
Grace Reflected: Are Betty Crocker and Martha Stewart our Best Models of Hospitality?

(Part 2)

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Introduction

You don't really have all the facts – you are not really sure why they are low on money, but you're pretty certain that the need is pressing, bills are mounting, and stress is building. You planned to buy \$1500 in stock on Monday... But your mind wanders to the cross. You were a sojourner once – you know what it is to need. You are a sojourner still, you know what it is to be exposed to the harsh elements of this world. You know they must be aching. \$1500 would probably cover their mortgage for a couple of months. Before you know it, you've written the check, it's in their hands, and you are trying to move fast before the left hand discovers what the right hand has done. You, and they, are left marveling at God's mercy as it has been just briefly, but gloriously, magnified.

She has been kicked out. She has made bad choices and she has been man-handled by bad people. Everything in the whole situation is bad. Her background, her family, her propensities... It's true, she is reaping what she has sown, but that is not the whole story. Your elder has just made a plea at flock for somebody to consider taking her in for several months. The very thought of disrupting your family's life makes your stomach turn. She is an unknown quantity. And you have worked very very hard to be sure that your life is characterized only by known quantities. No one responds to the elder's plea. Within 15 minutes of leaving flock you've got the whole thing rationalized – it never would have worked anyway. Your mind effortlessly sails on to tomorrow's schedule. Unfortunately, your bedtime reading takes you to Matthew 25. Your heart's hand is clapped over its mouth – to whose face did you close the door of your home this evening?

What is this “hospitality” all about... really? Is it simply pleasant meals with people who have uncomplicated lives – or are at least sophisticated enough to hide that they do? Or, as I argued last week, is it really about the radical love that was demonstrated at the cross? If it is about God's redeeming love for the sojourner, then I believe that most of us, myself included, need to have our ideas about – and practices of – hospitality, reset.

[Let's Pray: Father, let us now press our ears up against the bosom of your word, and strain to hear your heart. May you make our hearts like the Psalmist's who proclaimed, “My soul is consumed with longing for your rules at all times... Your testimonies are my delight, they are my counselors” (Psalm 119:20, 24).]

Review & Preview

Hospitality may take on a 100 different shapes, sizes, and shades, depending on the need and the circumstances, but in the end, the underlying expression is the same: Hospitality is the

demonstration of redeeming love to people in need. Last week we noted this in the observation of God's plain and undeniable love for the sojourner and our own position as sojourners prior to God's bringing us into his household. The words to Israel should be as clear to us today as they were to them 5,000 years ago: "You know the heart of a sojourner... therefore, love the sojourner" love the stranger, love the foreigner, the widow, the fatherless, the needy... Beloved, when you show hospitality, you love as God has loved and you give him much glory in your reflecting his love to others. And, as we will see tonight, you not only show the redeeming love of God to others, you show the redeeming love of God to God himself.

Tonight, we want to take a closer look at what the New Testament has to say about hospitality. We'll do this by considering several common distortions of biblical hospitality and then we'll focus the lens and get a clear Bible picture of this Christian practice.

Hospitality Privatized, Marketized, & Sentimentalized¹

Did you know that in the 1930's Betty Crocker was nearly America's most popular woman, second only to Eleanor Roosevelt? Did you also know that there never was a Betty Crocker? She was and is merely the product of good marketing on the part of General Mills. Nevertheless, "she" was instrumental in shaping and forming traditional American ideas about hospitality. Caught up in this shaping process, of course, was all of our society, including the church. As food and the perfection of its preparation moved into the limelight, the way was opened for this focus to be expanded to encompass the home. Market ideas began defining hospitality as something that took place privately, behind closed doors, around meals. It was no longer a many-faceted reflection of the redeeming love *God had shown us* – rather it was a reflection of *our* own ability, skill, and resources, shown to others . The focus had shifted.

