

*Valor of Wisdom*  
18<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost  
September 23, 2018  
Trinity Bixby  
Rev. Lucus Levy Keppel

[Mark 9:33-37 \(NLT\)](#)

[James 3:13-18 \(VOICE\)](#)

[Proverbs 31:10-31 \(Selected\)](#)

Do you have a nickname or a pet name that someone special to you calls you – or that you call a good friend? How many of you have a nickname? They're usually something special, something that points to a part of your life – or a person in your life – that has incredible meaning. Jesus has a few nicknames that people call him in the Bible – Son of Man, Messiah, King of the Jews, Lord, and so on. Ok, you got me – those are more titles than nicknames, but sometimes, with a lot of use, those titles get pretty worn in, and point to just one person. Kinda like an old VHS tape – you know the ones you loved to watch 'cause the quality was so much lower from all the watches and re-watches. As a child of the 80s and 90s, my favorites were the Fox and the Hound and Lady and the Tramp. It wasn't until I re-watched those movies in college, however, that I finally recognized that the human family in Lady and the Tramp never had full names – the dog Lady always heard them refer to each other as “Jim Dear” and “Darling.”

I think that most couples develop this habit – referring to their partners by pet names. Maybe not to the extent of Jim Dear and Darling - I mean, even Darling's friends call her that at the baby shower! – but it tends to be something that develops as a special, meaningful connection, celebrating the love and time spent with each other. At least, hopefully – because sometimes, those very loving nicknames can turn to daggers, used to wound where they were once used to celebrate. Little is more painful than words of affection twisted into spite and manipulation.

Sadly, the affection of the words of the Bible is often twisted in the same way, wounding people deeply, and turning them away from the true love of God. For

instance, in the book of Proverbs, the affirmation of the acrostic poem in chapter 31 is often twisted from a celebration of a woman's good qualities into a scornful, impossible-to-achieve proscriptive straightjacket – in other words, what a woman *must* do in order to be “good.” For many women, this verse is used as a scriptural hatchet, cutting spiritual growth at the base. But that's not at all what it's supposed to say! Let's look into it a bit further – and if these words have been used to hurt you in the past, I hope that this can help to repair the damage a little bit.

If you're familiar with Proverbs 31, you know that English translations usually begin with a variation on the phrase, “A good wife, who can find?” And, right of the bat, we're in poor translation territory. In Hebrew, it begins *Eschet Chayil* – Woman of Valor. If you translate this “a good wife,” you've missed the point. It's not that she is good with a partner, but that she is strong. *Chayil* means strength, and usually military strength. When it's plural, it means armies! So, “goodness” is a bit of a stretch. Valor, on the other hand, suggests strength of body, strength of mind, and strength of character. *Eschet Chayil* – Woman of Valor – seek her out!

Now, after starting with the first letter of the Hebrew aleph-bet, the poem continues with each verse beginning with the next letter. It's a descriptive poem, not of one person, nor even of an ideal person, but of the qualities that collectively make valorous women.

Valorous women might care for others – or run a business – or plan ahead – or enjoy the rewards of hard work. The poem lifts up wisdom and grace – “Her speech is wise, and the law of kindness is on her lips.” Law of kindness is “Torah l'chesed” – instruction of grace, teaching of lovingkindness. It reminds us that “charm is deceptive and beauty shortlived, but a woman loyal to God has truly earned praise. Give her honor for her work, her life proclaims her praise.”

The point of the poem is shown by its end, when her partner speaks up, saying, “Many women have done well, but you surpass them all.” This is meant as an affirmation, a celebration of a partner for all that they do. It's like saying, “You've heard all these wonderful qualities, but you are so much more to me.” Who

wouldn't want to hear that? And since it became part of the Sabbath ritual, many Jewish families repeat it weekly. *Eschet Chayil* – Woman of Valor – is supposed to be the Darling of the Bible.

