

How to Become Intimate With God

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The Book of Ruth: Life Under God's Care Series

Ruth 3

Frederick Buechner, who is a Christian writer, has a wonderful illustration of the universal desire that we all have to connect, to become intimate. He says imagine that you are in a railway station in some strange city late at night, or in a large gallery in a museum just before closing time, or the visiting room of a hospital after all the patients are asleep – just one of these public places where the light is dim and there is a great, heavy stillness in this big room. And the room is empty except for two people who are seated far apart in the room, just waiting and passing the time. One person is on one end of the railway station and then across the room and 30 feet down another person is seated. Let's say one of the persons is you and the other person is a stranger. The silence in the room is so deep, so strong that you can almost hear it. But it is not an embarrassed silence. There is no demand that you speak to each other. It is not one of those silences between a husband and a wife after a fight where you feel obligated to say something. This stranger is almost a non-person to you. He almost doesn't exist as a human being. Nevertheless, there is this great separation between the two of you. Everything you are, the whole mystery of your person, your fears, your loves, your dreams, your thoughts, your relationships – everything you are is hidden to this stranger. And everything he or she is is hidden from you.

Maybe, just on an impulse, you decide to say something – just a little thing like “I took this train once before, but it was delayed. I hope it is not going to be delayed tonight.” Or “I have always liked that painting that you are looking at.” Or “It is too bad that the food in this hospital isn't any better, that they don't have the cafeteria open this late.” Something, some impulse causes you to break the silence with some silly little statement, some expression.

Why do you speak? Maybe you suddenly felt lonely? Maybe you just wanted to hear the sound of your own voice? Or maybe there is this impulse in us to know and to be known, to not be completely a mystery to others and to not have them be a complete mystery to us. We speak because in some way we have a strong impulse to open ourselves up to the gaze of other people and to gaze into them. If the stranger answers you; if he hears you; a little bridge is built. A little window is opened up.

And Buechner says this is what prayer is all about. Prayer is the breaking of a silence between us and God who is a stranger to us. Prayer is driven by an impulse to know and be known. It is the overcoming of our aloneness in the world. It is the shattering of the silence. I am not talking about formal prayers or the reading of liturgical prayers. I am not talking about recited prayers. I am talking about little phrases, “God, please don't let him die.” “Lord, help us.” “God, if you are watching, please forgive me.”

Buechner says prayer is our impulse to open our lives up at the deepest level. People pray for the same reason that people talk to a stranger – because they can't help it. Because we can't remain disconnected for very long. Because we are relational human beings.

Now, the depth at which you open to another person or to God and the depth in which they open up to you is the measure of our intimacy. Intimacy simply means that we remove some of the mystery. As we grow older, we learn how to cover up our thoughts, how to arrange our faces, how to arrange our clothes, how to adjust our body language to hide and mask, to remain a mystery to others. And so we determine, then, to remove the mask, to uncover, to disclose, to let people see us as we are.

I have a dear friend who says that intimacy really just means “in to me see.” I am going to let you look into me. I will reveal the mystery of who I am to you.

Now the passage that we are going to be looking at today is found in Ruth 3. It is the story of the growing intimacy between a woman who is widowed, named Ruth, a young widow, and an older man named Boaz - their growing relationship that will eventually result in marriage. It is the story of increasing intimacy.

Now before we look at the story of Ruth and Boaz, I do need to say a few words about the proper interpretation of the Bible and why it is that I think it is appropriate to see this story as a type, as a clear illustration, of the kind of growing intimacy that a person can have with God. There is, in the history of the church, an illegitimate way of reading the Bible. A way that is very popular and has been very popular, but that is illegitimate and will lead us astray. That is the way of allegorizing a story. Allegorizing is the attempt to find a deeper spiritual meaning, a hidden meaning, underneath a historical event. When you allegorize, you move away from history. You move away from objective truth and you move away from the intention of the author. And you come up with some mysterious hidden meaning. Allegorizing opens the door to all kinds of fancy speculation, wild imagination, so that you no longer hear the author speaking, but all you read is really just a reflection of your own thoughts.

A lot of postmodern interpretations, just as an aside, a lot of what university students are getting in the classrooms is really just a current form of allegorizing. University students are being taught to read into the text anything their fanciful imaginations can come up with.

