

“Mother Knows Best” (Proverbs 31:1–9)

Today, I’m going to preach a Mother’s Day sermon, and some of you may be dreading it. You’d just as soon do eight loads of laundry or get a root canal than listen to a Mother’s Day sermon! One group says, “I’m tired of getting hammered on Mother’s Day with impossible expectations. I’d like to be the ideal mom, but I’m too busy raising children!” A second group says, “I’m a woman without children. Mother’s Day is hard for me. It’s awkward because I feel like I don’t fit.” To women in both groups, I want to say, “Relax! I don’t want to add to the pressure or pain that comes from being a mom or not being a mom. I want to encourage you from the Bible about the impact you can make on the next generation—your children, if you’re a mom, or your grandchildren, nieces, nephews, students, or neighbor kids who live next door. And this is a sermon not only for moms, but for dads, teachers, coaches, aunts, uncles, grandparents, and next-door neighbors of children. Men, this is not a day off when the sermon is just for mothers, so stop daydreaming! I want to share with *all* of you a lesson that wise moms and other influential people can teach the next generation.¹ Since the vision of our church is “transferring truth to the next generation,” this sermon is relevant for all of us.

Our text for today is Proverbs 31, but I want to talk about the “other” Proverbs 31 woman. The Proverbs 31 woman described in 31:10–31 gets all the press. But I’m interested in what the “other” Proverbs 31 woman listed in 31:1–9 has to say. In these verses, we’ll study an admonition from a mother to her son.²

Our text begins with these words: “**The words of King Lemuel, the oracle which his mother taught³ him: What, O my son? And what, O son of my womb? And what, O son of my vows?**” (31:1–2). The words that we will study today are recorded by King Lemuel.⁴ Unfortunately, we don’t have a clue as to who Lemuel is. It’s likely that he’s a proselyte to Israel’s faith.⁵ But we do know a very important fact: Lemuel’s name means “belonging to God.”⁶ Evidently, Lemuel’s parents understood the importance of dedicating their child to God. Although, King Lemuel penned these words, they come directly from his mom—the queen. The word “oracle” (*massa*) means a “burden” or “a heavy word.”⁷ What this mom has to say is urgent and critical. This is unusual for elsewhere in Proverbs a father addresses his son(s). Nevertheless, twice a mother’s teaching is referred to by the father (1:8; 6:20). One interesting and often overlooked observation is: The book of Proverbs begins by saying, “And do not forsake your mother’s teaching” (1:8b) and the book concludes with the same emphasis. Indeed, moms, and women in general, have much to teach all of us, not merely by their lives but also through their lips.

Three times in 31:2 King Lemuel’s mom uses the phrase “what, O my son.” In this context, the word “what” (*mah*) is better translated “listen”⁸ She desperately wants her son to heed her words! Each statement builds upon the former; these words are intimate and powerful. We men can’t fully appreciate this verse. This mother’s burden is based upon the fact that this king is her baby boy. Moreover, he was the son of her womb. She carried him for nine months. She went endured the challenges of pregnancy. She nursed this boy. The verse concludes with a promise the mother made before her son was born. The vow indicates that, for this queenly mother, the spiritual and moral responsibilities began before her son was even born. It is likely that this mom made a vow to the Lord that if He would give her a son she would raise him well.⁹ This verse gives us a glimpse of the hearts of women. It also warrants celebrating moms.

This mom’s specific advice begins in 31:3–5: “**Do not give your strength to women, or your ways to that which destroys kings. It is not for kings, O Lemuel, it is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink, for they will drink and forget what is decreed, and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.**” At first, this mom’s advice looks fairly predictable: “Don’t chase women, and don’t drink beer!” But if you think that’s what this lesson is about, you’ve missed the point. The question that’s being answered is, “How will you use your power when life presents you with great opportunities?”

King Lemuel's mom is no dummy; she targets the area that most young men struggle with—sex. She urges her son not to have intimate relationships with women. Please notice the plural *women*, not woman. Sex inside of marriage is wonderful; sex outside of marriage is not. In 31:3, the concern is that Lemuel will try to build a large harem. This was something kings did in ancient times, but it was a distortion of power and lust. This behavior also leads to destruction. I think of King David, who ruined his career because of an adulterous relationship, and Solomon, who ruined his career because of all the wives he acquired—wives who led him astray.¹⁰ Although he wasn't a king, do I even need to mention Samson?

I am a big boxing fan. I grew up watching all of the Rocky movies. One of the classic lines from all six Rocky movies is from Rocky I (1976). Mickey, Rocky's trainer, is busy coaching him while he is working the heavy bag. All of a sudden two young women approach him seeking his autograph. The crotchety old Mickey says, "Get out of here!" He then turn to Rock and says, "Women weaken legs!" If this is indeed true in the physical realm, how much more so is it true in the spiritual realm? Nothing can get a young man or woman off track quicker than an inappropriate relationship with the opposite sex.

