

## Building Community through Hospitality

Many years ago when I was pastoring a church on Long Island, I met another local pastor who had a really weird belief system about having people over to his house. He said he would never have anyone from his church over to his house. Ever. If he wanted to get together with someone over a meal, he would meet them at a restaurant. He wouldn't even allow his elders into his house. The reason he gave for this was even weirder: he was concerned that there might be some dark spiritual presence clinging to them that might come off of them and take up residence in his home. True story, I kid you not. He wouldn't even allow his elders to set foot in his door because he didn't know what unclean spirits they might be bringing in with them.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing - I was incredulous. I was also curious to sit in on one of his elder's meetings just to see if their heads would be spinning around in 360's like in the exorcist. Maybe it's just me, but it seems like one qualification of an elder should be that they aren't demon possessed.

Obviously that was pure spiritual kookiness on the part of that pastor. God's word doesn't tell us to close our homes off from anyone in the church, but just the opposite it says we are to open our homes to other believers as a way of expressing love to them. The Bible has a word for it: hospitality. As we continue our series on life together in community, this morning let's consider how we build community through hospitality.

### 1 Peter 4:7-11

I actually got a little nervous this week as it suddenly hit me: are we really going to end this series with a sermon on hospitality? Don't get me wrong, hospitality is a great thing - but if we think about hospitality just as throwing luncheons and making sure the fork goes on the left and the knife and spoon go on the right, it seems like a pretty lightweight subject compared to so many other things the scriptures talk about.

But then I took a closer look at this passage in 1 Peter and realized that for Peter to include it in this section shows that hospitality is not a lightweight matter to Peter at all. First of all, let's remember that he's writing to a group of believers that are experiencing suffering severe persecution, so right there you'd think that they've got more important things to worry about than having people over for dinner. But then, look with me at the serious subject matter that literally surrounds his exhortation on hospitality, beginning in verse 7:

- *The end of all things is at hand* (that's a pretty heavy statement): *therefore be self-controlled and sober minded for the sake of your prayers* (vs. 7)

*The end of all things is at hand...* Most of you probably heard that there were some who were teaching that the rapture was going to be last Saturday the 23rd. When I looked at Scott Clarke's ERF website yesterday he still had this huge banner saying Sept. 23rd - *Something Epic This Way Comes*. He took it down as of this morning. But something epic didn't come on the 23rd, so they found a way to claim that things were actually better aligned for Jesus to return on Sunday the 24th. But, apparently Jesus didn't think so, cause that didn't happen. It's another vivid reminder to us that Jesus instructed us not to set dates, period. But Jesus is coming back, and if the end of all things was at hand in Peter's day, how much more are they at hand now? The week before the 23rd our family had some interesting discussions revolving around Jesus' return and read some portions of scripture dealing with it and this past week I realized that we shouldn't stop having those discussions. Believers shouldn't set dates, but we should be watching and waiting, talking about our Lord's return and praying for it. Even so, maranatha - come quickly Lord Jesus! So Peter says the end of all things is at hand.

- Then he urges them to, above all, love one another earnestly (vs. 8).
- In verse 10 he calls them to use the gifts they have to serve each other as a way of stewarding God's grace to them and glorifying God through Jesus Christ.
- So in this paragraph you have these major, mega-important statements and right there in the middle of all that, he says, <sup>9</sup> *Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.*

As a topic hospitality can run with the big boys - when we see it through a biblical lens, we see that it's not lightweight at all, it's incredibly important to the church and is a necessary component to building the community of faith.

## I. Hospitality is a practical expression of loving one another

Verse 8 and 9 flow together.

<sup>8</sup> *Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins.* Flows into <sup>9</sup> *Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.* Hospitality is a practical expression of loving one another. The word "love" here is agape, and it emphasizes action over feeling. When Peter says love covers a multitude of sins, he's quoting Proverbs 10:12:

***Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.***

He's not saying, nor is Proverbs 10:12 saying, that sin should be covered up in the way that people try to cover up scandals. It doesn't say love covers up sin, it says love covers over sin. Proverbs is contrasting an environment where gasoline is thrown on problems in order to fan small fires into raging fires (hatred stirs up strife) with an environment that seeks to love and care for people, by overlooking minor infractions, and by forgiving more serious sins. Wherever there are people, there are going to be problems and offenses. Love says, I want to defuse this thing, not detonate it.

