

## LOVERS' LANGUAGE

by Steve Zeisler

In this study we're going to go back over some verses that we've already considered (see Discovery Papers [4542](#), [4544](#)), and look at them from a different angle. In 2:13 there is a phrase that is obscured in most English translations, including most that I've read. In the King James Ruth says to Boaz on the first day they meet, "...Thou hast spoken friendly unto thine handmaid...." In other translations we read something like "...You have spoken kindly to your maidservant...." But in a literal rendering of what is written there, she says to him, "...You have spoken to the heart of your handmaiden...."

One of the reasons these words are difficult to translate is that heart language is always difficult to say and difficult to hear. We find ourselves wondering what is meant. The heart that has been spoken to is vulnerable. Further, the events of the story make these words difficult, because Ruth and Boaz have just met, and they are in the middle of a field, surrounded by other people who are listening in. It isn't an intimate setting. Boaz hasn't said tender things to Ruth in a romantic setting.

We live in an age in which words are everywhere. How many of our lives are inundated with speech? It's easy to hear news and commentary from the most obscure places in the world. Getting e-mail from a far continent is a routine event.

I had the most amazing experience on Tuesday regarding this overflow of conversation. I received a phone call from an old friend, a Hebrew Christian who was once a member of this congregation. He emigrated to Israel and is now serving in the Israeli army. It was only after I had hung up from chatting with him that I realized what had taken place. It was morning here, but it was the middle of the night in Israel. He was on patrol at the border of Lebanon, in the middle of the night talking to me on his cell phone!

How much speech there is, and yet how little connection there is. How many words we hear, but how few of them penetrate to the heart. Heart language remains as elusive today as it was three thousand years ago. Thus the conversations of Ruth and Boaz will be helpful to us. We're going to reread two conversations between them, one in chapter 2 and one in chapter 3, and examine how they talk to each other. This book is a marvelous book on the art of conversation. More than half of the verses in it are direct address. We hear Ruth talking to Naomi, Naomi talking to the women of the town, Ruth and Boaz talking to each other, and later Boaz talking to the men of the town.

### GOOD STORED UP INSIDE

Communication that connects with people, that penetrates to the heart, is not just a matter of having social skills, knowing how to use words that sound good, whether you're saying anything good or not. Jesus made an important observation, recorded in Matthew 12:34b-35: "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him." The mouth speaks what is in the heart in the long run. No matter how skilled an evil person is at sounding good, hearers will eventually find out what is in the heart. What's inside will project itself. The same is true of the good person. The good that is stored within them will come out in what is spoken.

With that in mind, consider Ruth's and Boaz's two conversations. These are good people. They have learned the lessons of trusting God and loving others. They have been made free and courageous and righteous. They know how to bring out good things from within. So let's reread their conversations. The first is in 2:8-16:

Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen carefully, my daughter. Do not go to glean in another field; furthermore, do not go on from this one, but stay here with my maids. Let your eyes be on the field which they reap, and go after them. Indeed, I have commanded the servants not to touch you. When you are thirsty, go to the water jars and drink from what the servants draw." Then she fell on her face, bowing to the ground and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your sight that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?" And Boaz answered and said to her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband has been fully reported to me, and how you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and came to a people that you did not previously know. May the LORD reward your work, and your wages be full from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to seek refuge." Then she said, "I have found favor in your sight, my lord, for you have comforted me and indeed have spoken kindly to your maidservant, though I am not like one of your maidservants."

And at mealtime Boaz said to her, "Come here, that you may eat of the bread and dip your piece of bread in the vinegar." So she sat beside the reapers; and he served her roasted grain, and she ate and was satisfied and had some left. When she rose to glean, Boaz commanded his servants, saying, "Let her glean even among the sheaves, and do not insult her. And also you shall purposely pull out for her some grain from the bundles and leave it that she may glean, and do not rebuke her."