“What I see here in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is the struggle of a gay man against a homophobic culture.” Or “the struggle of a woman who wants to have a career and rejects the traditional role of wife and mother.” Or “the struggle of a person who wants to control their own body and advocates abortion.”

Just as an aside, most university students who take literature classes today are being trained in an illegitimate form of interpreting a text – that of allegorizing. Reading into a text what the author never intended. The problem is that it is totally uncontrolled. There is no way to tie this hot air balloon down. There is no anchor, no connection, between what the author is actually saying and what you come up with.

For example, in the early church, some of the fathers of the church read the story of how Herod, this wicked king, killed all the children who were under the age of two living in Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth. Some of you are familiar with that story. It is the story of the slaughter of the innocents. Well, one of the early church fathers said that this shows only those who are Trinitarian will be saved. If you are not over two you will be killed. So if you are binatarian and don't believe in the three persons of God, but only two persons; or you are Unitarian and you don't believe in the three persons of God, but only believe in one person – you will be eternally damned.

Now, whether or not it is theologically correct to say that if you don't believe in the Trinity you are not going to be saved, is absolutely the case that when Matthew wrote the story of King Herod's slaughter of all children under the age of two, he was in no way suggesting some hidden meaning about the number of persons in the Godhead or the need to believe in the Trinity. He was telling us a historical fact that King Herod, in his rage and jealousy and fear of the birth of Messiah Jesus, decided to wipe out every male child born in Bethlehem so that he could kill Messiah.

Now, we will read a story today, a simple love story, of two real people – not mythical people, real people, who really lived in history – two people named Ruth and Boaz.

You say, "Rich, why is it legitimate to find here a picture or to use the theological term a type, a pattern, of the relationship between a believer and the Lord. Why are you not simply engaged in allegorizing?"

The reason I don't think I am is because I think the author intends for us to see a picture not only of Ruth's relationship with Boaz, but a believer's relationship with the Lord. This is the author's intention.

You say, "How do you know that?"

Well, we are going to come upon a phrase that we'll explore in detail next week – the phrase "kinsman redeemer." Boaz was the kinsman-redeemer – a close relationship who redeems. The person who buys the person back out of slavery, whose role is to protect. The kinsman redeemer was a clear image or type in the Old Testament of Messiah. The author intends us to see Boaz as a type of the Messiah who is to come. And it is very clear that this book is intended to point us to Messiah because it tells us in the very last few verses that this romance between Boaz and Ruth and their eventual marriage formed the ancestry of King David, who is the preeminent Old Testament picture or type of Messiah.

We read in chapter 4:21, "Boaz was the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David."

This book is aiming us toward David and his greater descendant Jesus. The author wants us to see deeper significance here. He wants our minds focused not only on this horizontal romance between Boaz and Ruth, but also on a deeper romance between a believer and the Lord.

Finally, the reason I think we escape from allegorizing is that the very activities that Ruth engages in in preparing herself for intimacy with Boaz, for

marriage, are the same activities that the Lord says the believer is to be engaged in to prepare ourselves for intimacy with God.

So let me sum up what I am saying. We have an actual historical romance going on – a romance between Ruth and Boaz. But the author intends us to see something else in the picture of Ruth and Boaz connecting. The author intends for us to see how a person might connect with God. The way we are to overcome the silence, to break that distance in the railway station, or the distance in our own hearts between the Lord and us.

I have called today's talk, "How to Become Intimate with God." Let's pray.

We read in Ruth 3:1-2, "One day, Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you, where you will be well provided for? Is not Boaz, with whose servant girls you have been, a kinsman of ours? Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor.'"

And then she, Naomi, gives Ruth a plan for meeting up with Boaz. Let me, again, if you are a guest here and haven't been here the last few weeks, give you the background to what is going on.

There was a man named Elimelech who with his wife and two sons left the Promised land, I believe, in disobedience to the Lord. He was trying to escape a famine and went to the land of Moab, a pagan land, a land where the Lord wasn't worshipped, but false, foreign gods were worshipped. There he settled. His two sons married wives who were outside of the faith. One of his sons married Ruth, who was a Moabitess.

