

RESOLVE TO SET THE RIGHT EXAMPLE
Ruth 1:1-11 (AFBC 1/22/17)

As we prepare to ordain our new deacons this morning, we'll continue to look at some important resolutions for us to make as Christians. Whether or not we serve as deacons, or Sunday School teachers, or Pastors or other members of the church staff—if we claim to be followers of Jesus Christ, our lives will be observed.

We have a responsibility before God, and to one another as members of this body of Christ, to set the right example by the ways in which we live, and give, and serve, and interact with each other in our families, our church, and community. So let's resolve today to set the right example—one that brings honor to Christ.

Our text today comes from the book of Ruth. Usually when we read from this book, our focus is on Ruth—hers is a remarkable story. What I want us to see today, though, is that the story of Ruth unfolds as it does because of the example that was set by her mother-in-law, Naomi.

We're ordaining six new deacons this morning. Two of these are women, Liz Marvin and Fran Singleton. They are the daughters of Lillian Glenn whom we recognized not long ago with a "Phoebe Award"—an honor bestowed on the first three women to serve as deacons here at First Baptist. Lillian set the right example for her girls. Now, the two of them have some big shoes to fill!

Lillian, I know you're proud of them! We are too, just as we are proud of all six of these who have agreed to take on this important role of leadership and service in this body.

Our need to set the right example never ends. Centuries ago, this dear woman called Naomi lived a godly life before others. As a result, others were attracted to Naomi's God. Let's take a look now by turning our attention to our text (**Ruth 1:1-11**)

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land. So a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab. ² The man's name was Elimelek, his wife's name was Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and

Kilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem, Judah. And they went to Moab and lived there.

³ Now Elimelek, Naomi's husband, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ They married Moabite women, one named Orpah and the other Ruth. After they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.

⁶ When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there.

⁷ With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

⁸ Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. ⁹ May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband."

Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud ¹⁰ and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

¹¹ But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?"

By the way we live our lives, we can either draw people TO God or...push them AWAY from God. It's an awesome responsibility. Think about it: people may believe in our Saving God only as they see Him at work in the lives of those who claim He's saved them!

We clearly see this principle at work in Naomi. We observe in her life and witness several components of "setting the right example." The first of these is simply this:

1. HOW WE BEHAVE. This has to do with what people see when they observe our lives. This takes place in a variety of settings: in our homes, schools, places of business and leisure—wherever we are, people observe our words and deeds, and these make an impression.

Actually, most evangelistic opportunities happen during the ordinary times of life. Before we can share a *word* of witness, we must first make it our aim to *live a life* that points people to God.

I'm convinced that the time of greatest evangelistic opportunity in my life occurred, not during the years since I've been pastoring churches; but instead, it was while I worked in a textile mill.

Right after college, I went to work for Deering-Milliken—some of you have “been there and done that” too. I was put in charge of about forty people who ran the texturing machines, pushed the yarn trucks, and handled the other responsibilities of the job.

I was their supervisor--young, inexperienced--but determined to live out my faith at work. I sought to treat the people on my shift the way I would hope to be treated by them—the Golden Rule. And I would try to care for them as real people with real needs...never seeing them only as tools for getting the job done.

It wasn't always easy. And, believe me, I was tested often. At times, I failed. But perhaps I was at least partially successful.

I say this because, after several weeks on the job, I started to notice a change in some of the people on my shift. For one thing, I was no longer “the enemy.”

Occasionally I would find myself in the canteen area with one of my workers; and, if no one else was around, they might say something like, “You seem to really care about us,” or even, “What makes you different from some other people I've worked for?”

I welcomed those comments because here was the opportunity for my “lifestyle” witness to become a “verbal” witness. *Now* it had some credibility to it.

Instead of me just confronting them with something I wanted them to hear—and that really wouldn't have been appropriate under the circumstances anyway—*now* I had the opportunity to respond to *their* request to know more.

I'm not saying this approach is always effective—and I also understand that we live in a culture that's growing increasingly hardened toward the Gospel--but if we are consistent in our

Christian lifestyle, there will be opportunities for witness that come our way. And what a blessing when they do.

How we live, behave, and treat others—this makes a tremendous difference in how we are able to influence them for God.

This happened several years ago—true story, but it doesn't involve anyone around here. Of course, that doesn't mean it couldn't.

