

A well rounded Christian life

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[0 : 0 0] Now, I invite you to turn, if you have Bibles with you, I invite you to turn to chapter 31 of Proverbs, page 669 of the church Bibles, and at verse 30, the second half of that verse says, a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. I've never had the custom of giving titles to my sermons over the years, except if I was invited to a conference with a special topic, then I would try and think of a title or use the one given me. But on this occasion this evening, the subject that I want to speak about from God's Word does bring, at least to my mind immediately, a very suitable title, and it's this, a well-rounded Christian life. A well-rounded Christian life. What does such a life look like in practice? What are the principles that underlie it? How does it affect the way we live at home, at work, in our use of our money and our possessions, in our personal relationships, and how we get involved in the wider society? And from this passage, I want to draw out some principles, some principles, some principles. Now, I know there are more, but I've selected four principles that make us what we ought to be if we profess to be Christian believers. Whether we're men or women, in the case of this chapter, it focuses, of course, on a woman, a wife, a mother, but the principles apply to all of us. Whether we're men or women, whether we're married or single, whether we're parents or not, whether we're young or old, of any social or economic class, and of any race or any nationality, the principles are the same. So, I have four that I'd want to suggest to you, and let's all try and examine our own lives in the light of these principles from God's Word, so that by God's grace, we might all live. When we go out into the world tomorrow to our work or whatever, we're putting into practice what God says here, a well-rounded Christian life. The first principle is this, that in a well-rounded Christian life, we should be putting God first. Putting God first.

I'm sure if you know this passage reasonably well, you'll have noticed that in this picture that it gives us of a godly woman, there's no reference to worship in the temple or for us in the church, no references to sacrifices of atonement and thanksgiving, which were a staple in those days in the worship services. No reference to prayer, no reference to the praise of God and song. None of these what we would call religious elements are found in this description of a godly woman.

Now, these things we all know, they're good and they're necessary, but true godliness, what makes for a well-rounded Christian life, goes much deeper than those things. And here it is in our text, a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised, and that fear of the Lord undergirds everything and is absolutely vital in forming what verse 10 says at the beginning of this passage, a wife or a woman of noble character.

So, what is this fear of the Lord that we're told brings true praise to this woman? It's not dread or terror, but rather reverence and respect for God, a recognition of His greatness, His majesty, His authority.

But also of what we are as created and sinful beings in relation to this holy and majestic God.

[5 : 3 2] There's a passage in Exodus chapter 20, verses 18 to 20, which I think explains all this very well indeed.

The Israelites in this chapter, they're gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai, where God has revealed Himself in majesty, in holiness, presenting His own holy law, the Ten Commandments.

And we read that when the Israelites saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain and smoke, they trembled with fear. Well, no wonder they felt such dread and such terror. And they said to Moses, do not have God speak to us, or we will die. But then you go on to read Moses' response.

And he says to them, and no one could doubt that Moses had a true sense of the majesty and holiness and greatness of God. But he says to them, don't be afraid. God has come to test you so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning. In other words, sounds strange, but in other words, don't be afraid so that you will be afraid. Don't fear, but do fear. And if you turn to Deuteronomy chapter 6, where you have much of this repeated in chapter 6, verses 2 and 5, you find these words.

Moses says to the people, fear the Lord your God as long as you live. But that's followed by, that was verse 2, and in verse 5, it says, love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and all your strength. So, here are fear and love embracing one another. And this woman who fears the Lord, it's this kind of life that she's called on to live. And of course, there you have the heart of the gospel. God calls us to recognize our sin, to repent sincerely of that sin, and at the same time to receive the gift of His love and forgiveness through faith in Jesus His Son. Fear and love, sense of sin and of the majesty and holiness of God, combined with a knowledge of, a sense of, a great experience of love and grace. And so, you have the basis for a well-rounded Christian life.

[8 : 42] So, here's this woman. She's not a prophet, though there were female prophets in Israel. She's not a priest. She never could be a priest unless she were a man of the tribe of Levi. She's not a preacher.

