having said that, is it really possible to be this kind of mother? For that matter, is it possible to be the kind of son she wanted Lemuel to be, one who would live for God with all his heart, mind, and strength? Can we do it?

The truthful answer is... NO, we can't do it. Not apart from a relationship with THE Son, Jesus Christ. Why not? Because from birth, we are enslaved to our sin and self-centeredness. Only Jesus Christ can set us free. Only Jesus Christ can enable us to be the kinds of mothers, and fathers, and sons, and daughters that please God in the real world.

That's what the cross is all about. Christ died and rose again to save sinners, to transform sinners. Christ is the wisdom of God. 1 Corinthians 1:30 says, "Christ Jesus...has become for us wisdom from God, that is our righteousness, holiness, and redemption."

So Proverbs 31 points us to Christ. Have we fallen short of what we've seen today? Yes, every one of us. But Christ didn't fall short, and when we put our faith in Him God forgives us and gives us the ability to face our shortcomings, change, and live a new life.

Do you know Jesus? Is He your Savior and Lord? If not, call on Him now. If He is, I want to offer you this concluding challenge.

A concluding challenge to moms (and dads, grandparents, and the rest of us too):

1. *Don't settle for immediate gratification.* Rather...

⁷ *Bits and Pieces*, June, 1990, p. 10.

2. *Make an investment for God's kingdom that will continue after you are gone.*