Well, Elimelech died in the land of Moab and so did his sons. Three men left three widows – Naomi and her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Orpah returned to her family of origin, but Ruth, I believe through Naomi's witness, became a believer in the God of Israel. Ruth forsook her pagan roots and Ruth was converted. She left her old gods and committed herself to the God of Naomi, the Lord. Naomi and Ruth traveled back to the Promised Land, where they went to Bethlehem, the city that Naomi was from. Her husband had been from Bethlehem. And it was there that Ruth, this young widow, met one of Naomi's relatives, this man by the name of Boaz.

And so we pick up the story in Ruth 3 where Naomi, the older mother-in-law, is telling Ruth, "Ruth, you have been mourning long enough for your dead husband. It is now time for me to find you a new husband. And I have some ideas. Boaz, my relative. I believe he would make a good husband for you. Here is what you need to do. You need to wash and perfume yourself and change your clothes because I think this would be a really good match."

Now, it would be entirely inappropriate for you to read Naomi's words to Ruth as being the words of a conniving, manipulative mother or mother-in-law. You must understand that in ancient Israelite culture, it was the cultural, religious duty of a parent to find a suitable spouse for their child. It wasn't considered manipulative at all. The culture demanded that a parent try to fix their child up with a spouse that they found appropriate for the child. This was a culture, like some that still exist today, of arranged marriages. They still do this in much of the third world – in Africa, in India where I have traveled several times – the

custom, except where Western ideas have now begun to influence, is arranged marriages.

Even though in America we don't believe in arranged marriages – and many of say “Thank God, we fear what our parents would have come up with” – even though we have rejected arranged marriages, I think we can learn some things from Naomi's counsel to Ruth that would be culturally appropriate to us. Naomi believes that it is her job to get her daughter-in-law, she calls her a daughter because they are so close, but to get her daughter-in-law ready for marriage and to also find a suitable spouse for her daughter-in-law.

You know, friends, I believe that those two same roles exist for every Christian parent. Christian parents, many of you don't know what it is that you are attempting to do in your child raising because you don't have a clear target. The reason why you struggle in the day-to-day management of your child, the day-to-day relationship with your child, is because you are not aiming at anything in particular. Or you may be aiming at the wrong thing. Many parents' aim in their child's life is to make their child happy. That is their aim. Or to make sure they don't get into too many conflicts with their child. Or to bribe their child so that the child likes them more than they do the ex-spouse. But I guarantee you, if your aim is to try to make your child happy or to reduce the number of conflicts with your child, I guarantee your child will grow up unhappy and you will have major conflicts with your child.

Let me suggest a different target that you can aim at that will be very easy for you to fill in the blanks and a say “What should I, as a Christian who wants to be a good parent, do with my child?”

How about preparing your child to be happily married? Prepare them to not only not get divorced in the future, but also like Naomi, prepare your child to be happily married.

You say, “How do I prepare them to be happily married?”

Prepare them (1) to pick a good spouse, and (2) to be a good spouse.

I will make this really personal. From the time the kids were small, Marlene and I have regularly talked with our children about what to look for in a good spouse. What kind of person should they go after? I want it to be automatic, that they are so trained to look for certain things that it would be unthinkable to them to pick a rotten spouse. And in part, I confess that it is my selfishness because I don't want to bring a rotten person into my family and have to deal with them for 50 years. But it is more than selfish, because I love my children and I don't want them to endure a bad marriage. So we have talked over and over, “What are you looking for?”

Parents, talk with your children. You have to look for more than a cute smile. The first guy or girl who bats their eyes at you. Not just anyone will make an appropriate spouse. Your child ought to have a mental checklist that is clear to them. At the top of the list, if you are raising a Christian child, they ought to want to be with someone who deeply loves the Lord. Not just someone who says they are a Christian. “I think they are a Christian.” I am shocked by the number of people who will marry and never investigate the spiritual commitment of their

mate that they are swearing a covenant to for the rest of their lives. The top of the list is: Is this person passionately in love with my Lord?

Are they someone who shares my values?

Do we have the same outlook on life?

Do we prioritize things the same way?

Are they happy about serving in the church and giving money and taking time to pray for people and taking time for fellowship? Is that their priority also?

Are they someone you can respect? Someone who respects you, darling? Someone who treats you really well? Are they kind? Are they emotionally healthy?

It is the duty of a parent to assist their child to pick an appropriate spouse. And parents, frankly, I think that too many parents are way too non-directive. Too many parents don't want to impose their views. My goodness, you are older than your child. Impose some of your views. Share them. Train your child to think correctly about this most important matter.