Her life is taken up with household chores, rearing children, business ventures, but all of it as a servant of God. All of it in the spirit of Colossians 3, verse 17. Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. Or, in the words of the Lord Jesus Himself, seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things, all other things will be added to you. Now, that doesn't mean overt evangelism at every turn.

But it does mean an awareness of Christ's Lordship in everything you do. If you're a Christian, then tomorrow, that's what must shape who you are at your desk, in your classroom, in your workshop, in your kitchen, wherever you are. Outwardly, you may not seem very different from anyone else, but the fear of God, obedience to Him, His love in your heart, will affect everything, even when that runs counter to the standards of this world. And it may, often does, impact negatively your worldly prospects. It means, to quote John Stott, it means a Christian counterculture.

Now, there's a good example of this in a book called The Marquess of Lossie. I was speaking to Rhiannon a little while ago, and I thought I'd spoken about this in the morning, but it's now, you're going to hear it from Lossiemouth. It's a book by George MacDonald. Perhaps some of you know some of his books. He was the man whose writings helped to inspire C.S. Lewis in his writing, and he was from that area, from Lossiemouth area. So, in this particular book, The Marquess of Lossie, the central character, whose name is Malcolm, employed on a local estate, was asked by the factor, Mr. Crathy, who was an elder of the Kirk, to take a horse and sell it at the market, getting the highest price he could. Malcolm, as a Christian, replied that he would need to explain to the possible buyers the horse's defects, which were not visible at first glance. And to this, Mr. Crathy, the fact replied, Oh, religion is one thing, but business is another. And a very proper thing too, with customs and indeed laws of its own, far more definite than those of religion, to mingle with the one with the other is not merely absurd. It's irreverent and wrong, and certainly never intended in the Bible.

Malcolm disagreed. He stood his ground, and he got the sack. I recommend these books to you of George MacDonald. Listen, perhaps to summarize all of this, to words from Psalm 19, which speaks of the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever. The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, sweeter than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned, and in keeping of them there is great reward. So, there's the first principle of a well-rounded Christian life, putting God first. Then we find in this passage, caring for family, caring for family as another very important Christian principle. And it was obviously of central importance to this woman as a wife and mother. Have a look at some verses here. Verse 11, her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.

[14 : 14] Then verse 15, she gets up while it is still night. She provides food for her family. Then verse 21, when it snows, when it snows, she has no fear for her household, for all of them are clothed in scarlet.

Verse 23, her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes a seat among the elders. And verse 28, her children arise and call her blessed, her husband also, and he praises her.

Now, we know that history is littered with examples of the wrong kind of care, caring for the family, what we call nepotism, especially of people in power, making sure that they and their family become rich and influential. Not difficult to think of examples. Kim Jong-il, the dictator in North Korea, shoehorned into his position through his father and grandfather. Or along different lines from our own UK history, the 20 or so illegitimate children of King Charles II, many of them receiving titles that have come down to some of today's aristocracy.

But how different is the picture here of a loving, disciplined, and well-ordered family following God's creation pattern?

And all of it is confirmed by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 19 at verse 4, where he says these well-known words, Well, because we live in a broken and a sinful way.

[16 : 48] In a sinful world, God's ideal is not always attained, as we know very well. But it's always to be striven after. So, for all of us, whether it's as husbands and wives, or as parents and children, or as grandparents and grandchildren, as uncles or aunts or brothers or sisters, the importance of the Christian family's duties is emphasized again and again in Scripture.

Now, we have this in this one particular passage in the Old Testament, but it's confirmed all through the New Testament.

Just listen. It'll give us a little mosaic of what the New Testament tells us as I give you various passages, various verses from various parts of, largely of the letters.

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. Husbands, love your wives just as Christ loved the church.

Ephesians chapter 5. Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Fathers, do not exasperate your children. Instead, bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

[18 : 14] Ephesians 6. If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

1 Timothy 5.8 If a widow has children or grandchildren, these should learn first of all to put their religion into practice by caring for their own family.

And so repaying their parents and grandparents, for this is pleasing to God. 1 Timothy 5. If any woman who is a believer has widows in her family, she should help them.