In 1982 Martha Stewart published her first book, "Entertaining." It was an immediate best-seller "gloriously photographed and filled with a wealth of information on the art of hospitality." It is probably safe to say that by the 80's, our ideas of hospitality had been completely hijacked by experts who lived in perfect homes, hosted perfect parties, and prepared perfect foods. The real emphasis in showing hospitality became the performing of an elaborate façade which gave an illusion of mastery in the domestic arts accented by a practiced politeness which did everything -but embrace a stranger. I was reminded of the Westminster Dog Show which was held in New York City this past week. The dogs there were absolutely perfect – every last hair in place and their obedience flawless. It almost made you forget that the dogs still pooped, threw-up, needed fed, and could be given to whining. Our idea of hospitality is sometimes like this. We use it to hide the very fact that it is meant to reveal – God redeems and we are in need of redemption.

Women, it may be of some relief to you to know that you don't have to repaint your dining room with each season, have a unique place setting for every holiday, and know how to perfectly flute the edge of your pie crust to exercise biblical hospitality. Hospitality is not mimicking Martha Stewart, having home décor that looks like Pottery Barn, or perfectly timing

¹ Credit is given to Elizabeth Newman for her identification of these distortions of hospitality. Newman, E. (2007). *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers*. Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, MI

the transition between warm appetizers and hot entrees. For believers, the **Bible** tells us what hospitality is, not the marketers.

But this is not the only distortion that hospitality has suffered in our culture. Picture the host or hostess whose main objective is to keep everyone comfortable – in every possible way. In other words, there will be no environmental distractions (the yappy dog has been muzzled), there will be no failed food ventures (the bread is from Panera, the roasted bird from Kroger, and the dessert from DLM), and there will be NO uncomfortable conversation. Which reminds me of what a barber I had once said, “I’ll discuss anything with my customers except sex, politics, and religion.” For some of us, hospitality has become more about the creation of an atmosphere than the reflection of redeeming love. One author commenting on this says, “...that hospitality and honoring the truth seem to be ‘opposed to one another: to be concerned for truth is to be inhospitable, and to be hospitable means being mushy on matters of truth... [this] reduce[s] hospitality to a bland niceness’”² devoid of *speaking the truth in love*. Like the Westminster dogs, we are compelled to project the image of quiet, groomed, perfection – making our hospitality not about our guests, most certainly not about God, but about us. Is that how it should be? We can turn to the Word to find out.

The “Who” of Hospitality (Luke 10:25-42)

What does the Word of God tell us about hospitality? It certainly tells us much – in fact, more than I can fit into a three sermon series, believe it or not! Nevertheless, we will consider this evening what the New Testament has to say about the Who, When, What, and How of hospitality. Let’s begin with the Who by turning to Luke 10:25-42. Who? do I owe hospitality to? Believers or unbelievers? Those near or far? Those I like or dislike?

Who is I

We won’t take time to read this passage together this evening, you know this parable of the Good Samaritan well. It is apparently a public setting when the 72 had just returned to Jesus to report on their work to spread the Gospel. This interaction is interrupted by a lawyer (that is, a teacher of the law) in verse 25 who seeks to “test” Jesus by asking what must be done to inherit eternal life. Note that just a moment before, in verses 23-24, Jesus told the disciples that they were blessed to “see” and blessed to “hear.” Now comes a contrast in the lawyer – who cannot see or hear. Hence a parable for him.

Jesus responds to the lawyer by asking him, “What is written in the law?” A source, no doubt, that the lawyer is very familiar with, but may have not been accustomed to accurately expounding. Nevertheless, the lawyer gives a good answer – he cites the first and second greatest commandment. Christ congratulates him as he says, “Do this, and you will live.” The lawyer, however, is not satisfied. And what comes next is SO characteristic of not a Christian, but a lawkeeper. Verse 29 lays the lawyer’s focus bare. He asks, “Who is my neighbor?” For the lawyer and his obsession with showing himself righteous, it was all about the letter of the law and nothing about the spirit of the law.

² Newman, E. (2007). *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers*. Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, MI

In response, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. There is the jumped, mugged, beaten and bloody body by the roadside. The priest goes by, the Levite goes by, none stop, until the half-breed Samaritan comes by, and shows gracious, abundant, sustained, and unmerited hospitality to this one in need. Jesus then completes this parable with a masterful redirection of the lawyer's intention. The lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?" In essence, the lawyer is asking who am I required to love? He wants to know the bounds, the parameters, how far must this love go? Note carefully that this is NOT the question that Jesus answers. Instead, he poses a question to the lawyer: "Which [of the passers-by]...was a neighbor...?" (v.36). You see, the camera now pans to the lawyer – where the focus should be – Jesus is answering a very different question, and it is this: Will you show mercy? Not, who should I show mercy to? But, will you show mercy? And that cuts to the heart of the matter.