And then, of course, you have to train your child to be a good spouse. That means more than being a success in school or athletics. Can they be a great husband or wife? Not only to find a good spouse, but to be a good spouse. If you think about that, it will help you to challenge and confront certain bad attitudes and behaviors in your child and to affirm good ones. You say, "I have a target of making and training my child to be a good spouse."

#1 – How does my child do in resolving conflicts? Have you trained your child to resolve conflicts well with their friends, with you? They are going to marry someone who is outside of your family, someone with a totally different background and different gender, you hope, different family, different tastes, different habits, different likes and dislikes. Have you trained your child to deal with people who are different from them? Is it my way or the highway with your child? Can they take into account an opinion other than their own? Does your child know how to back down, to compromise? How do they do with resolving conflict? Do they forgive? Do they let go of grudges?

#2 – How does your child do in serving? Have you trained your child to serve without pay? Because family members in our home contribute to the health of the family because they are part of the family. Do your children clean, spend a day, even though they want to be with their friends, helping around the house? Your child will not be a good spouse if they are not a good servant.

#3 – How do your children deal with anger? Do they say anything they feel like saying to you? To their siblings? Do you let them get away with it? Are they allowed to speak disrespectfully? Are they allowed to hurt with their words just because it is their little opinion? You train your child to control their anger.

#4 – How do your children do in listening? Are they compulsive talkers? Can they shut-up? Do they have a response to everything before you get a chance to air your views? Have you modeled listening to them?

What I am saying, friends, is that a very concrete way to think about what you are aiming for in your child's life is to say, "I want to help my child have a great Christian marriage. To know how to pick a good spouse and to be a good spouse."

And so we see Naomi preparing Ruth for marriage. And as I said at the outset, this is also a story of a person being prepared for intimacy with God.

Naomi says something to Ruth that I think forms, at least an initial, motivation for intimacy. In verse 1 we read, "One day Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter, should I not try to find a home for you?'" Literally she said in the Hebrew, "Should I not try to find a place of rest, a place of security for you?"

When I think of why a person would want to become intimate with God, why go through the preparation for intimacy, I don't know if we can state it any better than Naomi stated it. It is because we need a place of rest. We need a place of security and we are not going to find that apart from intimacy with God.

There was a pastor from North Africa who lived way back at the end of the 4th Century. His name was Augustine. He wrote the most famous spiritual autobiography in all of history. It is called Augustine's Confessions. These confessions open with a statement some of you might have heard before. Augustine is speaking to God and he says, "You have formed us for yourself and a heart is restless until it finds its rest in you." Lord, you have formed us for yourself and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you. There is a universal feeling of internal restlessness; it doesn't matter if you go to India or South Africa or South America or urban America or the suburbs. Everywhere in the world that you go, you will find people suffer from an internal restlessness, an internal lack of peace. And because you are a human being, I know that you suffer from that feeling as well.

Many people write off Christianity because they think that Christianity is for losers. They say, "Well, it's fine if you need religion. If you need it, great." If you are a drug addict, an alcoholic, or grew up in a totally awful situation, great. I am not judging you if you need that, but I don't need it. What folks miss is that you don't have to be a down and outer to need an intimate relationship with God through Jesus Christ. We are, all of us, restless. We are searching for something. There is this need to scratch an internal itch, an itch for satisfaction, an itch for fulfillment, and an itch for peace.

And do you know, what I observe in America is that there are two basic approaches that people take to this internal itch of restlessness. Either people try to dull it or they actually increase the itch. People dull their sense of restlessness, this sense of internal search for more, for peace or fulfillment, by sedating themselves with TV for 25-35 hours a week, by constantly having music on, by constantly having to be entertained, by filling every waking moment with activity, shopping, working on the house, working at your business – people dull their sense of itch. Or people actually increase their sense of restlessness through some sort of addictive behavior.

Some time ago, God gave me a picture of what people do with addictive behavior. It feels good when you scratch an itch. There is something satisfying about scratching an itch. Do you know what addictive behavior is like? It is like deliberately sticking your arm into a jar that is filled with mosquitoes. Deliberately allowing yourself to be bitten and have your skin erupt and become raw from the bites so that you can experience the pleasure of scratching the itch. Giving into

an addictive behavior is deliberately exposing yourself to mosquito bites, just so that you can scratch.