A woman who had been a Christian for long enough to know better...told me how she responded to some young neighbors who were playing their "Gosh-awful rock music" way-too-loud!

"I was listening to Charles Stanley," she said, "so I turned up the volume on my TV until it was blaring louder than their music!"

I thought about asking her if she felt this had enhanced her witness or furthered the Kingdom of God in some way--but I didn't. She probably wouldn't have been able to hear it anyway—she'd been subjected to so much loud noise already!

Friends, sometimes we fail even at the basics of common decency and courtesy, let alone the higher standards of Christian graciousness and love. And all the while, a lost world is watching.

Are they finding anything in our lives that would draw them toward the Savior we claim to follow, anything that would attract them to our way of life... in Christ?

Remember the woman at the well? She listened to Jesus because He took the time to hear her and relate to her as no one ever had before. Jesus didn't condemn her. He cared for her.

The Philippian jailer wanted to know what made Paul and Silas different. He had observed their actions in prison. Their lives were obviously different from other prisoners. He wanted to know why.

What an attractive, God-honoring life Naomi must have lived to cause Ruth to later say to her, "Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you..." The right example is attractive!

2. Now, a second component of "Setting the Right Example" is **HOW WE COPE**. In other words, how are we affected by life's

adversities...and how do others see us dealing with both the everyday problems and the more serious traumas of living?

You'll need some background here: the book of Ruth begins by telling us the story of Naomi and her husband Elimelech. There was a famine in the land of Judah; so Elimelech and Naomi, along with their two sons, went to live in the country of Moab.

While in Moab, Elimelech died; but the two sons had both married Moabite women--one of whom was Ruth.

Before long, though, both of Naomi's sons also died. Naomi's life, then, was filled with much sadness. She was far removed from her homeland; and while so far away, she had lost her husband...and both of her sons.

Once again, the Bible is clear that everyone must face pain and trouble—God's people are not exempt. We do, however, have resources to draw upon during those dark and difficult moments.

Ruth observed this in Naomi—she handled these sadnesses well. Ruth knew that whatever it was that helped Naomi face her troubles, she wanted this also in her life.

The world is attracted by a faith that sustains in the midst of suffering and sadness. "How we cope" is another important aspect of how we set the right example.

3. A third component of this is WHERE WE CONGREGATE.

That's what we do—we're doing it now. The Bible tells us that, as believers, we're 'not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together.' We gather with our fellow Christians each Lord's Day.

But "where we congregate," in other words, the church family with which we identify, makes an impact, either positively or negatively, on our ability to lead others to the Savior.

Christian witness is not just a function of the individual. It's also the responsibility of the gathered community of faith—the body of believers. The impact of the whole community was acknowledged by Ruth when she said, "Your people will be my people."

We have people. We're church. We're each other's people! The health of this congregation is affected by how well we handle being people together. One important indicator is how we welcome and minister to strangers who come through our doors.

Most churches, including ours, do a fairly good job with this initially. But then we quickly return to our old patterns of relationships—close friends and family—and if we're not intentional about this, we'll be so tight with each other, there will be no room for... new people—for others to become part of "our people."

Yes, you've heard me talk about this before—when it's no longer a problem, I'll hush up about it. People expect to find community when they come to church. If they don't, most folks won't put up for long with the pain of feeling like they don't belong.

Those who are setting the right example find ways to say to those who are new among us, who maybe "aren't from around here," or seem a little different—we find ways to communicate "my people will be your people—beginning with me—we're people now!"

We shouldn't be satisfied until every person among us feels in his or her heart that this is true for them—that they belong; that they're family. They have people here too!

This is our responsibility; but it's a special privilege and burden for all who seek to lead and serve this congregation—deacons, Sunday School teachers, music and missions leaders, our church staff, family ministers, and others—we must do this well!

Think about this: would it change our actions if we knew that the ways in which we respond to those who are new among us may either enhance or destroy someone else's witness to that person? Does it matter to us that our actions here may significantly affect whether that new person in our midst ever responds to Christ?

How we behave, how we cope, where, and how, we congregate—all three play an important role in whether those who observe our lives ever reach the point that Ruth did, when she was able to say to Naomi, "your God will be my God." So—my people, *our* people--let's all resolve... to *set the right example!*