The second conversation is in 3:8-13. It takes place the night of the harvest party, when Ruth has gone to the threshing floor and is lying at Boaz's feet.

And it happened in the middle of the night that the man was startled and bent forward; and behold, a woman was lying at his feet. And he said, "Who are you?" And she answered, "I am Ruth, your maid. So spread your covering over your maid, for you are a close relative." Then he said, "May you be blessed of the LORD, my daughter. You have shown your last kindness to be better than the first by not going after young men, whether poor or rich. And now, my daughter, do not fear. I will do for you whatever you ask, for all my people in the city know that you are a woman of excellence. And now it is true I am a close relative; however, there is a relative closer than I. Remain this night, and when morning comes, if he will redeem you, good; let him redeem you. But if he does not wish to redeem you, then I will redeem you, as the LORD lives. Lie down until morning."

This is the heart language of those who are falling in love. These are conversations that are leading to the greatest type of human intimacy.

Sadly, many of the best known examples in popular culture of how men and women relate to each other are of people at the margins, those who are the most angry and dysfunctional and miserable. Our world needs good examples of people bringing up from their storehouse of godliness good words like Ruth and Boaz did.

### FREE OF AWKWARDNESS

Let me make some observations about these conversations. First, there is no awkwardness when Ruth and Boaz talk to each other. There have been times in history and there are places in the world today in which men and women occupy almost entirely separate arenas. They know so little about each other that their conversations are stilted or awkward or nonexistent. We sometimes hear statements that are dismissive of the other gender. "You know what men are like. That was a guy thing." And that ends the conversation. Or, "She's just a woman, after all. That accounts for it." Contemporary society has not so much divided men and women from each other as it has called for such guardedness that even though both genders occupy the same place and do many of the same things, they interact fearfully, not wanting to say the wrong thing or be misunderstood. Conversation is reduced to the simplest and least important things.

But Boaz and Ruth don't seem to have any problems with guarded speech, worrying about being misunderstood, fending off awkwardness, or dealing with the opposite gender as an alien species. They

just talk to each other. To me, that is encouraging. God wants men and women to talk to each other, to treat each other with respect and appreciation.

### GRATEFUL FOR UNEXPECTED BLESSINGS

Another observation to make here is that both the man and the woman express gratitude for an unexpected gift. They are grateful for blessing that they have received, because they didn't anticipate the blessing. In chapter 2 the first thing Ruth does when Boaz shows kindness to her is fall on her face and say, "I'm a foreigner, a nobody. Why would you be so good to me?" Ruth was not angling for Boaz's positive regard and he had no ulterior motive in reaching out to her.

Boaz has the same experience of gratitude when Ruth finally raises the question of marriage for them, he says, "Your last kindness is better than the one before. I expected you to be interested in young men. I didn't think you would want someone like me." And it's his surprise and his gratitude at her interest that we hear when he thanks her on that night on the threshing floor. Gratitude is ruined by manipulation, or by taking one another for granted.

### INTERACTING AS EQUALS

A third observation is that Ruth and Boaz interact as equals. There are many things that distinguish them from each other, which we've talked about a number of times. One is a man, one is a woman. One is older, one is younger. One is a Jew, one is a Moabite. One is poor, one is not. There are any number of things that would apparently make them unequal. And yet they treat each other as equals. Ruth refuses the false version of submission that is sometimes advocated for women. That's what Naomi's advice to Ruth amounts to: Don't say anything, just be attractive, and in that fashion gain security. Ruth refuses that advice and speaks up when she has the opportunity. She has something to say. She talks about direction gained from the word of God.

The industrial revolution did a lot to separate spheres of responsibility for men and women. But Ruth and Boaz work in the same field, talk about the same things, articulate the same hope. They both talk about God and the role of God in each other's lives. They both challenge each other to be more aware of the Lord. There's a wonderful sense in which each of them has the right to be God's instrument in the other without having to work at accepting one another as equals.