There is a healthier approach to dealing with the internal restlessness that either dulling it so that you avoid the truth that you are restless, or increasing the restlessness through some sort of addiction. The healthier approach is finding a true place of rest and security. To do what Naomi did for Ruth. Should I not find for you a place for rest? Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.

Well, how does Ruth prepare for intimacy with Boaz? Naomi says to her in verse 3, “Wash and perfume yourself, and put on your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don’t let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.” ‘I will do whatever you say,’ Ruth answered. So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do. When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet. ‘Who are you?’ he asked. ‘I am your servant Ruth,’ she said. ‘Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer.’” There is nothing sexual going on here in the story. Intimacy, self-disclosure doesn’t have to include sex.

The scene is that Boaz is going to be on the threshing floor. The threshing floor was the place where the men threshed grain. After the barley was harvested, they carried the sheaves of barley up on top of a hill where the winds would be blowing off of the Mediterranean Sea. They carried the sheaves up to the top of a hill to a nice level flat spot. Often they would have oxen tread on the grain to crush it and break it. And then in the evening when the winds picked up, they would take the broken pieces of barley and throw them up in the air. The chaff, which is lighter, would be blown away, and what would fall to the ground were the heavier kernels of barley. Men used to sleep by their grain so that no one would come and steal it.

And so Naomi is telling Ruth: Here is how I want you to prepare to become a bride. We can read here some very clear lessons about the way we, as people, would be prepared to be intimate with God. Naomi’s first instruction is to wash yourself. Verse 3, “Wash.” Ruth, clean the dirt off yourself. If you are going to become a bride, you need to become clean. Well, a person who is to become intimate with God must likewise be washed. Paul speaks of the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit. Our souls, in order to become intimate with God, need to be washed. And the ultimate washing experience of the soul is something called the born again experience. No matter how much you want to get connected with God, you will never be intimate with God unless you have the born again experience – the washing of your soul by the Holy Spirit. The born again experience is available to anyone who turns to Jesus Christ in humility and cries out saying, “Lord, Jesus Christ, save me. I am dirty. Sin has stained my soul. My sin is keeping me from being intimate with you. Lord, Jesus Christ, I trust that you have been sent to be my sin-bearer by dying on a cross. I

ask you to take the sins that stain my soul and place them upon your strong body. And then, Lord, Jesus, send your Holy Spirit into my heart to wash me so that I could be spiritually born again. Clean the slate off.”

The ultimate washing experience is the born again experience. If you have not had this, right at the front door you are barred from real intimacy with God. But God makes the born again experience available to anyone who asks him.

And then there is the daily washing that we need to go through of our consciences. Those who have experienced the born again experience, still need to have the daily accumulation of dirt, of sin, washed away through confession.

Here’s the deal, friend, if there is sin staining your conscience, things that you have done that you shouldn’t have done, or things that you have failed to do that you should have done – either sins of commission or sins of omission. You have failed to call someone you should have called. You have failed to pay a debt that you should have paid. You have failed to love in the way you should have loved. If there is sin staining your conscience, you cannot be intimate with God. Because intimacy with God means that you are asking God to look into me, see me. And you will be unable to ask God to look into you to search you if you have a bad conscience. To the extent that your conscience is bad, to that extent you will hide in shame, you will withdraw from the presence of the Lord.

Oh, you can resolve to be a nice person even if you have a bad conscience. You can be a good church person. You can smile at all the right times and tell everyone that things are going fine, but if your conscience is bad, you can’t be intimate with the Lord. The first step of preparing for intimacy is being washed – once for all in the born again experience and then daily by asking Jesus to forgive you as you openly confess what you have done or failed to do.

Washing may also mean washing your possessions. I don’t mean getting out and washing your car. I mean there may be certain possessions that you may need to wash out of your life. You may have certain things in your home, certain cable TV channels that are a stumbling block to you. Certain CDs, certain books or magazines, certain possessions. You may have certain things – pictures, letters from people you shouldn’t have letters from, or gifts. And to the extent that these things remain in your home, they form a barrier between you and total intimacy with God.

