

Reconsidering Proverbs 31

By [Brant S. Copeland](#)

September 17, 2012

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Proverbs 31 used to be a standard at funerals. That was before we realized that womanly virtue meant more than giving a husband bragging rites in the city gates. I use to think it my pastoral duty to root out both masculine and feminine stereotypes in liturgy, hymnody and scripture. Now I'm not so sure.

There's a lot to commend this paragon of entrepreneurial enterprise. She makes the ant of Aesop's fable seem like a slacker. If you translated her self-appointed duties into a modern job description, it would jive with that of the most successful of CEO's. Today she would be running her own corporation, selling a line of handmade clothing on the Home Shopping Network, and chairing her local United Way. Her husband could brag about her if he wanted, but she would be far beyond the need for that kind of thing. She would be a self-made woman.

And that's the problem. Virtuous as she is, this woman is still a sinner in need of grace. She is also, it seems to me, badly in need of a vacation. All that industry and burning of midnight oil has got to wear a person out. When does she put her feet up with a good book? Does she ever allow herself a night off?

Nobody ever asks for Proverbs 31 to be read at funerals anymore, probably because few people know what a "spindle" is, much less a "distaff." That this is an acrostic poem is not obvious, but its anachronism is hard to miss. I remember reading at least one commentator who suggested that preachers avoid this virtuous lady altogether. Keep her out of the liturgy; she will make too much trouble.

I'd hate to think that preachers were so chauvinistic—and so unimaginative. Give the woman a break! She still has something to teach us if we could just get

over ourselves and hear the word of the Lord.