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O F
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S E R M O N XXVII.

THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN.

B Y

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PROV. xxxi. 29.

Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.

INSTRUCTIONS, exceedingly useful for our conduct in life, are found in this chapter. They are given by his mother, to Lemuel, a foreign prince, of considerable prospects. Sobriety, chastity, and justice are chiefly insisted upon from the beginning of the chapter. At the tenth verse, the style is greatly changed. It assumes a poetic dress. The iambic measure generally prevails. Each verse begins with a distinct letter of the alphabet. This was a favorite species of composition among the ancients. It is found in some of the psalms. Greatly it aids the memory. This little poem assists Lemuel in fixing upon a partner for life. The qualities in the female, necessary to

bles the husband, and to promote domestic happiness and respect, are illustrated in simple, but expressive language. Their praise, who possess such qualities, are celebrated in my text, *Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.*

In discoursing from these words, I shall endeavor, through divine assistance, to place, in as clear a light as possible, the whole character referred to in my text.

The object of this sacred poem, is a *virtuous woman*. Interpreters observe, that the same word is used by Jethro, when he characterizes good judges. *Able men* is our translation. In what their ability consists immediately follows; *such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness*. The word has the same meaning in my text. *A virtuous woman*, in the tenth verse, is explained in the thirtieth, as a *woman that feareth the Lord*. This principle inspires her with heroic courage. The feats are not shewy, but real. She regulates her temper, and governs her tongue. She marks the path of piety and virtue. The path she treads with a steady and unvarying step. A name may lead one—the general practice another; in becoming conduct she persists. From it she cannot be diverted by the laugh of the giddy, or the scorn of the thoughtless. In this there is true greatness. The man who takes a city has not more praise—You may call her unpolite, but she will be indus-

trious—You may think her whimsical, but she will be pious:—No degrading epithet can dissuade her from managing her affairs with economy. Where is this heroine to be found? *Rubies* are not so valuable to the possessor. *Rubies* are not so ornamental to the wearer. Such qualities dignify the character. They diffuse a refreshing influence far around. In reference to these, the apostle Peter speaking to wives, earnestly exhorts, *Whose adorning, let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel; but let it be the hidden man of the heart, in that which is not corruptible, even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price. For after this manner in the old time the holy women also, who trusted in God, adorned themselves, being in subjection unto their own husbands; even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord; whose daughters ye are as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement.*

From a general description, this sacred poem descends to particulars. A whole group of good qualities come in view. *The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her.* No lightness in her carriage to awake his jealousy: No inattentions to make him solicitous—modest in her appearance—frugal in her management—her eye every where, and on every thing—the husband pursues his business abroad, at the senate, in the shop, without one distrustful thought. No disorder, no negligence, no waste: Every thing laid in its place—every work

done in its season—every article of diet or dress applied to its particular use—confusion, hurry and deficiency are not known. The man whose domestic affairs are conducted in so regular, so peaceful, and so frugal a manner, needs not *the spoil* of others to increase either his happiness or his wealth. A little, in such hands, renders a man independent. Ordinary fare with such company, has the relish of the most delicious repast.

His happiness is not the breeze variable in itself, and in the quarter from whence it proceeds; it is not the swelling tide, whose waters, in a few hours, forsake the shore which they had overflowed. No, my brethren, his virtuous partner *will do him good, and not evil, all the days of her life*. She accommodates herself to his humor, and studies his interest. It is her ambition in all things to please. Some are amiable enough at one time—The common resemblance to good angels can be fully justified; but, at another time, the appearance is disgusting; no feature of the good angel can be recognized. Uniform is the character here celebrated. The temper is always even; the behavior always obliging. Is the husband dejected? A cordial is at hand. Is he rugged in his disposition? Here is a constant polish. If the world frown and persecute; at home he is sure of smiles, and of a *sacred asylum*. Not only is his reputation, his happiness, and his interest dear, during his own life; but he leaves one behind who will respect his memory, and will prosecute with the same unremit-

ring care, as if he were yet alive, his favorite views.

The intemperate, and the unchaste often hear from this place, that their conduct is disgraceful and dangerous. I am happy in having it in my power to prescribe an antidote to the evil. Choose a partner for life, in whom you can confide, and from whom you shall receive constant benefit. Soon will you forsake your wicked courses. Soon will you despise what has hitherto been your reproach. A state of celibacy is ensnaring. The man is an enemy to himself. He transgresses an original law of nature. He is unprofitable to society. That such may become sensible, not of their insignificance to society, but of their own loss—I proceed in the description of the virtuous woman.