Sometimes things need to be washed out of our lives. Sometimes relationships need to be washed out of our lives because they are getting in the way of our intimacy with God. Not only was Ruth told to wash, but also she was told to perfume herself and put on her best clothes. Perfume and change your clothes. Ruth probably would have been wearing the clothes appropriate for a widow and now that she was preparing for a new life as a bride, she had to take off her widow clothes and put on her best dress to be ready for marriage, or intimacy.

Now, growing in intimacy is always a process of changing. To grow in intimacy, a person commits themselves to constantly changing their beliefs and their behaviors. You don’t become more intimate with God unless you are committed to change.

You say, "I like things just the way they are and I like who I am and I am going to just stay put."

Then you miss out on real intimacy with God and real connectedness and your heart will be restless. To be intimate you must change your beliefs about God.

You say, "In what way, Rich? What would I need to believe to be intimate with God?"

Let me suggest one thing that you would need to believe. That God is good. Perfectly good. And everything he tells you to do is for your good. In 1 John 1:5, John at the end of his life says, "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." Growing in intimacy with God means growing in conviction that no matter where you search in the heart of God you are going to find light, that there is no dark spot in God whatever, that as far into the heart of God you plunge, you will always encounter goodness, that God's intention for you is good.

You say, "Why must I believe that? How will that help me to be intimate?"

Well, friends, unless you deeply believe that God is good and that his intentions for you are good, you are not going to want to obey God in everything. We have a great fear, all of us, in our sinfulness, in our unbelief; we have a great fear about God. Our great fear is that God doesn't know as well as we do what will ultimately make us happy. He is always wonderful, but in this particular area he is not that wonderful, because God is commanding me to do something that ultimately won't result in me being happy.

For example, does God intend your very best when he tells you as a Christian to not date a non-Christian? Do you believe that God is good and wills to be good to you when he says to you, "Christian, don't date someone who doesn't love Christ." Do you believe that God is good and wills only good to you when he says to you, "Christian, don't marry someone who doesn't love Jesus Christ." Is God really good and does he will to be good to you when he says to you, "Don't get a divorce, but hang in there and work on your marriage." Has God gone out of his mind and intend to hurt you, to rob you of happiness when he says, "Don't get divorced." Does God intend to rob you of happiness when he says, "Don't have premarital sex?" Does God know what he's talking about when he says "Forgive everyone for everything – that is best for you?"

Intimacy with God begins by us being washed. But it goes deeper as we allow ourselves to be changed – changed in our beliefs that God is good and wills to be good. And changed in our behavior. Ruth had to put off old clothes, her widow clothes, and put on new clothes. The book of Colossians uses this illustration of clothing to speak to us about changing our behaviors. When Paul says, "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience." "Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on a new self." The book of Colossians tells us that part of the change is not only a change of belief, but also a change of practice.

I believe Christians are mightily confused when it comes to God's role and when it comes to their own roles. Christians are constantly trying to do what God

alone can do and Christians are constantly trying to get God to do what God commands us to do. There are certain things that God does for us that we must never try to do for ourselves. And there are other things that we must do that God will not do for us.

The main thing that God does for us that we must never try to do for ourselves is God forgives us, accepts us, and saves us by his own activity. And we add nothing to that activity. By the perfect life, sinless death and powerful resurrection, Jesus Christ has bought for us forgiveness and acceptance and salvation. Christians are constantly trying to do something, which will gain for them forgiveness, acceptance and salvation. Maybe if I promised to be better. Maybe if I worked harder. Maybe if I do penance. Forgiveness, acceptance and salvation is a substitutionary work, God does it for you.

But change in your life, getting rid of bad habits and beginning good habits is not a substitutionary work of God. You can pray all day long, "God, change my life. Zap me and make this habit go away and start a new habit in me" and that is not going to result in a change. You must do something. You must take off the old clothes, the old automatic bad habits, and you must put on new clothing.

God works in us. I think the perfume is a picture of God the Holy Spirit anointing, empowering, working in us to will and do his good pleasure, but we must make the changes. There are certain habits that we have learned to automatically do, that come as automatic to us as driving the car or eating or writing – we don't have to think about them, we just do automatically. Well, we have certain sinful, habitual patterns. We are given an appropriate set of stimuli; we regularly sin in a certain area. We habitually get angry, explode in rage. We habitually lust or commit sexual sin. We habitually hold grudges or habitually gossip or slander. They are automatic habits that are as natural to us as driving. And God requires that we change those behaviors.