One practical action that this kind of love takes is hospitality. Opening our homes to others, inviting them into our lives, sharing our food and time, building relationships by spending time together. But it's not just opening our homes, it's opening our hearts as well. Notice that Peter says, don't just do it, do it *without grumbling*. Do it happily. Yes there's a cost, there's an inconvenience, there's a sacrifice. But do it joyfully. Don't complain about it, do it without grumbling.

Have you ever had someone offer you something but you knew they didn't really want you to take it? Or offer you food but you knew it was begrudgingly cause they felt obligated. I don't know about you, but I would much rather pass than accept that grumbling hospitality. Prov. 23:6-8 gives incredible insight into this:

*Do not eat the bread of a man who is stingy; do not desire his delicacies, **7**for he is like one who is inwardly calculating. "Eat and drink!" he says to you, but his heart is not with you.*

**8***You will vomit up the morsels that you have eaten, and waste your pleasant words.*

Don't eat the stingy person's bread. They may say, "eat" but they're calculating how much you take and they resent every bite. You will spit it back up - in other words, you will regret every bite of their food you take. How we give is as important as that we give. A generous person doesn't just give a lot, they give joyfully. They may not even have a lot to give, but what they give they give gladly. A hospitable person doesn't just open their home, they open their hearts. They welcome you.

## II. Hospitality is an expression of our love for Jesus

The topic of hospitality is not a lightweight topic to God in part because hospitality towards others is an expression of our love for Him. To fully grasp biblical hospitality we need to know that it has to extend beyond our family and close friends. Having close friends and family over all the time is great, but biblically speaking, it's not enough. There's a deeper component to it. The Greek word for hospitality actually means *love of strangers*. Many times in the Bible saints open their homes to people they don't know.

- Abraham welcomed three strangers into his home, insisting on preparing a nice meal for them before they continued on their way. Turns out, it was the Lord and two angels, and they decided to share two important things with Abraham. One is that Sarah would conceive and have a child by that time next year. The second thing was that they were on a mission of judgment, and Abraham interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah. These revelations came to Abraham because he was hospitable to three strangers and it provided an important context for God to speak to him.
- Hebrews 13:2 reminds us of this when it urges us: *Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.* That doesn't mean that every stranger you invite over is going to turn out to be an angelic being but it has happened. People have encountered God's direction and provision by being hospitable.
- Romans 12:13 tells us: <sup>13</sup> *Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.*
- Jesus taught us to invite people over who have nothing to give in return. *"When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. <sup>13</sup> But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, <sup>14</sup> and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."* Luke 14:12-14
- Jesus tells us that hospitality will be a criteria on Judgment Day: to the sheep on his right he will say:
  - *I was a stranger and you welcomed me... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.'* (Matt. 25:35,40)

But to the goats on his left he will say:

- *I was a stranger and you did not welcome me... Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'* (Matt. 25:43,45)

What we see from scripture is that hospitality is very dear to the heart of God. Big things come from and out of hospitality, including a tangible evidence of where we stand with the Lord. The other thing we see is that hospitality deals with selfishness in our hearts. It's good to have people we love over to our homes (that's called fellowship) but if we only open our homes and hearts to people we love to be around then we're giving when we know we will get back in return. Our reward is that we enjoy having them over, that it's no burden, it desirable to have them over. But what about the person who has nothing to give back? The person we wouldn't normally hang with? The one with no social status to impart to us? The Lord says don't forget to show hospitality to them.

