

Restoring the Table | Hospitality
September 6, 2015

The Call for Hospitality (Introduction)

The beginning of school always sobers me to how fast life moves. The season of perpetual change never seems to end—kids go from throwing up to growing up almost overnight. The same goes for churches. In truth we are only 2 ½ year old, but that is a world of difference from a 2 ½ month old. We will continue to grow which means we will continue to change. Every new season of our mission will be different than the last. And there are literally hundreds of things that we as a church **can do together** this year; but there are only a few things that our church **must be together** every year.

The church is more than event, more than a social club, and more than an organization for social justice. The Bible says the church is the **gathering of disciples saved by Je out of the world, adopted into the family of Jesus apart from the world, sent into the world by Jesus, to tell the world about Jesus.** Among other things, the church is described as the body of Christ, the household of God, even the family of God. The Bible uses language that defines the church LESS by what they do in the world, and MORE by who **they are in relationship to one another.** There are many commands to serve the poor, feed the hungry, preach the gospel in the world; but there are over 50 commands about how we are relate to one another. Without being the church, these commands are relatively impossible to obey:

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| 1. Pray for one another | 11. Forgive one another |
| 2. Rejoice with one another | 12. Work with one another |
| 3. Serve one another | 13. Admonish one another |
| 4. Devote yourselves to one another | 14. Encourage one another |
| 5. Share the same mind with one another | 15. Confess to one another |
| 6. Accept one another | 16. Agree with one another |
| 7. Bear one another's burdens | 17. Be hospitable to one another |
| 8. Greet one another | 18. Fellowship with one another |
| 9. Instruct one another | 19. Weep with one another |
| 10. Comfort one another | 20. Welcome one another |

All of these commands can be best summarized by one command: *Love One Another*. In John 13, on the night Jesus was betrayed, arrested, and sentenced to die, one of the last things he told his disciples was: ***34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*** (John 13:34-35). **Jesus commanded us to love one another, so we must all consider what obedience to this command looks. According to Jesus, our obedience to that command is both THE identifying mark OF being a disciple and THE greatest tool FOR discipleship.** Obedience to this command extends beyond random acts of kindness or sentimental feelings toward one another—it requires a Christ-like sacrifice. In writing from the most the most antagonistic and unloving church in the New Testament, Corinth, Paul encourages the Romans to love one another. He also charges them not to be lazy or passive in doing so, rather, to be pursue love very concrete ways: ***Romans 12:9-13 9 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. 10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.*** We are commanded to practice hospitality.

The Tool for Hospitality (The Table)

Historically, the early church was characterized by hospitality. At that time, the church really had nothing but one another. They didn't have big buildings, creative programs, or even polished services. The churches gathered in homes where families employed the greatest tool God gave them...their table. It is in their homes, around their tables, where fellow brothers and sisters shared food, shared drink, shared their lives, and shared their faith. The table is where strangers turned into guests; guests turned into friends; and friends turned into family members. The early church had a genuine sense of what it meant to love the household of God. In his book, The Hospitality Commands, Alexander Strauch writes: *"I don't think most Christians today understand how essential hospitality is to fanning the flames of love and strengthening the Christian family. Hospitality fleshes out love in a uniquely personal and sacrificial way. Through ministry of hospitality, we share our most prized possessions. We share our family, home, finances, food, privacy, and time. Indeed, we share our lives. So hospitality is always costly. Through the ministry of hospitality, we provide friendship, acceptance, fellowship, refreshment, comfort, and love in one of the richest and deepest ways possible for humans to understand. Unless we open the doors of our homes to one another, the reality of the local church as a close-knit family of loving brothers and sisters is only a theory."* (17)

The Need for Hospitality (Love)

We all NEED love, and we all need TO love. Obedience to the command for hospitality is designed by God to satisfy both of those needs. And even if you don't feel a need to be love, you are commanded to love. The question we must all ask ourselves is how, where, and when we are intending to obey this command? The act of inviting someone into your home satisfies some of the deepest needs people have:

PEOPLE NEED TO BE LOVED UNCONDITIONALLY: Everyone wants to feel welcome and be accepted for who they are. Most people who enter a new church, enter feeling alone and insecure. An unloving church only affirms the lies that person already believes—their strange, unwanted, or out of place. The loving church pursues those people. Hospitality is more than a friendly greeting, though there is something very beautiful, very gospel-centered, about initiating contact and going out of your way to meet someone you don't know. Hospitality represents a deeper sense of unconditional love, as you invite someone into your home to share your table. **The welcome is an acknowledgment—I see you as important. The invitation is a kindness—I accept you as equal. The meal is a grace—I love you as family.** Author Gerald L. Sittser puts it this way: *The ability to acknowledge and accept people is a rare gift that few of us possess and all of us need. Most of us forget names once we hear them and overlook people once we meet them. We pay attention to people we already know, or to the ones we want to know. The few powerful, popular, witty, rich, and successful people attract the biggest following, even at the church. The quiet, elderly, odd, ordinary, and undesirable are often left alone, like the lepers of Jesus day.* (Love One Another, 28).

PEOPLE NEED TO BE LOVED INTENTIONALLY: We not only need to be loved unconditionally, but also intentionally. Sometimes the invitation is enough; all we need is to feel accepted. But sometimes, we need to be loved in a particular way. The loving invitation into one's home provides the opportunity to truly "serve" one another. As we fellowship with one another, we begin to hear one another's stories. And as we hear the stories, we discern what the heart needs—encouragement, comfort, or maybe admonishment. **This is nearly impossible to do on Sunday mornings and impersonal to do over email.** The table is where we are able to obey all the "one another" commands. The table is where we can most easily rejoice with one another; weep with one another; bear with one another; or pray with one another. The table is where we come to learn and meet the needs our brothers and sisters. Some will need recognition for hard work, others encouragement to press on. Some will need comfort when they lose something—be it

a job, a dream, or a loved one, others will need to have a good laugh. And at times, some will need a loving admonishment to turn from sin and follow Jesus—to remember the gospel if they are too full of themselves or remember the gospel if they are beating themselves up.

PEOPLE NEED TO BE LOVED MISSIONALLY (evangelizing) Finally, I believe that the table is the best pulpit we have. The table is one of the most powerful tools for evangelism. As a Christian, your home, your food, and your time are all gifts from God. **We must think less like owners and more like stewards.** Have you considered how you can use your home, not only to bless, but to preach? Without question, we struggle with sharing our faith in the world—not the case in our homes. Home is where we invite people to belong before they believe.

The Curse of Hospitality

Though some of us are gifted (many think they are), most of us struggle with being hospitable to our brothers, sisters, and neighbors. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that we struggle with obedience. **1 Peter 4.8-9** ***8 Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. 9 Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.*** In our home, we defined obedience as following a command first time, without complaint, arguing, or delay. Are we obeying the Lord's command to love this way? We make all kinds of "rational" sounding excuses to justify our disobedience. **The three most common reasons we use is that we can't (or won't) sacrifice our time, money, or privacy. We fill our schedules with good things that God doesn't command, making them more important than things he does.** We fear the cost of the meal or the cost of things getting broken. And we protect our home like a king under attack from a barbarian horde. The simple truth is we don't love people like Christ has loved us. Again, Alexander Strauch wrote it this way: *"At heart we are all selfish, and selfishness is the single greatest enemy of hospitality. We do not want to be inconvenienced. We do not want to share our privacy or time with others. We are consumed with our personal comforts. We want to be free to go about our business without interference or concern for other people's needs. We don't want responsibility and work that hospitality entails. We are greedy and don't want to share our food, home, or money. We are afraid that we will be used or that our property will sustain damage..."All of these attitudes are selfish, and selfishness is sin. Selfishness is a mark of the old, unregenerate life. It is worldliness. It is the opposite of love. It is contrary to hospitality. It is totally opposed to everything Jesus Christ taught and lived." - pg. 38*