### EACH HAVING SOMETHING DIFFERENT TO GIVE

But it's also clear that Ruth and Boaz draw on the differences between them. They are equal, but not the same. The things that Ruth talks about are different from the things Boaz talks about. They each give the other something that the other needs.

In 2:13 when Ruth says, "You have spoken to my heart," she makes a statement that Boaz couldn't make. Boaz couldn't evaluate what was happening in the relationship. He spoke about provision and protection for her, about his appreciation of her. He created an environment of confidence and safety for her. She was already a woman of excellence, who trusted God. But he brings these qualities into clear view. He declares aloud among onlookers her value. Later, in 3:11 he said, "You don't need to be afraid of the present or of the future."

In all of these statements, what Boaz made it possible for Ruth to give him the gift that she does. She is able to talk about the relationship. He talks about her needs, she talks about their needs. It is Ruth who is able to say, "We are connected to one another at the heart level. What you've done in speaking well of me and allowing me to be protected and believe in myself is penetrate my heart. You've built a bridge that is profound, Boaz." The articulation of connectedness is something Boaz needs from her. It is she on the threshing floor in chapter 3 who speaks about marriage, who realizes what God had created between them.

The covering leads to intimacy, which leads to the openness amidst vulnerability, which leads to protection, which leads to intimacy, in a circle. Couples will have those experiences in different ways. Men and

women don't play entirely separate roles in this. But over and over again this pattern will hold.

## THE ONE WHO CAN CHANGE THE INSIDE

Jesus had a brother named James, a down-to-earth sort of a fellow, who wrote the book of James in the New Testament. I read Jesus' words, "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him." Here is how James makes the same point (3:10-11): "Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?" If what is coming out of your mouth is brackish, it means that what is in your heart is corrupt and deadly. You're going to discover what's inside you by hearing what you say.

We can apply that to the relationships between men and women, to friendships, or to any other relationship. What we say displays who we are. If you've had a history of shallow relationships, friendship after friendship that begins and then dies quickly, then you're discovering something about what's inside you, aren't you? Someone who speaks only of shallow, unimportant things is saying what they believe of themselves, what they believe about God. If anger wrecks every love relationship you've ever been in, so that closeness proceeds to a point, followed by an outburst of defensiveness and hurt, you're saying something about what's inside you. There's a salt water spring that's erupting. If you're so afraid of life that you pull the covers over your head every time someone gets close, if relationships are so hard that you're afraid of them, you're saying something about what you believe about, your own worthiness.

Keeping these ideas in mind, let's consider for a moment the story of Jesus' encounter with the woman of Samaria in John 4. This woman may be the most distinct opposite of Ruth among the people in the Bible. The woman of Samaria longs for what Ruth has in Boaz. She comes to Jacob's well in the heat of the day because she can't come when the other women are there. They are threatened by her, and she has no friends among the women in the town. The men in the town only use her. She is a Samaritan who has no business being in conversation with Jews. She is a woman with whom the disciples are astonished to hear Jesus conversing. Everywhere she looks in the world around her, she is isolated from people. But all her life she has sought someone who would speak to her heart, someone who would care enough about her to esteem her, to say what was good and true and beautiful and worthy about her. And she has had one man after another, five husbands, and the man she is living with now, says Jesus, is not her husband. She wants to be connected, but she has nothing to draw on. She herself can't enter a relationship like that because there is nothing in the inside that will produce it.

And Jesus makes a remarkable statement to her. He says in verse 10, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." He meant, "If you understood how much love I have for you, if you understood my authority and power to bring about change, you would have asked, and I would have given you living water. You would be re-made to be a blessing instead of being someone people fear and use. If you understood, you would have asked, and I would have given you everything you wanted."

If we understand who he is, we too will ask him for help. We will pray for change on the inside so that our speech articulates good that is inside, a good spring of living water rippling through our lives.

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