Jesus does not answer the lawyer's question – it is not the most important question that needs to be answered here. Instead, he tells the lawyer that the one who keeps the two greatest commandments *will show mercy*. So, the *who* question about hospitality is one that we must first and foremost direct back to ourselves – will I, in view of God's mercy, show hospitality?

Who is Christ

Interestingly, if we read on in Luke 10, there is one more lesson to be gleaned here. And it is again about a *Who*. Verses 38 through 42 actually go on to record a demonstration of hospitality [Read vv. 38-42]. Make just this one observation with me. Martha is busy about preparing the meal, the food, the bread, the wine, the meat, the **portions** of life-sustaining substance... She is focused on the *apparent* duties of hospitality. Jesus, however, seems to suggest that Martha's hospitality is lacking and that Mary somehow has gotten it right. *Martha, not Mary, is missing the meal*. What Christ makes clear here is this: The most important "portion" that can be served in the course of hospitality is Christ himself. There is *nothing* more rich, more filling, more pleasing, than the Bread of Life. If when we practice hospitality we do not serve Christ, we have missed the one necessary thing³.

Who is Others

Finally, in the conventional sense of the question: To whom are we to show hospitality? This is not a difficult question to answer. In the Old Testament, it was clearly focused on those both within the covenant community (the poor, the needy, widows, and orphans) and those outside of the covenant community (sojourners, foreigners, and strangers)⁴. In the New Testament, the same emphasis continues. In Christ's reference to acts of hospitality (Luke 10, the good Samaritan and Matthew 25, the least of these) it seems clear that no consideration is given to the "in" or "out" status of the recipient of kindness. In the epistles we have passages clearly directing acts of hospitality to those within the body⁵ AND to those outside of the body⁶. I think the short answer here is **everyone** -

³ See also the vivid centrality of Christ in John 12:1-7

⁴ See Part 1 of this series for a discussion of these Old Testament passages.

⁵ Romans 12:13, 1 Peter 4:9

with, perhaps, several small exceptions that can be saved for another sermon⁷. In a very simple sense, hospitality and the gospel are inextricably linked. For whom the gospel is appropriate, hospitality is also appropriate. If these are the “Who’s” of hospitality, what is the “When”?

The “When” of Hospitality (Matthew 25:31-46)

The early New Testament church was known throughout the ancient world for its hospitality. A famous liberal church historian has this to say about the hospitality of the ancient church:

...during the early centuries of Christianity it was the Roman church more than any other which was distinguished by the generosity with which it practiced this virtue [hospitality]... A living interest in the collective church of Christ throbbed with peculiar vigor throughout the Roman church...and the practice of hospitality was one of its manifestations⁸.

He is not the only author to note this – there are also those who were contemporaries of the early church that spoke of the predominance of Christian hospitality as well⁹. If we turn to Matthew 25, this phenomenon may not be so hard to understand – given that these words and warnings of Christ would have been ringing in the ears of the believers in the early Church. But let’s back up into Matthew 24 to get the run up to this passage. After issuing forth some very harsh words to the Scribes and Pharisees at the temple, Jesus and his disciples are headed toward the Mount of Olives. The disciples comment on the buildings of the temple and Christ responds letting them know that one day those buildings will be utterly destroyed. This leads to a longer conversation with the disciples about events and issues related to the end of this age... What will happen, who will be the actors, how can we watch for its coming, and then, to a very important question... what about the meantime? What will be characteristic of those who God knows while they wait for the coming of the Son of Man? Let’s read Matthew 24:45ff [Read 24:45-51].

So Christ sets up the contrast between the faithful and wise servant and the wicked servant – both waiting for their master’s return. Then in chapter 25 we have three pictures, if you will, of what these two groups will be up to while they wait. There is the parable of the ten virgins – five were alert, aware, and oriented, five were not. Then there is the parable of the talents – two servants were actively invested in increasing the wealth of their master, one was not. Lastly, we come to a passage that describes the final judgment –but again, with direct reference to what two different groups of people (sheep and goats) were doing during this period of time between Christ’s ascension and Christ’s return. Let’s start together in verse 34 of Matthew 25. [Read Matthew 25:34-46]. We can note at least three things from this passage in regards to our topic this evening.