Also, 1 Timothy 5. And we could quote many other passages, Old and New Testament, that show that this is a vital principle for all of us, whatever our status might be, caring for family.

And looking closely at this godly family described in Proverbs, we can see how practical it all is. How easy it would have been for this woman to let her stimulating professional life or professional work.

[19 : 34] And you can see in verse 16, for example, she's quite a businesswoman. She considers a field and buys it. Out of her earnings, she plants a vineyard.

And again at verse 24, she makes linen garments and sells them and supplies the merchants with sashes. But because she was so active in her domestic life and in her business life, it would have been so easy for her to elbow out her family, leaving the servants to bring up the children, or letting her husband and herself live parallel lives.

He in his civic duties, that's what it means when it says in the gate with the elders, and in his work on the land.

She in her domestic responsibilities and personal business interests. But the person who lives a well-rounded Christian life will not neglect this particular aspect of it.

Perhaps finding himself or herself regretting their failure when it's too late. So, there are two principles of a well-rounded Christian life, putting God first and caring for family.

[21 : 01] A third one is helping the needy. Helping the needy. Now, you might think, reading this passage, that this woman is so busy that she's got no time to think of other people in need.

Not at all. Even though there's just one verse out of 22 that describes her attitude to the poor and needy.

Let me read it to you. It's verse 20. She opens her arms to the poor and extends her hands to the needy. Here she is, busy as always, and let's imagine it.

Along comes a widow with several children to feed. Or along comes a man who's lost his job. Or along comes a refugee forced to flee war in his own country.

Or along comes a severely disabled neighbor forced to depend on others. She doesn't turn aside, busy though she is, and toss a few coppers in a hat.

[22 : 25] Rather, she reveals her constant attitude. One of compassion. Like the Messiah, whose coming she looked forward to.

As did every godly Israelite. You remember on one occasion, it's in Luke chapter 7. Jesus is walking along with his disciples.

And he sees a crowd of people coming. And there's a funeral procession. And he sees a widow accompanying her only son's coffin to the cemetery.

And what do we read? We read that his heart went out to her. And so it was with this woman. And so it needs to be with us.

If we aspire to live a well-rounded Christian life. Of course, because the world is sinful. And man's heart is sinful.

[23 : 28] The words of Deuteronomy 18, verse 11. Which are repeated by Jesus in Matthew chapter 26. That we will always have the poor with us.

They're true. And they call us to share Jesus' heart of compassion. In Hebrews chapter 13, verse 16.

We're warned that it's all too easy to forget our responsibilities. Because otherwise, why would the writer in that verse say, Do not forget to do good and to share with others.

Don't forget. You might have the best of intentions. But don't forget to do good and share with others. That's what God expects of us.

And what He delights in. And that's why He goes on to say in that same chapter, With such sacrifices, God is well pleased. I think that a verse in Ephesians 4, verse 28, I think it's very striking in this respect.

[24 : 43] Where Paul says, He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work. Well, that's what we'd expect the Bible to say, isn't it?

Stealing's wrong, and work's a good thing. God's given it to us. But the verse doesn't stop there. Listen to the whole verse.

He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work. That he may have something to share with those in need.

And for this woman, and for every Christian, sharing with the needy is not optional. The more we have, the greater the good we can do.

And after all, we are followers of the Lord Jesus, who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes, He became poor, that we through His poverty might become rich.

[25 : 54] So there are three principles. Putting God first. Caring for family. Helping the needy. And the last one that I've picked out, I'm sure if you go through the passage yourselves, you'll find half a dozen more.

But the last one this evening is witnessing through work. Witnessing through work. I think that this woman would certainly be praised by successive governments in our modern state.

Not as a stay-at-home mother. Not in our glad recognition of her husband as the head of the family unit. But yes, in our entrepreneurial spirit.

In our successful running a small business. Providing employment and increasing the nation's GDP. And she certainly did put into practice the words of Ecclesiastes chapter 9, verse 10.

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might. Now, of course, this can bring its own temptations.

[27 : 15] When hard work, allied to initiative and inventiveness, brings prosperity. But there's nothing sinful in seizing opportunities, in expanding one's business, in gaining awards, recognitions, and promotion.

