

An Honorable Woman!

Ruth 4:13-17
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I picked up some advice for those of us needing a little help honoring our mothers. Here are the *Top Seven Things You Should Never Say on Mother's Day*.

7. Boy, that is a nice power screwdriver you got MOM!
6. Dad and I are going fishing.
5. You look great for your age.
4. Mom, when you get done with those dishes, would you iron my clothes for church tonight?
3. Mother, what are you cooking for lunch?
2. Happy Mothers Day, Dad. (AND THE NUMBER ONE THING YOU SHOULD NEVER SAY ON MOTHER'S DAY)
1. Mom, aren't you putting on a few pounds?

Honor goes far beyond avoiding these faux pas. God commands all people to honor their father and mother. The fifth of the Ten Commandments is:

Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you. (Exodus 20:12, NIV)

This is not a call to set aside one day a year to treat your mother in a civil fashion. This is not about avoiding faux pas. This is not judging your parents and deciding whether you will respect them. This is a call from God himself to a *lifestyle* that honors your parents. The Apostle Paul restates this commandment:

“Honor your father and mother” – which is the first commandment with a promise—“that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.” (Ephesians 6:2-3, NIV)

Paul writes that the promise, “that you may live long in the land,” means “that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.” The Bible links your treatment of your parents to your experience of life on this earth.

I've seen such a link. I've watched people, who remember their parents with bitterness, suffer in so many ways, and I've seen people, who hold their parents in forgiving love, exhibit amazing grace in all their relationships and work. They seem much healthier and less prone to physical problems although their parents were alcoholics, mentally ill, or abusive.

I believe God moved our nation years ago to set aside a day to honor mothers, and I want to focus on how we can develop a lifestyle of honor for mothers and women. I also want to help you mothers and women walk the path of honor.

There is a story that helps us see the path to honor, and it describes the life of two women, Naomi and Ruth. Naomi lived in Bethlehem. After her marriage, a terrible drought hit Bethlehem and forced her husband and her with their two sons, to make a life in a different country. While there, they suffered a series of misfortunes. Naomi's husband and sons died leaving Naomi with two daughter-in-laws and no rights to own anything or work at anything. Naomi had to have sons or grandsons for any opportunity. When she decided to return to Bethlehem, her daughters-in-law both wanted to come with her. There was something about the way Naomi looked at life and looked at her sons' wives that made them want to come with her. Listen to this exchange from the first chapter of Ruth:

“Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me. May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” Then she kissed them and they wept aloud and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.” (Ruth 1:8-10, NIV)

Naomi is a woman in great pain, yet she thanks her daughters-in-law for the good things they did. She does not remember their deficits. She blesses them and seeks their best; and they don't want to leave her. They both prefer life with her in a foreign country than with their own relatives. Both want to follow her back to Bethlehem. Naomi insists that she has nothing to

offer them and that their lot would be better with their relatives. Orpah is finally convinced and leaves, but Ruth declares:

Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.
(Ruth 1:16-17, NIV)

Can anything but love create such commitment? Ruth declared with an oath that nothing but death would separate her from her mother-in-law. Naomi thought she did right in persuading Orpah to return to her family, but she relented when she saw Ruth's commitment. Clearly, Naomi wasn't self-centered. She was not a control-freak. She was humble and teachable even if she wasn't positive and optimistic.

Naomi was far from positive and optimistic. When she returned to Bethlehem, the Bible says:

The whole town was stirred because of them, and the women exclaimed, "Can this be Naomi?" "Don't call me Naomi," she told them. "Call me Mara, because the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, but the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The LORD has afflicted me; the Almighty has brought misfortune upon me." (Ruth 1:19-21, NIV)

The word *Naomi* means pleasant. The word *Mara* means bitter. Hearing Naomi talk, one cannot call Naomi a positive thinker. Her condition is exceptional and appalling to her and to her community. All Bethlehem is stirred.

However, there is something more positive and powerful than positive thinking go on in her soul. Somehow, in her terrible misfortune she did not succumb. Naomi may have called herself bitter, but Ruth would have never stuck with a bitter woman. What made this woman so pleasant? What did she do that caused people to love her?

In the book of Ruth, we find Naomi coaching Ruth, and Ruth acting with kindness and integrity in return. Ruth is able to marry and give birth to a son so that according to Jewish law Naomi regains the inheritance that belonged to her family.

Ruth became an instrument of redemption and blessing. The birth of her son deeply moves the town of Bethlehem.

The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth." (Ruth 4:14-15, NIV)

It is difficult to find two more honorable women than Naomi and Ruth. The primary marks of their honor were fear of God and love.

I know the word *fear* is loaded. I know for some of us fear is a paralyzing emotion. I know some of us are dogged by worry, guilt or crippling phobias. In the book of Ruth, Naomi expresses no guilt or paralysis. She conveys no worry. She doesn't fear what has not yet happened. (For those of you prone to worry, I heard recently that even God can't answer your worries. God can't remove a situation that does not exist. Thus, the Bible teaches us not to allow anxiety to grip us. Instead, with thanksgiving we are to pray about every concern.) When I say that Naomi and Ruth exhibit fear of God, I do not mean that they display any aversion to God. Instead, Naomi understood that God was involved in every aspect of her life, including her misfortune. She did not sugarcoat her condition. She did not accuse God of injustice. She expressed the view of Job without blame, rebellion or anger toward God. She acted as if every aspect of her life depended upon God's favor. That is the fear of God. Such a focus helps us honor parents who are less than perfect, and it helps us become honorable ourselves. It causes us to humble ourselves and learn. It looks constantly to God.

The second mark of honor is love. Naomi's love is seen in calling her sons' wives "*my daughters*." It is displayed in her kindness to Orpah and Ruth, and it is reflected back to her in their affection for her. It is captured in Ruth's commitment to Naomi. It is evident in the way the women of Bethlehem rally about Naomi and Ruth. Finally, Naomi and Ruth's love is a legacy seen in David, Ruth's grandchild, who writes so many psalms in the Bible and rules as the greatest and most compassionate king of Israel. This love is more than a principle or command fulfilled. It is God's Spirit working in the nature of people through their faith.

Not too many of us have experienced the intensity of pain and lack of hope that these two women suffered. Apparently, what happens in our circumstance is not pivotal to becoming honorable. Honor comes with a faith that is humble and teachable. Are we that way? Naomi and Ruth are direct ancestors of Jesus our Lord. More than that, their actions point to the faith and love of Jesus. Naomi and Ruth exhibited, at least in part, the attitudes and actions of Jesus as they lived in kindness and honor.

Today, if we wish to genuinely honor those we love, then the examples of Naomi and Ruth are more than relevant. They are a call for you and me to believe that God's righteous hand is involved in every aspect of our lives; and they are an invitation to welcome the Spirit that was working in them. That is the Spirit that conceived Jesus, anointed Jesus, counseled Jesus, and raised Jesus to life. That Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, will live through you and me when we die to our own opinions and right to live. Are you ready to die, so he can live through you? That is when faith and love captures your soul. That is when you act honorably.