Why? Why is this so important to God and why does it have such implications for our souls? Because biblical hospitality not only builds community, it reflects the heart of God and the heart of Jesus Christ. In the gospel God has extended His eternal hospitality to lost sinners – welcomed us into His family and into His kingdom. Prepared a feast for us and welcomed us to His table. Welcomes lost sinners, “come home”. His home becomes our home. John Piper says:

*Therefore when we practice hospitality, here's what happens: we experience the refreshing joy of becoming conduits of God's hospitality rather than being self-decaying cul-de-sacs. The joy of receiving God's hospitality decays and dies if it doesn't flourish in our own hospitality to others. ~ John Piper*

By being a conduit instead of a cul-de-sac we bring glory to God by mirroring His hospitality to us through Christ to others. And this brings up an important principle we see in the Bible and in our lives: when we give, instead of having less, we have more. When we don't give, instead of having more, we have less. I experienced an odd phenomenon that goes along with this principle when I was selling cars (many moons ago). When we went through slow times where very few customers came in, we'd have to occupy our time in different ways. Maybe just talking with the other salespeople (usually griping about the low traffic) or, at Volvo, they had a giant TV in the lunchroom tuned to MSNBC, and it was during the election recount of 2000, so they were constantly running scenes of people holding up hanging chads and trying to interpret what the voter meant by their voting card. But this was the phenomenon: when I hadn't seen a customer in a long time - when I needed a customer to come in and buy a car the most - I would want a customer to come in the least. When I was told, "Allen, customer on the floor, you're up!" I would feel almost bothered. Interrupted from doing nothing. And then I would often just be off my game, a little stiff, a little less confident because I was out of practice. Not dealing with customers made my desire and my ability to deal with customers dry up.

Conversely when things got busy, and I was delivering a car plus trying to sell a car plus getting ready for a return customer who's coming is soon, I'd be so relaxed and on my game. I'd be confident cause I'm in the flow - giving, giving, giving, so I have more to give. Cul de sac lives dry up. Conduit-lives keep having more to give. That is a biblical principle and it applies to hospitality. If it's uncomfortable for you to do it, the answer isn't to do it less. The answer is to do it more. It will get easier the more you do it.

### **III. Practical thoughts about practicing hospitality**

Ok, so by now if you haven't had 10 strangers over for dinner this past week you might be questioning if you're even a Christian. Our lives are busy, our schedules are tight, and for some of us we might feel like there's barely enough gas in the tank for what we've got going on, much less trying to add a weekly dinner party for complete strangers to the schedule. And for those who really struggle with this you might be tempted to feel condemned. That's not the intent of this message. No condemnation, period. But let's embrace the Lord's kindness to convict us of an important area that most of us can probably grow in. So here are a couple practical thoughts about practicing hospitality. And remember, the only way to get better at practicing hospitality is by practicing hospitality. Practice makes perfect!

#### **a. Plan**

I've seen over and over again how easy it is for hospitality to be crowded out of our lives if we don't plan for it. Figure out what you have grace for and what your schedule allows. I've met people who have people over 4 or 5 times a week. They always have people over. Most of us don't have time or grace for that. It's ok - I admire people who can do that, but it's too much for me.

Maybe you feel like you can only schedule to have people over once a month. Do what you can but be intentional about it. Plan it in and make it happen.

#### **b. Keep it simple**

I read years ago that John Piper serves their guests on paper plates, no matter who it is. He's had some well known guests over the years, but still the paper plates come out. Cause he and his wife Noel don't want to spend their time cleaning up - they want to focus on their guests.

That doesn't mean you have to use paper plates, the point is keep it simple. Don't worry about whether your home is perfect or stress over what you serve. The focus of hospitality is people.

c. Give a gracious welcome

This the easiest part - doesn't cost anything or take any extra time but makes such a difference. Warmly welcome people when they come and make them feel at home. And as we get to know and spend time with one another we will actually be richer for it. Strangers will become friends. We were all strangers at one point. Your best friend was once a stranger. The Lord enriches our lives with new friends and builds community through hospitality.

This is a way that we can reflect the heart of God who provides a "rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." 2 Peter 1:11