The Blessing of Hospitality

When we think of hospitality, and living like Christ, we are hard pressed to only think about pain, suffering, and sacrifice—"I guess...if it is my cross to bear." But let us not forget that, according to Hebrews 12 It seems we focus too much on the curse of hospitality, and refuse to consider the promised blessing. **Hebrews 13.1-2** ***Let brotherly love continue. 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*** This verse references the different experiences by O.T. saints like Abraham or Gideon, who were hospitable to strangers who ended up being angels. And while it is possible that we could entertain an angel or two in our lifetime, more likely, **this verse refers to blessings that men like Abraham and Gideon experienced** as a result of that encounter. In other words, we are often quick to count the costs of hospitality, but we are slow to consider the rewards:

- the blessing of joy from giving rather than receiving (Jesus said it was better)
- the blessing of the blessing of teaching your children
- the blessing of helping to heal someone's loneliness, wandering, or suffering
- the blessing of being healed from someone else's suffering

- the blessing of making the kingdom of God tangible [STORIES...stop taking notes...heart]

STORY #1: We were a newly married couple, in a new town looking for a new church with a new baby, 19 & 22yrs old. An older couple greeted us and told us about the nursery, which we turned down, showed us to the cry room, sat with us and their littles ones and invited us to their home afterwards. It didn't seem strange or weird. Uncommon, yes. Their home wasn't perfect, dishes in the sink, papers on the counter and 4 preschoolers in a small space. But you could tell they had purposed to have hospitality should the Lord allow. A porta crib was set up, and a freezer meal defrosting on the counter (cheese manicotti.) Even though they were easily 15 years our senior and we didn't have much in common, they welcomed us and we began a journey at that church where my husband rededicated his life to Christ and I became a believer.

STORY #2: David was the single guy that invited our family of 10 (at the time) and another family of 7 into to his 1 bdrm apartment up at the top of a high rise for simple yet tasty fish tacos. My husband and I love to talk about that story because it was truly timely and heartwarming for us... it literally refreshed us out of a season of discouragement & restored our faith in the body at that time. I remember being super curious riding the elevator up to his place. I remember mismatched dishes, a little bit of a scramble for enough utensils, a bachelor atmosphere and cramped quarters, yes. But in the fondest of ways. I remember Dave's grace in letting the little kids frolic throughout the apartment, even getting his gun collection out to show off to them - (doh!) Mostly, the really good stories & laughs had sitting in a circle on his carpeted living room floor eating our tacos with him and the other couple. It flew in the face of all the excuses we've ever heard.

STORY #3: Dave and Debbie welcomed us into their home and their lives, My wife and I were blessed to know them. Debbie was an absolute gem and one of a kind. She gave my wife and I sooo much grace and love, even while she was passing from this life (messy house, small apartment, sickness...what's your excuse?)

The Heart of hospitality

All pragmatic reasons aside, at some point, your refusal to practice hospitality evidences pride or unbelief. And the question for all of us is: **at what point is your lack of hospitality sinful?** The pursuit of hospitality evidences a deep belief in the gospel. As a pastor, I must be careful here. The gospel does not motivate out of guilt, shame, or fear. But the gospel does motivate. We can easily become motivated by the wrong things like: 1) being accepted by God 2) being accepted by people 3) being reciprocated. All of these reasons are anti-gospel. Our motivation must be out of love for Christ. **Matthew 25.34-40** ³⁴ Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. ³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me... 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? ³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?...And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.' **Our hospitality isn't ultimately for you or for one another, it is for Christ.** It is our response to the one who already became hungry, naked, imprisoned, and killed for us.

Conclusion: The Way of Hospitality

Will you invite Jesus to your table by inviting a stranger? Everyone needs this kind of love, single, marrieds, families, widowed, new believers, new to the church, hurting people, fringe people, old people, young people. Everyone needs to love this way. Pastors and Older Christians should be leading the charge in this. As we close, know that...**You don't have to have a BIG house. You don't have to have a BIG budget. You don't have to have a BIG meal. You don't have to have a BIG clean. You don't have to have a BIG plan. YOU HAVE A BIG GOD...and you just need a little faith. {ROAD GROUPS}**