She seeketh wool, and flax, and worketh willingly with her hands. Idleness she cannot endure. In what is useful she employs herself, rather than in what is ornamental. She sets up a linen and woollen manufacture. She is not satisfied with giving orders, or merely with overseeing; she puts her own hands to the work. She performs it with dexterity. In such employments, the ancients of the highest rank thought it an honor to engage. For this, cotemporary writers speak in their commendation. The example merits imitation. Can moderns view it and not blush? Can Americans review it and receive no improvement? If a prin-

cess, and a queen, for of such this sacred poem speaks, made her boast of the robes, which her own hands had manufactured and prepared, shall America prescribe to her daughters, an education dignified as fashionable; where exercises comparatively trifling, are substituted in the place of what would always be useful, and greatly to the honor of a young, but rising empire. Let America be cautious of receiving a wrong bias. Let her circumstances dictate her habits. Let her cast off with indignation, the fetters of prejudice, which in an old country, are too strongly revitted to be easily removed. In her industry, the virtuous woman finds her account. *She is like the merchant's ships, she bringeth her food from afar.* Her labor is not in vain. Her manufactures are exchanged for foreign commodities. A domestic supply through this traffic was easily procured. Her industry affords her as great a variety as the merchant's ship affords the owner. The produce of distant countries is seen on her table. Sweet is the meal which industry earns. The sluggard must submit to inconvenience; he must be satisfied with any thing. But labor is rewarded with whatever is found in the East or West Indies—in the countries of Europe, or continent of America, calculated to promote convenience, refreshment, or health.

The character, so honorably mentioned in this chapter, cannot be attained without much self-denial: *She riseth also while it is yet night, and giveth meat to her household, and a portion to her maidens.*

No enemy so dangerous, either to a pious or a prosperous life, as a slothful disposition. Over it, a virtuous woman has obtained the mastery. It is yet dark, when she shakes of her slumber; she provides for those who labor in the field. To the maidens who continue under her immediate eye, she assigns their respective tasks.

If she be attentive to the present, she provides also for the future. *She considereth a field and buyeth it; with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard.* Rich fields are valuable property. Their produce are always in demand. Other articles of commerce ever fluctuate. But from the fields, the greatest must continually be supplied. It is also a property which descends through many generations. Realizing the gain of her labor in this manner, was prudent. Beside, the principal was still accumulating. Her crops this year, enabled her to purchase a vineyard next year; and her vines next year still put more in her power.

This variety of employment left no place for the complaints, which the degeneracy of latter ages render so common. Her nerves were always braced; her body always healthy. *She girdeth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms.* She tucks up the flowing garments which might impede her motions. She bestows not one thought, unseasonably, on finery. Labor she prefers to ease, strength to ornament. In the hours of business she is diligent, the work is dispatched. It is done with all

her might. Nothing is neglected, and nothing superficially performed.

Working with spirit, she acquires a taste for it. She considers it not as a task, but as a pleasure. The further she proceeds, the stronger the attraction by which she is drawn—*She perceiveth that her merchandize is good ; her candle goeth not out by night.* Her course of life, was found by experience, to be healthful. It also procured the conveniences of life. She thinks nothing, therefore, of making encroachments upon the night. The time we sleep is all lost. The less we indulge in this, the better, both for the body and the mind. In a hurry of business, the virtuous woman can continue at labor during the whole night.

She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff. In such labor, the lower ranks are usually engaged. But the labor is necessary. By practice, therefore, she acquires of this a clear knowledge. In it she becomes expert. She twists the thread or yarn with her own fingers; she winds them with her own hands. In a princess, this was condescending, but it lessened not her importance, she is the more dignified and the more beloved. It is a weakness of mind which deserves no countenance, when any are withheld from useful employments, because they happen to engage our inferiors, or our slaves. A virtuous woman rises above this weakness. It is enough to her that a work be useful to induce her to become, by

information and practice, expert in the performance.

No unworthy motive prevails upon her to be so industrious. She indeed turns her gain to the greatest advantage. But she is neither uncharitable nor mean. *She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy.* If any be in distress, she gives them her helping hand. She is much concerned for their relief. Both her hands are ready to extricate them from danger and from straits. She employs those who are capable of labor. An abundant supply is made for those whom sickness has incapacitated. It gives her peculiar satisfaction, to have it in her power to do good. It rewards her self-denial and her toil. The Pharisees, in our Saviour's lifetime, thought, by certain ceremonial observances, to merit the divine blessing. These the Saviour overlooks. *Give alms of such things as you have,* is his direction. This, as the first fruits under the law, sanctifies a man's substance. It is acceptable to God, and beneficial to man. It enhances greatly the character in my text.