Moms, pray for the sexual purity of your children. Listen to anything and everything your children want to share with you. Make conversation a priority. Learn to understand their struggles. If you can't fully empathize with the struggles of your son, talk to your husband and urge him to be honest with you. Read the book *Every Young Man's Battle*.¹¹ Talk openly about issues. If your son or daughter discusses interest in the opposite sex don't shut them down. If your son or daughter confesses any type of sexual sin, don't alienate them through shame or rejection. This will cause your children to go "underground" with their questions and struggles. Yet, our children want our acceptance and approval. Whether they are fully conscious of it or not, they want our boundaries and instruction. We must capitalize on this window of opportunity and minister to our kids as they navigate this most challenging issue in life. May we as moms and dads continually pray for our children's purity and encourage them to confide in us. We must help our children and grandchildren through this sexually obsessed culture.

In 31:4–5, the queen mother shares a concern about the abuse of alcohol. What is probably meant is an excessive and unwarranted use of alcohol.¹² In the Bible, wine can be a source of joy.¹³ Israel was called "the vine." Jesus and the disciples drank alcohol. But alcohol is frequently misused.¹⁴ Therefore, the Queen warns her son not to abuse it. Verse 5 says that those who cope with the pressures of being king by drinking forget what they've decreed.¹⁵ I'm sure you've heard of Mother's Against Drunk Driving. Lemuel's mom was the founder of Mother's Against Drunk Ruling!¹⁶ The King's mom gives two reasons for abstinence: wine affects memory and judgment. The king cannot forget the Lord's commands. The mother's admonition focuses on the responsibilities of the king and not his privileged position. The primary duty is to administer justice.¹⁷ Wine and women can't get in the way of these responsibilities.

You and I also have to decide if we want to exercise our freedom to drink alcohol. While we are free to partake (just not unto drunkenness), there are advantages to abstaining. You don't have to explain or justify your freedom to your children and grandchildren who will likely abuse alcohol in their teen and young adult years. Furthermore, you can maintain sensitivity to other believers who may struggle with limiting their alcohol consumption. However you decide to exercise your freedom, it is important to be sensitive to other believers and be prepared to explain your freedom to your children and grandchildren.

To dramatize her point against the abuse of alcohol, King Lemuel's mom says: "**Give strong drink to him who is perishing, and wine to him whose life is bitter. Let him drink and forget his poverty and remember his trouble no more**" (31:6–7). The queen mother is not recommending a free beer for the poor program.¹⁸ This would be completely out of harmony with wisdom.¹⁹ Rather, this is a sarcastic statement.²⁰ She's using sarcasm to awaken Lemuel to the duties that go with his class and status. She's saying: "Don't use your power to serve yourself."

Chances are, your kids or nephews or nieces or students are not going to be royalty. But they might become doctors, teachers, senators, or heads of corporations. They might receive college scholarships. They might make more money than you make. They might get elected to political office. The question is, how will they use the power and privilege that comes with these opportunities? King Lemuel's mom says to him, "Don't use your power to serve yourself."

Lemuel's "mouth" is to be closed to carousing; it is to be "open" to correcting.²¹ In 31:8–9, the queen is ready to state positively the lesson that is driving her words to her son: **"Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all the unfortunate. Open your mouth, judge righteously, and defend the rights of the afflicted and needy."**²² "Open your mouth" means "speak up!"²³ Stand for justice. The word "mute" refers to those who can't speak up for themselves. The word translated "unfortunate" (*chaloph*) means people who are passing away; they are "on their last legs." The king is to plead the case of those who can't defend their own cause.²⁴ This is true not just for kings, but for all believers in Jesus Christ. The moral of this text is: *Wise women teach children to serve people in need.* Those in need not only exist in downtown Olympia; they also can be found in our church. Gal 6:10 says: "So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith." As we minister to our brothers and sister in need on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights, we will be more prone to serve those in need outside of our church walls. We must teach our children and grandchildren to look out for the welfare of the kids who were despised or ignored by others.

When I read the words of King Lemuel's mom, I think about the greatest king who ever lived—a King whose kingdom was all about meeting the needs of the destitute, the widow, the orphan, the marginalized, and the poor. This King had no qualms about talking with prostitutes, touching lepers, and exorcising demons from frothing demoniacs. I'm referring to King Jesus, of course. Jesus was the kind of king King Lemuel's mother wanted Lemuel to be. In fact, Jesus calls all in His kingdom—those who call Him their king—to live as He lived. Once, while at a dinner banquet, Jesus said to His host, "But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" (Luke 14:13). Later in the New Testament, James summarizes it like this: "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (Jas 1:27). May we strive to be Christ's hands, feet, and face to a world that desperately needs Him.

Have you placed your faith in Jesus Christ? The relationship with God that He offers is a free gift. Once you've responded to the gospel and believed in Christ, then you live out the gospel by using your strength to serve people in need. Not out of guilt, but out of gratitude. Moms, you don't have to be perfect. You don't have to be super moms to your kids. Just teach them what really matters. Live for Jesus and point them to Him.

