

Dr. Knut Heim, Proverbs, Session 19,

Teaching of King Lemuel's Mother (Prov 31:1-9)

6-min. Video Overview

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When you're looking for great leadership advice, you probably think of, you know, modern CEOs, famous generals, or big-name philosophers. But what if some of the most powerful leadership advice ever came from a source you'd never expect? And what if it wasn't delivered as some gentle, friendly tip, but as a fiery, urgent, and, believe it or not, sarcastic takedown from a mother to her son, the king? Well, that's exactly the story we're going to unpack right now. So where do we find this? We have to go to the very last chapter of the Biblical Book of Proverbs, looking specifically at the first nine verses.

Now, on the surface, it's presented as wisdom from a king, but the real story, well, it's a whole lot more interesting than that. The text starts by introducing us to someone named King Lemuel. And right out of the gate, we hit a wall.

A big one. Why? Because this King Lemuel, he's a ghost. He doesn't show up anywhere in the very detailed records of the kings of Israel.

Not a single mention. This tells us he was almost certainly a foreign ruler, which makes you wonder: why is his story included here at all? It's pretty fascinating. And it gets deeper.

The text calls these words a massa. Now, that's a really important term. It means an oracle or an inspired utterance.

So this isn't just a collection of good ideas. It was considered a divine, authoritative teaching, right up there with words of the greatest prophets. So whose words are we talking about? And here is the big twist.

The inspired utterance, the massa, it isn't from King Lemuel. It's from his mother. He's just passing along the lessons she drilled into him.

Think about that for a second. A woman's teaching, and a foreign woman at that, is being given this incredibly high status. That tells you just how vital her wisdom was considered to be.

Okay, so what did she have to say that was so important? Well, if you're imagining a sweet, tender, mother-son chat, you're going to want to scrap that image. The tone here feels much more like a sharp, forceful correction. She is laying into him.

She kicks it off with this urgent plea. Listen, my son. You can almost hear it, right? It's what you say when you know the other person isn't really paying attention.

But she's just getting warmed up. Then she escalates, making it incredibly personal. Listen, son of my womb.

Whoa. She's reminding him of their most basic, fundamental connection, pulling on that bond between a mother and the child she carried. And the third time seals it.

When you have to tell someone to listen three times in a row, it's because you're pretty sure they haven't been listening at all. This isn't just some poetic flourish. This is the sound of a queen mother who has had enough and is demanding her son's complete attention.

So what was he doing that was so wrong? Well, she doesn't beat around the bush. She immediately zeros in on two classic traps for anyone in a position of power. Two major distractions that she says can, and I quote, destroy kings.

She points right at two of the oldest temptations in the book. First, getting sidetracked by romantic and sexual pursuits that drain his energy and focus. And second, excessive drinking.

She sees these two things as direct threats to his ability to rule effectively. Now, here's a really crucial point. She isn't blaming the women.

Remember, this is a woman talking. Her criticism is aimed squarely at her son's foolishness. The problem isn't the women.

The problem is that he's letting himself get so distracted that he's failing at his most important job — leading the nation. And she applies the exact same logic to alcohol. See, for her, the real problem isn't just the act of drinking.

The true danger is what happens when a leader is drunk. He forgets the law, he forgets his duty, and he denies justice to the poor and afflicted. His personal indulgence has devastating public consequences.

And now, we get to my favorite part. The most brilliant and surprising piece of her whole speech. To really hammer the point home about his drinking, she uses this incredible rhetorical trick.

It's so clever, you could easily miss it if you're not paying attention. She says to him something like, "Fine, go on then. Give booze to the dying."

Give wine to those whose lives are miserable. Let them drink to forget how poor they are and not remember their suffering anymore. So you read that, and you have to wonder, what is going on here? Is she seriously suggesting the best social program is to just get the poor drunk so they forget their problems? No, not at all.

This is pure, biting sarcasm. What she's really saying is, you know who might actually have an excuse to drink themselves into oblivion? People who are truly suffering, who have nothing. But you, the king, you have absolutely no excuse.

It's a way of shaming him into realizing how ridiculous his behavior is. So after completely tearing down his bad habits, she makes a hard pivot. She goes from telling him everything he shouldn't do to laying out a powerful positive vision for what he must do.

This is his real job description. So what is a king's real job? According to his mom, it's not about throwing parties or building monuments. It's about advocacy.

His core duty, his entire purpose, is to use his power and his voice for the people who have none. It's to defend the rights of the poor and the needy. I mean, this is a radical idea, especially for the ancient world.

The queen mother's message is crystal clear. The whole point of having power isn't for your own benefit. It's to shield and lift up the powerless.

Authority is a tool, and it's meant for service. And that kind of leaves us with one last question to chew on. This advice is almost 3,000 years old, coming from a foreign queen to her wayward son.

But just imagine for a second what our world would look like today if every single person in power, in government, in business, in our own communities, actually lived by these words.