I will tell you something. If you are not committed to changing your behaviors, you will never get intimate with God. If you are content to just come to church each week guilty and asking God to forgive you, but you don't want to change, you don't want your life changed, you will never have the salvation experience that God wants you to have. God wants old habits off and new habits put on.

You say, "How do I do that?"

You have to stop rationalizing or making excuses or justifying bad habits. Stop excusing gossip or lust or sinful sex. Stop justifying it. Stop excusing it. That's the first step.

The second step is to believe that what God wants for you is better than what you are currently doing. That his desire for you to break off a relationship or to get rid of something is better than what you currently have.

The third step is something that would require a lot of discussion, but deal with your habit indirectly by learning how to feed upon God. Let's say that you are struggling with gossip. Now you can try with all your might not to gossip and you might have some limited success. But if you aim at dealing with gossip indirectly, not directly, but indirectly, by learning how to feast upon God, by taking time in the morning to read the Bible, and mediate on the text that you are reading, by taking time to worship so that you can reflect upon God and draw

near to God, by taking time to pray, by asking God to fill you, by engaging in a discipline like fasting, by taking time alone to withdraw, by taking time in fellowship, by serving – if you deal with habits indirectly, you will find that you are stronger in God and that the stronger you are in God the easier it is going to be for you to resist doing something that you don't want to do.

Ruth grows in intimacy with Boaz not just by washing, by perfuming and changing clothes, but by wholly obeying. In verses 4-5 we read,

“When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do.’ ‘I will do whatever you say,’ Ruth answered.”

Ruth obeys Naomi to the letter. And the only way that we move forward in intimacy with God is to obey God to the letter. To actually do what the Bible tells us to do. People misunderstand all the time what the Bible is for. The Bible is not trying to get you to agree that certain things are true. That you look at it and say, “This is really true.” The Bible is not even trying to get you to believe that you ought to do certain things and to feel guilty because you are not doing them. The Bible is trying to get you to do what it says. That's God's intention in the Bible.

See, if you are a parent and you're training your child to ride a bike, you are not just trying to give the child information about a bike. You are not trying to get your child to believe that riding a bike is good or that he ought to ride a bike. You are trying to teach your child how to ride a bike. God, through the Bible, wants to teach you to actually do what he is telling you to do. If he is telling you to resolve a conflict, then he wants you to do it, not just believe you ought to. If he is telling to make a phone call, make a phone call. If he is telling you to forgive someone, forgive. If he is telling you to get rid of something, get rid of it. If he is telling you to give something, give it.

Only people who obey completely ever have the kind of intimacy with God that God wants.

Finally, what I see in Ruth's preparation is she boldly asks for her needs to be met. She gets rid of the dirt. She changes clothes and puts off old things and puts on new behaviors. She obeys completely to the letter. The final thing that I see really opens Ruth up to intimacy is she is bold in asking for what she wants.

“When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly uncovered his feet and lay down. In the middle of the night something startled the man, and he turned and discovered a woman lying at his feet. [talk about a rude awakening] ‘Who are you?’ he asked. ‘I am your servant Ruth,’ she said. ‘Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a kinsman-redeemer.’”

It is a lovely picture of God spreading his wings over us. We read in Ruth 2:12, “May the Lord repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

Ruth is being very bold. She is saying to Boaz, “I want you to bring me under your cover and protection.” In other words, “I am asking you to marry me.”

Here is the real ultimate breakthrough in intimacy after we obey the Lord, we become bold with God. The Bible says, "Come boldly to the throne of grace so that we might receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

Charles Spurgeon, who was perhaps the most famous pastor in the 19th Century, and who pastored the great Metropolitan Tabernacle in London which was the largest church of its day, once said, "There is no need for us to go beating about the bush and not telling the Lord distinctly what it is that we crave at his hands. Nor would it be seemly for us to make any attempt to use fine language. But let us ask God in the simplest and most direct manner for just the things we want." Spurgeon said, "I believe in business prayers. Prayers in which you take to God one of the many promises he has given us in the word and expect it to be fulfilled as certainly as we would look to the money to be given to us when we go to the bank to cash a check. We would not think of going to the bank, lying over the counter, chatting with the clerks on every conceivable subject except the one thing for which we had gone to the bank and then coming away without the coin we needed. But we should lay before the clerk the promise to pay the bearer a certain sum, tell him in which form we wish to take the amount, count the cash after him and then go on our way to attend to other business. This is an illustration of a method in which we should draw supplies from the bank of heaven."