Note: This manuscript is brief because I conducted two interviews during my sermon. One was with Lisa Ward, a military wife and mother of three (15, 12, 10). She answered the following questions: What are your priorities as a mother? How are these priorities fleshed out in your life? What are you seeking to teach your children? How do you instruct them when Steve is out of the country? The second interview was with Theo Yu, a former L.A. police officer and assistant to the governor of WA State who ministers to the poor. I asked Theo to respond to the question: How can we care for the poor as individuals and families?

Scripture References

Proverbs 31:1–9

Proverbs 31:10–31

2 Samuel 14:4–11

1 Kings 3:16–28

Psalms 45:3–5; 72:4

Isaiah 9:6–7

James 1:27

Study Questions

1. Do I look forward to Mother's Day? Why or why not? On Mother's Day, how do I typically express my love and appreciation for the women God has placed in my life? How do I reach out to women and make them feel special the remaining days of the year? How can I grow in my respect and appreciation for women?
2. What matters most to me in raising my children? What types of values am I hoping to impart to my children (and grandchildren)? Have I made any vows or commitments to God in the raising of my children? If so, am I keeping my commitments to the Lord?
3. How can I keep the children and teenagers in my life from making the same mistakes that I have made? What valuable lessons have I learned over the course of my life the hard way that I can share with young people that God has placed in my life? What healthy decisions and commitments have I made over the years that have helped me in my spiritual maturity?
4. How am I presently impacting the children of my church through my example and instruction? Is there a child or teenager that I have taken a special interest in? What am I hoping to instill in his or her life? How can I provide the necessary support and encouragement for children and teenagers in my church or neighborhood? What will I do this week to "transfer truth to the next generation?"
5. Am I intentionally teaching my children and grandchildren to have a heart of compassion for those in need? How have I exemplified concern for the poor and needy? What are some practical ways I can care for the poor? How can I reach out to those who are in need in my own church? Read Galatians 6:10.

Notes

¹ Steve Mathewson, “A Lesson Wise Moms and Other Influential People Can Teach the Next Generation” (Prov 31:1–9): www.preachingtoday.com.

² For another example of royal instruction, see 1 Kgs 2:1–12.

³ “Taught” (*yasar*) is a pivotal word in Proverbs (see 9:7; 19:18; 29:17, 19; cf. the noun *musar*, see 1:2, 3, 7).

⁴ Constable, “Some commentators have regarded only the first nine verses of this chapter as Lemuel’s writing. One reason for this is that the Septuagint translators separated verses 1-9 from verse 10-31 by five chapters (chs. 25–29). However the Hebrew text implies that Lemuel wrote the whole chapter since it connects these two sections.”

Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Proverbs* (2009 ed.): www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/proverbs.pdf, 63.

⁵ Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 15-31*. NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 503. The words for “son” (31:2) and “kings” (31:3b) have Aramaic spellings and Yahweh is absent from any of the sayings.

⁶ See HALOT s.v. *Lemuel* (cf. Num 3:24). Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 503.

⁷ The same question of translation occurs here with *massa* that occurred in Prov 30:1, whether it is “oracle” or a place “Massa.”

⁸ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 503–4 n. 14. Kidner writes, This unusual address is “affectionately reproachful.” Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs*. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series (Leicester, Eng.: Tyndale, 1964; reprint ed., Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1978), 182.

⁹ Cf. Hannah’s vow in 1 Sam 1:9–11.

¹⁰ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 507.

¹¹ Steve Arterburn and Fred Stoeker, *Every Young Man’s Battle: Strategies for Victory in the Real World of Sexual Temptation* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook, 2002).

¹² NET study notes; Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 507. See Prov 20:1; 21:17; 23:20, 29–35.

¹³ Deut 14:26; Ps 104:14–15; Isa 25:6–8; 55:1.

¹⁴ Prov 20:1; 23:20–21, 29–35; Isa 5:11–12, 22; Eph 5:18; 1 Cor 6:10; Gal 5:19–21.

¹⁵ Elah, king of Israel, was drunk when Zimri, one of his officials, assassinated him (1 Kgs 16:9–10).

¹⁶ Mathewson, “A Lesson Wise Moms . . .”

¹⁷ Dave L. Bland, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs*. The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2002), 281.

¹⁸ Duane A. Garrett, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. New American Commentary, vol. 14 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1993), 246.

¹⁹ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 508.

²⁰ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 508.

²¹ David A. Hubbard, *Proverbs*. The Preacher’s Commentary Series, vol. 15. Edited by Lloyd J. Ogilvie (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 488.

²² This mother’s high view of royal ethics fits Moses’ description of good kings in Deut 17:14–20. Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 453.

²³ Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs*, 509.

²⁴ 2 Sam 14:4–11; 1 Kgs 3:16–28; Pss 45:3–5; 72:4; Isa 9:6–7.