She attends to the destitute abroad, but neglects not her family at home. *She is not afraid of the snow for her household; for all her household are clothed with scarlet:* A variety of cares overpower the slothful, and distract the weak—they are life to the industrious—Her eye is abroad and at home, on the present, and on the future. The weather

need not give her domestics any uneasiness. They have change of raiment. *Thus*, some interpreters render the last clause. In summer, all is light and airy. In winter, all close and warm. The dress is suited to their rank. The garment is indeed convenient. It is also rich and splendid.

Her house and person indicate her circumstances, and station in life. *She maketh herself coverings of tapestry, her clothing is silk and purple.* Tapestry gave her house a noble look; silk and purple were a princely wear. Such magnificence attracts the eye. For it, the female sex have a delicate taste. In obtaining it, no considerable sacrifice ought to be made. It is dearly purchased, at the loss of honor, of justice, or of humanity. But to this distinction is she, and she alone, fully entitled, whose easy circumstances are the consequence of her known industry, and uniformly attended with extensive beneficence.

In her attention to her domestics and her house, *her husband* is not overlooked. *He is known in the gates, when he sitteth among the elders of the land.* His robes are always so rich and so neat, and his general appearance so unexceptionable, that it cannot escape the notice of any, under what prudent management his domestic affairs are conducted. Beside, a man's situation at home, gives an impression to the whole of his conduct. Disappointed there, it depresses the spirit. He has not vigor. He loses relish for every thing; but do-

domestic enjoyment cheers the countenance, invigorates the mind, and disposes a man for business and for beneficence.

In providing for her household, the overplus she disposeth of to the greatest advantage. *She maketh fine linen, and selleth it, and delivereth girdles unto the merchant.* In her other employments, the necessity and convenience of her own family, were immediately consulted. Here, her ingenuity and taste are employed to meet the public approbation. She prepared the finest linen, and curious girdles for the merchant. Her other traffic supplied the house with conveniences, this the coffers with current money. In her gains and industry, so well managed, and so well applied, she seemed entrenched against any surprize from change or accident. However much she is to be commended for both, in this is she particularly celebrated—*Strength and honor are her clothing, and she shall rejoice in time to come.* Silk and purple had formerly been mentioned, but these have no excellency, compared with the constancy and purity of her mind. An uncommon steadiness, a modest deportment, and a generous turn, are spoken of according to the Hebrew idiom, as an ornamental garment, with which she was invested. These qualities of mind, joined with industrious habits, early acquired, and long persevered in, secured a happy old age, and a peaceful end.

Her conversation is the transcript of her mind and conduct—*She openeth her mouth with wisdom,*

and in her tongue is the law of kindness. She weighs well all her words. Neither is she talkative, nor yet silent. Her remarks are judicious. Good are they for the use of edifying. They minister grace unto the hearers. Soft is the language. It sooths the melancholy. It encourages the stranger. It calms the enraged. In no other instance is eloquence so pleasing—so irresistible—so well directed. The ear is charmed, as if listening to the harp of Gabriel. The heart yields to conviction, as if the former of the heart himself, communicated instruction.

This heavenly eloquence is never subverted to mischievous purposes: *She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness.* Her first care is to instruct her own family. She corrects what she sees amiss. She gives wholesome advice. She insists upon ready and exact obedience. Amidst such a variety of concerns, she finds herself usefully and entirely employed. An opposite behavior is severely reflected upon by the apostle. *They learn to be idle.* For such a tattling, fauntering life, a virtuous woman finds no time. She has business enough of a suitable and profitable nature, in her own family. She meddles not with the families and concerns of others.

Happy the children of such a mother; as they arise, thus educated, and thus provided for, they revere her memory, and bless her name. Happy the husband who has such a wife; he knows not

how sufficiently to commend her. *Many daughters, he confesses, have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.—Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain, but a woman that feareth the Lord, she shall be praised.* However taking a handsome shape and graceful behavior—however amiable a fair complexion and regular features—these are fading qualities, and many times conceal under them, what is the bane of domestic peace—but the fear of the Lord is a steady principle. It cherisheth a peaceful and obliging disposition. It excites to vigilance. It produceth industry. If any thing be true, it enables her to think of these things, and to do them.

Speak not of her parentage—speak not of her prospects—speak not of her beauty—she has something more solid of which she can boast—the qualities of her mind—the charms of her conversation—the industry of her life, celebrate her worth better than mortal tongue can pretend.

After placing in as clear and precise a manner as possible, the whole character referred to in my text, I ought to go on to apply my subject, in an address to the younger part of my audience of both sexes; and then to those who are more advanced in life; but this I must leave until God shall give another opportunity. May he bless his word. Amen.