You don't just chat about with God on every conceivable subject except the one thing you are concerned about regarding your child, your marriage, your weight, your relationship, your job, the salvation of someone you love. Tell God what you want. Tell him plainly. Tell him distinctly. Tell him boldly. That's what Ruth did.

And you know, what pulls us into intimacy is, first of all, a desire to find rest for our restless hearts. But ultimately the reason we would want to go through these steps is because we see in God a loveliness, an attractiveness, a desirableness – we want to be totally open with this being named God because he is the best possible thing we could ever have. And this is what we read in the following verses regarding Boaz.

"The Lord bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All my fellow townsmen know that you are a woman of noble character. Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives I will do it. Lie here until morning." So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognized; and he said, "Don't let it be known that a woman came to the threshing floor." [He wants to preserve her reputation.] He also said, "Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out." When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and put it on her. Then he went back to town. When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, "How did it go, my daughter?" Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her and added, "He gave me

these six measures of barley, saying, ‘Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’”

What do we read here? Why is the Lord someone we would want to draw near to? Why would we want to totally obey him and put off old habits that get in the way and get rid of things and put on new habits? Why can we draw near to God in boldness?

Because, first of all, God accepts us. Verse 10: “The Lord bless you, my daughter.” Boaz could have rejected Ruth. There were other possibilities concerning her bold request. He could have said to her, “Are you out of your mind? Marry you? Who do you think you are? You are a Moabitess. You are a pagan, you are used, damaged property. You are nothing. Get out of here.” Talk about living with delusions of grandeur, he could have rejected her. He could have shamed her.

He could have used her. O, a nice young woman here on the threshing floor. I can have a little fun with her tonight and toss her out in the morning.

Boaz doesn’t do any of those things. He loves her. He receives her. He calls her “my daughter.” He pronounces a blessing on her. He wants to protect her reputation. He not only doesn’t touch her, there is nothing sexual going on here, but he protects her reputation.

God is safe, if by safe we mean that he wants our good and will never reject us if we come to him.

Not only did Boaz accept Ruth, but also Boaz assured Ruth. He says, “My daughter, don’t be afraid. I will do for you all you ask.” He spoke loving words of assurance to her. Fear not.

How often God says to people, “don’t be afraid.”

I know that it is dark right now, Boaz speaks to her in the dark. I know it is dark right now. I know that you have had a really hard way to go. Don’t be afraid.

The Lord says that over and over to his servants. Don’t be afraid, Abraham. Don’t be afraid, Moses. Don’t be afraid, Jacob. Don’t be afraid, Joseph. Don’t be afraid, Mary. Don’t be afraid, shepherds. Don’t be afraid, Paul. Don’t be afraid, John.

In fact, I will do for you whatever you ask. I want to show you how good I am. I am going to start answering your prayers. You can trust me, just come.

Boaz accepts her. Boaz assures her. Boaz advocates for her. He says, “Although it is true that I am near of kin, there is a kinsman-redeemer nearer than I. Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to redeem, good; let him redeem. But if he is not willing, as surely as the Lord lives I will do it.”

There was a law that said that the person who was closest in relationship had the first claim on a widow. We will go through all of that next week. But it is interesting to me that Boaz was willing to advocate for Ruth, to defend her. He goes beyond his duty.

That is Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, standing before the Father pleading our case.

And then, finally, Boaz abundantly provides for her. She takes her shawl and he pours in six measures of barley. It is not clear what measure they are talking

about. It may have been a measure called a seah. He gave her about 88 pounds of barley. Here, again, is the widow Ruth walking down the road for a second time hauling back this sack of grace.

Intimacy leads to abundance. Do you want an abundant life, the life that God came to bring us in Jesus Christ? Not just a life where we get our sins forgiven, but an abundant life, a life where our inner restlessness ceases? Where we find fulfillment and satisfaction? Intimacy with God leads to the abundant life. It is in knowing him, in opening ourselves to him and him opening himself to us that we experience fullness of life. That's what God wants for us. Let's pray.