⁶ Hebrews 13:2, Romans 12:20

⁷ 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

⁸ Adolf Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, 2 vols., trans. James Moffatt (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904), 1:222,223.

⁹ 1 Clement 1.2, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, eds. J. Auasten and J.C. Plumpe, trans. James A. Kleist (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1961). 1:9.

Hospitality While Waiting

First, and very clearly: Now is the time for hospitality. When the need presents itself - that is the time for hospitality. Simply consider Christ's description of the actions of true believers: I was hungry and you gave, I was thirsty and you gave, I was a stranger and you welcomed, I was naked and you clothed, I was sick and you visited, I was in prison and you came. Hospitality does not depend on whether or not the house is clean, whether or not we have extra money this month, whether or not I am in the mood to be nice, or whether or not the recipient is worthy of my attention. None of those factors figure into answering the question about "when." Now, while we wait for Christ, is the time for hospitality.

Hospitality as Evidence

Secondly, and somewhat soberly, we should not miss the force of the context of this passage. This is a passage discussing the final judgment. This is when sheep are separated from goats. Sheep will go to eternal life but the goats will go to eternal punishment. Be clear, this decision depends on nothing more than the individual's justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. With that said, what we have here is one sign or indicator of how true believers will live. And it is an indicator so potent, that Christ chooses it to describe the difference between believers and unbelievers at the final judgment. Here is the take home message: Believers will be ministers of mercy, they will show hospitality, not as an act of self-righteous account keeping, but rather as a free-will and abundant expression and reflection of God's love for the sojourner, the poor, the needy, and the stranger.

Hospitality and Its True Recipient

Thirdly, we see a truly amazing thing here. I wonder, were you amazed when you read verses 37-40 [READ vv. 37-40]? This profoundly begs the question of who should be taking their shoes off when we have guests into our home. Moses might say that it is we who should remove our sandals. There is an almost palpable sense here that when we engage in biblical hospitality, we host not only the poor and needy human faces before us, but we host Christ himself, we are participating in an act made holy by the true recipient of our kindness. So in this way beloved, hospitality begins and ends with Christ.

An additional thought here to consider for those of you who struggle with the "What have you done for me lately?" attitude in hospitality. Because let's be honest, sometimes the naked, the hungry, the thirsty, the poor, are not easy to show love to, to give to, to be kind to, and quite often, the hospitality is NOT received with gratitude nor is it deserved. If we are really honest, this same thing at times happens in the body - extraordinary expressions of hospitality are made and they go unappreciated by the recipient. What is our natural response? You know what it is. See if I do this again for you! But that is just the thing, *who* were you doing it for? Know this, "Truly I say unto you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to Christ." Has Christ become so precious to you that even your acts of hospitality are done unto him with every confidence that he is in the midst of the least of these... freeing you entirely from the slavery of needing to be recognized for your kindness. It is now kindness with abandon, understanding that nothing less than Christ himself and his redeeming love for you, a stranger, motivates your

hospitality. And, nothing less than Christ himself is on the other end of your hospitality, receiving your kindness.

The “What” and “How” of Hospitality

Let’s wrap up our time together tonight discussing the “what” and “how” of hospitality. We won’t spend much time here because next week we will cover this topic with greater depth. I would like, however, to gather up a number of New Testament Scriptures and challenge us to biblical hospitality.

What Does Hospitality Require?

If you are anything like me, you may be sensing a dull but present anxiety about the application of this sermon series next week. And this anxiety is not related to the felt need to show more hospitality or the opportunities you’ve missed in the past. It is related to Christ’s words, “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it” (Matthew 10:39). And it is related to Paul’s comment, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). It is a reaction to Asaph’s proclamation, “Whom have I in heaven but you, and there is nothing on Earth I desire besides you...” (Psalm 73:25). You see, we feel the tension of what Christ calls us to, of what we see other believers doing, and the reality of where our own hearts are. We are often like Demas, in love with this present world (2 Timothy 4:10). I don’t want to give up my stuff, my time, my money, my sleep, my comfort, my energy... In one hand I’ve got the world, and in the other I have Christ, and I want the best of both without giving up any of either.

