

# Proverbs 31:13-18

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/prov/prov-31/proverbs-3113-18/>

*The excellent wife works hard to gather resources and steward them toward production.*

In this section, Lemuel's mother describes the work ethic of the virtuous woman. This is poetic language, so this should not be viewed as a strict checklist which the wife completes every day. It is meant to be a description of character. One overarching characteristic underpinning all these traits—she works hard. Everything about her is intentional and industrious. Her actions are directed, deliberate, and persistent.

The first task described is fabric making. *Wool* and *flax* are materials that are used to make garments. The excellent wife *looks for* these materials and *works with her hands in delight* (v 13). She is not idle. She initiates (*looks for*). She is not waiting for materials to show up. She is not making excuses because she has no materials. She is seeking and planning to acquire materials.

Then she works with joy. She is not acting purely out of a sense of obligation (she *works in delight*). This kind of work is very practical; it helps the family in a tangible way. She is grateful to be able to contribute to the needs of her family, providing them with clothing. In the case of the queen, she might be providing clothing for the entire royal household.

The second task describe is just as practical. *She brings her food from afar* (v 14). Just like with the garment supplies, she is proactive in this endeavor. She goes out *like merchant ships* (v 14). A *merchant ship* would travel to far away places to trade for what was needed at home.

So, this woman is adding to the household. She is going out to *look for* supplies to make clothes and she *brings food* from other places. The first marker in this passage's list of activities is that she adds value to the home. She goes out and brings in the things that make the home/palace better.

That she is bringing *her food from afar* shows that she has vision about how to elevate her household table beyond what is easy and readily accessible. She is not reacting to her surroundings. She is creating a vision for her household, then making and executing a plan to see it accomplished.

We see in all this that she is a hard worker. Lemuel's mother now emphasizes her diligence with the sentence: *she rises also while it is still night* (v 15). The word *also* is an indication that the mother is reiterating the work ethic alluded to in the first two verses of this section.

That the woman gets up early is not meant to be used as a literal barometer for what a good wife should do. Rising early (*while it is still night*, before the dawn) is an example of commitment, diligence, and hard work. It is these qualities Lemuel's mother is highlighting.

The next touted quality is service. The wife *gives food to her household* (v 15). She is a helper. She is focused on serving. She provides. The virtuous wife leads through serving. Not only does she provide for her family, she gives *portions to her maidens*. A *maiden* is something similar to a nanny, babysitter, or personal cook in the modern world. This is a royal household, so it might include a large number of staff. She rises in concern for them all. She is the queen, but rather than being waited upon, she is rising early and serving. Lemuel's mother makes a point of giving an allotment, a *portion*, to these *maidens*. The insinuation is either a) that she does not cheat them; she is giving their proper wage for their service to the house, or b) the wife goes above and beyond the wage to give the *maidens* extra. In any event, it is an indication she cares well for the people around her.

The next character-revealing vignette is that *she considers a field and buys it* (v 16). This tells us a few things about her. First, she is not brash. She *considers*. The excellent wife is capable of weighing pros and cons, working through the value, and discerning what is best. She shops. She values. She selects the best investment opportunity.

The second thing this reveals is her decisiveness. She does not need a consultation or permission. She has already earned trust, so she has the capacity and authority to act. Accordingly, she goes for it. Lastly, related to verse 11, this reveals she has means. She can afford to *buy a field*. This indicates she (along with her husband) have stewarded their finances well and she is able to discern how best to utilize those resources. Given the era in which this is written, this likely means that her husband trusts her so implicitly that he is glad for her to make investments because he trusts they will be good for the household (v 11).

This continues in the next phrase: *from her earnings she plants a vineyard* (v 16). The *field* has produced crops to sell, so her investment is paying dividends. These are described as *her earnings*, literally, "the fruit of her hands."

To have a field and a vineyard are two of the most desirable things in an agricultural society. These will provide the resources necessary to continue meeting the needs of the family/household. The extra can also be sold. Whereas the wife began by going out like a *merchant ship* to procure resources, she is now (or perhaps also) able to do this on the land belonging to her.

This is a lot of work. And while this is not a strict step-by-step guide of what every excellent wife should do, it is a poetic example of the hard work and good character indicative of such women. Given that we are speaking of royalty here, the wife of a king, we might expect the description to be of beauty, social graces, and palace intrigue. But just as the wise king is not to indulge his appetites, he is to seek a life partner that has the same work ethic and commitment to servant leadership.

All of this effort is no doubt taxing. Lemuel's mother says the excellent wife *girds herself with strength* (v 17). This literally says, "girds her loins with strength." Loins meaning the hips, midsection. To gird the loins was to pull up the robe or toga and tuck it into the belt in preparation for vigorous activity. The idea is that the source of her industry is a resolve to get things done.

This idiom *girds herself with strength* is used in reference to perseverance, courage, and/or resolve. She does not wait and depend on others. She initiates her projects with her own *strength*. The Hebrew word for *strength* is “oz.” It covers a variety of types of strength—including physical, moral, mental. She is held upright by this characteristic. She also *makes her arms strong* (v 17). She does not only direct activities, she engages directly in the activities. The excellent wife takes care of her own health through the challenges of hard work.

The excellent wife is also skilled in quality control. *She senses that her gain is good* (v 18). The word for *senses* is “ta’am”; it literally means “taste.” And the word for *gain* is “sahar”; which literally means “merchandise” (this is a different word than the one translated “gain” in verse 11—[see notes on Proverbs 31:10-12](#) ).

This seems to be a reference to what the *field* and the *vineyard* are producing. When she “tastes the merchandise”, she finds it is *good*. They are producing a good product. This means she is an astute and successful businessperson.

This could also be an idiom indicating that the good wife understands that her role is making a meaningful contribution to the family, and she is content with it. She is not spending time complaining that this work is beneath her (I am a queen, what am I doing in the kitchen?). She is not fretting that she wants to share power with the king, and be a part of meetings of state. She knows that her role matters, and she is well satisfied in making a contribution that might not be in the limelight every day. Accordingly, she has an enlightened perspective of life. She has the wisdom to understand that true greatness comes through serving.

*Her lamp does not go out at night* (v 18) is probably a continued reference to the quality of her merchandise. Lamp oil was made from olive trees, which are likely a part of the field she bought. Olive trees are prevalent in this part of the world. The phrase literally reads, “her lamp is not quenched at night.” The oil is of high enough quality that it sustains throughout the night. She produces good products.

Alternatively (maybe additionally), this phrase is a reference to the woman’s character and diligence. That her light shines into the night indicates that although she rose to work prior to dawn, she is still industrious after sundown. Perhaps also this means her light, in a metaphorical sense, continues to shine even when she is asleep. The effects of her goodness do not set with the sun. It is common in Hebrew literature, especially poetry, for sayings to have multiple meanings. And that is likely what is happening here.

There is also a sense of poetic symmetry to her *rising while it is still night* (verse 15) and *her lamp not going out at night* (verse 18). These phrases are like bookends. Both suggest that her influence exceeds the parameters of day. Even while she rests, she is a blessing to her family.

### **Biblical Text**

**<sup>13</sup> She looks for wool and flax and works with her hands in delight.**

**<sup>14</sup> She is like merchant ships; She brings her food from afar.**

**<sup>15</sup> She rises also while it is still night. And gives food to her household. And portions to her**

**maidens.**

**<sup>16</sup> She considers a field and buys it; From her earnings she plants a vineyard.**

**<sup>17</sup> She girds herself with strength. And makes her arms strong.**

**<sup>18</sup> She senses that her gain is good; Her lamp does not go out at night.**