Provided it's based on the first element of a rounded Christian life, putting God first. And for this woman, it meant commitment to the community, verse 21, verse 23 rather.

Her husband is respected at the city gate when he takes his seat among the elders. I suppose that was the equivalent of the city council. Right?

And here, her husband and herself, through her husband, they're involved in the community. And as a result, it led for both of them, as the last verse tells us, to praise at the city gate.

People looked on and they saw a united family, a successful family, a caring family, a godly, and a God-glorifying family.

[28 : 40] Of course, Satan would be trying to disrupt their godly unity and lead them into sin, thus ruining their testimony before the world.

But by God's grace, they would be enabled to maintain their constant witness through their work and through their home.

That's the way it was, you remember, with Daniel, who rose to very high office in the Babylonian Empire when his jealous colleagues tried to find grounds to charge him before the king.

we read that they could find no corruption in him because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent.

But maybe you're thinking that your own sphere of witness as a Christian is so restricted that a witness like Daniel's or like this obviously intelligent and highly able woman's publicly recognized contribution to our society, you may think is beyond your reach.

[30 : 04] No, not at all. Whoever you are, whatever you're called to be and to do, you can, by God's grace, do all to his glory.

Your all may be much more restricted than this woman's all, certainly than Daniel or Joseph's all. But the call is the same.

And God's grace is the same to live that kind of witness through our work and our daily activities. So, let me encourage you as we close with a story of a humble, uneducated man whose name I never knew and I never met him, but who sought to live for Christ every day.

Some 50 years or so ago, my wife and I used to attend a prayer meeting for English-speaking missionaries of different missionary societies and churches in the city of Lima in Peru.

And at one meeting, we had, for the first time, a former Wycliffe Bible translator who'd worked in the jungle for many years.

[31 : 30] I think it was for health reasons in the family that he had to relocate to the city of Lima. And he was searching for suitable offices in the city center to expand his new ministry of Bible teaching cassettes.

Now, you'll know how long ago that was when I tell you that that was a tremendous novelty. What we all had in those days was the old reel-to-reel recordings.

You remember them? Reel-to-reel? No, most of you don't. You don't even remember cassettes? I imagine some of you, most of you. But this was his great ambition.

And he wanted to get different folk to record. He got me along to his recording studio when he got it set up. And for little groups throughout the country in the jungle up in the mountains who had no pastors, this would be a means of teaching ministry.

Well, when he came to that meeting, he was really quite despondent at his lack of success in finding a suitable place in the city to rent.

[32 : 49] Sometimes, because the price asked was too high, but other times because the owner obviously didn't want to rent to an American Protestant missionary.

He asked us to pray that the ministry could continue. And a month later, we met once a month, and a month later, he came back to the meeting bubbling over with joy and gratitude to tell us that a very suitable place had been found.

After many more rebuffs, he'd spoken with the owner of a very suitable property who not only said he would rent him the space needed at a reasonable cost, but also told him why he was doing so.

He owned the whole building, and he employed a janitor to keep it clean and safe. The man, he said, was an evangelical Christian.

I use that phrase because in Spanish, they would always be called evangelicals, evangelicals. So, he was an evangelical Christian, and he assured the missionary that he had never known in all his business life, he'd never known a worker so trustworthy, so hardworking, so polite to tenants and visitors.

[34 : 24] And then he said this, if that's what your religion does for people, then you're more than welcome to set up shop in my building.

A well-rounded Christian life. Well, may God help us all to live out such a life. Let's pray.

Our God and Father, we thank you that your word is so full, not only of the way of salvation which we so desperately need, but how to live out that salvation in our daily lives, in our families, whatever we are, whatever we do.

And we pray that you would help us to go out tomorrow into this busy city and this busy world in which we live and to do so as Christian people, living a life that is seen to be and truly is to the glory of God.

Give us wisdom because often we don't know what to do, what to say. Give us wisdom. Give us grace. Give us love to the Savior.

[35 : 48] Give us love to the people around us that they too may know your saving grace in Jesus Christ. Amen.