If there is ever a definition or what a snapshot of what a “Superwoman” may be, the passage that we just read from *Proverb 31* would probably come the closest. However, this proverb is also one of the most often misunderstood and misinterpreted passages in the Bible. To begin with, let us set the record straight that the intent of *Proverb 31* was NOT to be a checklist of what a “perfect” woman or an ideal wife or mother should be. Some have turned this into a “job description” or a “wish list” of some sort. Certainly that’s not God’s view of what a “Godly” woman is either.

This poem was written beautifully in an acrostic style, meaning each verse starting with verse 10 begins with each successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. We’ve come across this type of writing before in a couple of Psalms that we’ve read. This literary poetry style tends to suggest to the readers that there is a universal and encompassing theme on whoever the subject is, whether it’s referring to God, God’s creation, or some other person. In our poem today, the writer was attempting to describe the greatness of a woman or a mother who pays careful attention to the finer details of things on one hand while overseeing the large picture and keeping everything in order on the other.

In our passage today, the writer - King Lemuel (some scholars believe that he’s King Solomon himself…but that’s an on-going debate among the scholars) lifted up and showcased the characters of the strengths and the gifts of a capable woman or a mother. This, by no means, suggests that any actual woman would possess ALL of these characteristics, but instead **it paints a composite portrait of what womanhood may look like.** Bear in mind that no one would fit into the perfect description of this Super-woman or Super-mom either!

In the opening line of our poem today, the subject was described as the “capable wife” or in other translation (in the *New International Version)* as the “wife of noble character” or of “women of strength”. This term for “capable” or “strength” in Hebrew is mainly associated with either “physical strength”, “strength in character” or “will power”.

Furthermore, prior to our text in verses 1-9, the King’s mother was sending a series of instructions or words of wisdom instructing her son of what he must do in order to become a competent leader for his people. He must stay away from various forms of self-indulgence (such as women and alcohol) as they might distract him from his duties as the King. However, the focus quickly shifted from the King to this fictitious character of the “capable wife” or the “wife of noble character”. It was a pretty thorough description, as if this was a mother’s wishes of her future daughter-in-law.

The poem offers words of praise and acclamation to this “noble and capable” woman not for her beauty and charm, but for her strong character, great wisdom, multi-disciplined skills, gentle spirit, and compassionate hearts towards others. She’s not your typical servile and domesticated housewife, but instead she was a competent manufacturer, importer, manager, realtor, farmer, seamstress, upholster, merchant, and entrepreneur. She’s an industrialist, a multi-tasker who pays careful attention to details and special needs of those under her care. She opens her arms and her heart to those who are poor and needy. Furthermore, not only is she honorably respected, she made her husband look good as well, as he also earned his respect among his peers.

This woman’s strength and dignity do not come from her personal achievements, but instead they come as sign of reverence and fear of her God. Her ultimate loyalty and allegiance belongs to God, followed by her family. The strength of this “capable woman” rests upon her character and NOT her beauty and her charm.[[1]](#footnote-1) This was quite an exhaustive list of what a woman of noble character should be.

Throughout different generations and across different cultures, this passage has also been studied and debated regarding the roles of women in our society and in our household. Certainly the way you would read this passage in this country today would be very different from when it was maybe 50 or 60 years ago when the roles and expectations of women were assumed quite differently back then. Many churches also have found themselves in such social dilemma of discerning what is the proper role of women in and around the church and in the household.

Throughout biblical history, the role of woman within the bible, including many of the writings of the Apostle Paul, has also been challenged and debated. We need not look far to find ourselves in the middle of such debate and controversy, as many church denominations today still do not allow women to be ordained as ministers of Word and Sacraments. Our own denomination, the *Presbyterian Church (USA)* on the other hand, does recognize the gifts of women and has been ordaining them as ruling elders since the early 1930’s and as ministers since 1956. However, despite all of that, many of our fellow clergywomen still struggle with different level of respect and treatment. Many have been overlooked for positions and promotions even if they are just as qualified as their male counterparts.

Regrettably, some denomination churches today still do NOT ordain women as elders. They would not be allowed to serve communion or speak behind the pulpit, even if they have demonstrated their giftedness, qualification, and received training to serve in various capacities. Their roles were reserved to be either Sunday School teacher, as Christian Educator, as choir members, pianist, or as a deacon providing care for other fellow members.

As one commentator suggests that “*the church should affirm women for their strength, intelligence, and a wide range of abilities. The church should emphasize that there is diversity and variety in women’s roles, and that not all women must make the same choices (or the same paths). The church can encourage women to affirm each other rather than judge and compete.”[[2]](#footnote-2)*

Many of you, I’m sure, have seen on the news about this famous bronze sculpture of the fearless girl who stood face-to-face down on Broadway with the raging bull, which has been a symbol of power and strength of *Wall Street* for many decades. The fearless girl statue serves as a powerful symbol of courage and strength in confronting the orders of injustice in our society, not only among the women or children, but among the varying voices that have long been suppressed and marginalized. The fearless girl, at least for now, stands as a symbol of hope and raises public awareness across our society when it comes to gender-equality and women’s rights. Although this has made significant stride over the years, there are still a long long way to go. Many women, wives, girlfriends are still being beaten and abused domestically, by their husbands and boyfriends or other men. Their dignity and grace of womanhood has been demoralized by those who suppress power over them. This is totally unacceptable.

Perhaps another way of looking at our text today is that instead of placing all these noble characteristics upon the shoulders of women, let us allow them to deepen our understanding of who God is as our parent who is perfect and fully capable of accomplishing and meeting all these expectations and measures. *Proverbs 31* leads us to reflect upon our own relationship with our God, who is our provider, our comforter, our care-giving, our nurturer, and our friend. In spite of all the uncertainties and chaos that we face each day, God has demonstrated to us that God remains faithful and in charge of all things. We need not worry about our future at all.

As another theologian suggests, *“In Proverbs 31, this extraordinary woman is providing the food and the clothes for her household. Her husband and children do not need to be anxious, because she will provide what they need. No need to worry, because she is in charge. Like God, the woman nurtures and sustains her family, servants, and community. She is a compassionate, caring and powerful presence.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

We are all created equally in God’s image and are chosen as God’s daughters and sons. We are all uniquely gifted and talented in many different ways. The only standard that we are called to live up to, is the teachings of Christ and the commandments of God. There is no need for us to compare ourselves with others, to live up to certain expectations or standards, as long as we strive our best to be whom God has created us to be. **The Holy Spirit enables us and empowers us to speak when necessary, respond accordingly, and love unconditionally beyond our human understanding and measures.**

So on this day, as well as any other day, let us honor all of our mothers, our grandmothers, our aunts, god-mothers, or fellow sisters in Christ with dignity and respect. May we extend our sincere appreciations for their extra-ordinary gifts and talents just as they are, for what they have done (to the best of their abilities), and for what they have sacrificed and committed to. We know they are not perfect, but we still love them and appreciate them for who they are as daughters and women of God. **As God has first loved us, let us love one another.[[4]](#footnote-4)**  In the name of God the Father (and Mother), God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

1. *Proverbs 31:30* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Japinga Lynn, “*Preaching the Women of the Old Testament*”, P.182 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Japinga Lynn, “*Preaching the Women of the Old Testament*”, P.183 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *1 John 4:19* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)