I work with people like this in daily life – in my business we call them addicts in denial. They have completely deceived themselves into believing that they can serve two masters. They say they can love the bottle and love their family. They say they can love their pills and powders and be an effective employee. How do we know who they really serve? Where their affections lie? If they lose their job, it’s sad, but not tragic. If they lose their family, it is even sadder, but it will not change their destructive habits – they will keep on. But, if they lose their drug, they will do anything to get it back - anything. Their drug means more to them than job or family. But they are in denial. They cannot see this. They believe they can serve two masters.

Sometimes, we are not much different. Externally, we talk the part of serving Christ above all. Internally, we have convinced ourselves that we can do that AND drink deeply of all this world offers, convincing ourselves that sacrifice is not part of the Christian life. But neither the external nor internal pictures match the reality. Hospitality is okay until it threatens the things we truly love. You see, cozy dinners on Sunday afternoon are much safer than biblical hospitality. I’m okay with providing for the needy until I have to give something up to do it. Giving from my excess is easy. Giving that causes pain and discomfort it a totally different story.

The reality is that “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other” (Matthew 6:24). Do you ever “despise” the helpless? Despise the fact that there seems to exist constant stream of

opportunities to serve the needs of others in the church? Despise the fact that the benevolence fund is low again? Despise your elder when he asks you to “help” in this situation or that? Despise the showing of hospitality? Despise the request for YOUR money? If so, the diagnosis may be simple, Christ says it like this: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth or rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. FOR where you treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matthew 6:19-20).

Many of us still believe that the treasures of the world are prettier, more sparkly, of greater worth than Christ himself. We therefore have not given ourselves wholly to Christ and his kingdom’s work. We are still holding out, hoping that he really doesn’t require all of us, all of our affections, all of our selves. We prefer the illusion of satisfaction that the world holds forth. Not the substance of Christ, which brings true satisfaction. Therefore, it is very difficult to give up the things that hospitality would sometimes require of us. What does hospitality require? It requires Christ-like love. Love that gives all, for the stranger, the poor, and the naked. If we are not ready to give generously and sacrificially of ourselves and our resources, then we are not ready for hospitality. We must repent of our love of the world, we must grow in our understanding of who we are before Christ, and we must grow in our understanding of the cross.

How Does Hospitality Get Done?

Finally, “how” does hospitality get done? Luke 10, that we read earlier, gives us a clear hint. In verse 33 we are told that the Samaritan had compassion. In Romans 12, where hospitality is commanded it is in the context of showing brotherly love. In Hebrews 13, it is again love which prefaces the command to hospitality. And lastly in 1 Peter 4 the call to hospitality is contextualized by love. Hospitality can exist only because love pre-existed. Why did God show hospitality to us? Simply because he loved us. There is no more basic reason. It is in and through and by God’s love that we, then, show hospitality to others. Hospitality cannot be drummed up with a warm meal and a cold beverage. Hospitality must come from a heart that is smitten by God’s love. In its most biblical sense, hospitality is a gospel-induced expression of kindness to the needy. To be hospitable is to be God-like, Christ-like, to demonstrate an understanding of the cross. God-lovers will be people lovers. The deeper our understanding of the gospel, the greater our expression of hospitality.

Let us review then as we wrap up:

1. We should examine closely what we think of as hospitality – is it really biblical hospitality or is it the market version of entertainment?
2. Learning to show biblical hospitality is not primarily a matter of “who” it should be shown to, but whether or not I will show it.
3. Biblical hospitality is not devoid of Christ, he is the focal point of it.
4. Hospitality is always warranted from now until the day Christ returns when we will enjoy God’s hospitality, face to face.
5. Christ is a recipient of our hospitality through our acts of kindness to the needy. Therefore, love the needy as you love Christ.
6. Hospitality will require that we love Christ more than the things of this world.

Conclusion

I want to encourage you to be here next week. We'll wrap up this series by discussing questions such as:

1. How much hospitality is too much hospitality?
2. What about when I am on the receiving end of hospitality?
3. How do I begin to show biblical hospitality?

Let's pray.