

September 19, Ordinary 25B (Proverbs 31:10–31)

Does a good woman give and give and give without thought to her own well-being?

by [Nanette Sawyer](#) in the [September 8, 2021](#) issue

Those of a certain age may remember a perfume ad that first aired in 1979, the year I graduated from high school. It features a song, based on Peggy Lee's "I'm a Woman": "I can bring home the bacon / Fry it up in a pan / And never, never, never let you forget you're a man." A woman dressed for office work sings the first line. Then a duplicate version of her, dressed in a bathrobe, sings the second. For the third line of the ditty, a third version of the same woman appears on-screen, dressed in a formfitting satin dress. This is a woman who can do all the things. Except it takes three of her to do it.

At the time this commercial aired, women were rising up to say that we belong in the boardroom and not just the bedroom, in the workforce and not just the kitchen. Women can do so much more than we have been allowed to do—and by the way, call us Ms., not Mrs. or Miss. Our identity is not based on whether or not we are married.

The ad was meant to be inspiring and empowering. It targeted White women who were pushing against old ideas that treated them as weak and vulnerable, to be protected and valued as objects of beauty. The impulse to say "we can do more" was in resistance to being limited and held back. Unfortunately, it also reinforced another idea: that women, as givers and helpers, can—and should—give and give and give.

What the old perfume commercial did not address: in order for the social roles of women to change, the social roles of men needed to change too. Real partnership between men and women means that men also fry up the bacon in a pan and that their sense of masculinity does not depend upon their affirmation by (or domination of) women.

Things have changed a lot since 1979, but we're not done changing. We are still working on addressing the racial disparities in how we understand gender. Black women were never seen as weak and delicate, as White women have been, although Black women have been expected to give and give and give for the benefit of others. Asian American and Pacific Islander women have been stereotyped as passive, and we remember the brutal history of them being forced into sexual slavery as "comfort women" during World War II. As we continue to study our Bible, we must also continue to study our world, to learn our history, to learn the stories of diverse siblings in faith.

How does our Proverbs 31 ode to a virtuous woman relate to such questions of what comprises virtuous womanhood? Does this passage imply that a good woman gives and gives and gives without thought to her own well-being?

It risks being interpreted as just such a standard: capable, competent, virtuous, and noble women (depending on your translation) can and should be all things to all people in all areas of life. And if they don't, then they are not succeeding. This imagined perfect woman then becomes a source of shame among actual human women who cannot duplicate themselves like the woman in the perfume commercial. And if a woman's primary virtue is in being demure or submissive, obedient or self-sacrificing, then how do women defend themselves against violence?

Whether Proverbs 31 is uplifting or shaming, empowering or entrapping, depends on which verses we emphasize—and whether we see the text as supporting or challenging patriarchal and racist stereotypes that limit women.

King Lemuel explains that he is recounting how his mother taught him to be a good man, a good king. She told him not to waste his energy on meaningless sex (this destroys kings), not to get drunk and forget justice. So then, what kind of woman should he trust to bring into his household? In a patriarchal world, the queen mother wants a strong woman for her son. Yes, the ideal wife will be wise, kind, generous, and energetic. But she will also gird herself with strength and make her arms strong. "Strength and dignity are her clothing." This wife will rise in the early morning and hunt for food. The translation "provide food" makes it sound like she is up early baking bread. But as Wil Gafney points out, verse 15 says that "she rises while it is night to take 'prey.'"

Gafney argues convincingly that the strength of this heroic and virtuous woman is *warrior* strength, based on the underlying Hebrew word *chayil* and its application to male military might. This woman described by the queen mother meets the strength, wisdom, and justice of her husband with her own. Perhaps this is what makes her so very trustworthy. She is a match, a faithful partner, to be respected and not dominated.

After detailing the virtues of this heroic, larger-than-life woman, the queen mother gives one command to her son: “Give her a share in the fruit of her hands, and let her works praise her in the city gates.” While such a woman’s husband “is known in the city gates, taking his seat among the elders of the land,” the prince’s mother does not want her son to claim all the power and recognition and benefit for himself. He should match his wife’s trustworthiness with his own, her faithfulness with his fairness, her strength with his honor. The fruit of her hands is great—give her a share. Her works are praiseworthy—let her works praise her. These are wise words from a wise woman.