As Professor Amy Oden<sup>1</sup> from the St. Paul School of Theology in Oklahoma City points out, it's important to note what the acrostic poem doesn't say. It doesn't say that a wife's worth is derived from her husband's. After all, she buys land, she plants it, she sells its fruit, and uses the profit herself. She has full agency, and is praised for her purposefulness. It doesn't say anything about pregnancy or childbirth – again, her value is her own, not derived her relationship with others. It does mention children once, but not in a relationship sense – rather, it says that her children will call her blessed (or happy). Her identity is not in motherhood – it's a part of her, but it does not define her. And it says nothing about her appearance – as Professor Oden puts it,

*There is nothing about weight, shape, clothes, make-up or make-over, the sole topics of women's worth if current popular culture in America were to be believed. Has she achieved younger-looking skin? Does she bulge in the wrong places? Does she know what not to wear? We'll never know... the silence of Proverbs 31 on appearance is striking and refreshing. She is praised for the content of her character and the excellence of her endeavors rather than the surface of her skin.*<sup>2</sup>

This is something we can do, too – praise others for the content of their character and excellence of their endeavors. Indeed, just as we might have special names for those we love romantically, we also might have special names for our closest friends. One of my friends from High School was fairly unique for developing a huge number of nicknames, since all of his friends used a different name for him. Well, this is another example of praising people for their character and endeavors.

Now, in the New Testament, James writes a whole letter about what it

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Oden, "Commentary on Proverbs 31:10-31," Working Preacher, last modified 2012, [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1377](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1377).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

should mean to be called “wise one” – just like the Woman of Valor is called wise. James tells us a lot of things that those called wise should not be. True wisdom isn’t fanatical, filled with “unbalanced violence rather than reasoned conviction,”<sup>3</sup> as the late William Barclay puts it. Nor is wisdom bitter – opponents are not enemies to be annihilated but friends to be persuaded. Wisdom doesn’t promote its own opinions or earn glory for itself, nor is it arrogant, rather remaining aware of its own limitations.

Now hang on - because James tells us, too, how to identify a wise one, and even how to be wise ourselves. In verses 17 and 18, James writes, “Heavenly wisdom centers on purity, peace, gentleness, deference, mercy, and other good fruits untainted by hypocrisy. The seed that flowers into righteousness will always be planted in peace by those who embrace peace.”

First, then, wisdom is pure and holy, standing apart from the world enough to get closer to seeing things through God’s eyes. Through that holiness, wisdom acts in peaceable ways, restoring right relationships between God and humanity, and humanity with each other. Wisdom is considerate of justice, and the righteousness that lies beyond justice, when mercy should overcome rules and regulations. Matthew Arnold defines this as “sweet reasonableness” – the ability to extend to others the kindly consideration we would wish to receive ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

Part of that reasonableness is that wisdom is not rigid, set in its ways, but rather remains open to seeing things in different ways – deference, as James puts it. It doesn’t mean that wisdom always folds at the first counter-argument, but that wisdom is about exploring, diving into the issues more deeply than the first stance you envision. James goes on to tell us that wisdom is full of mercy and good fruit, offering help to those who are in trouble even of their own making. The reference to fruit reminds us that mercy isn’t an emotion, but an action – in order to get good fruit, you have to care for the fruit tree. Likewise, the good fruit of mercy is the

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<sup>3</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters of James and Peter*, revised ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1976), 92

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in *ibid*, 96

result of caring for a person.

Finally, James reminds us that wisdom is without hypocrisy – it acts and speaks in the same direction. And that pulls us back to where we started, because when Bible verses are used to harm people rather than restore relationship, then we know that they are being used differently than what they tell us to do. Instead, wisdom is sown by the peaceful, the peacemaking, the peacebuilding. In affirming each other, whether by positive use of pet names, or by lifting up friends and partners for their wise actions, we act against hypocrisy and towards the true wisdom and valor that God provides.

And, so, when Jesus tells us to welcome kids in his name, maybe we're supposed to apply some good nicknames of our own. "Beloved of God" "Peacemaker" "Made in the image of God" "Child of Valor" "Bearer of God's Wisdom."

So, may God grant you Wisdom. May Christ lead you in Valor. May the Holy Spirit fill you with loving kindness, that you spread joy and grace to all you meet. Amen.