
Grace Reflected: So What Does Hospitality Look Like at the Chapel?

(Part 3)

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Introduction

Let's begin tonight with a few quotes from Martha Stewart's best-selling book *Entertaining*. She says,

The principle behind each dinner was the same: The desire to please someone in a personal way... one friend treating other friends. Entertaining is, therefore, an opportunity to be individualistic, to express your own ideas about what constitutes a good party... it might be a small and elegant dinner, with poached salmon... evidence of a unique personality... resides in detail – a bucket of wild flowers at the door or a child's ceramics on the dinner table; sometimes in a tactical decision – to eat in the kitchen or to change the seating arrangement between courses; or a menu choice – Cincinnati chili or wild boar¹.

Now, to Ms. Stewart's credit, she does not in her own writing appear to confuse the terms hospitality and entertaining. You can leave that confusion to the popular culture and the church. As I have noted over the past several weeks, the church is guilty of co-opting popular cultural ideas about hospitality into its own understanding of the biblical practice. We have come to confuse "one friend treating other friends" with biblical hospitality. We have muddied the distinction between meeting needs and creating opportunities for us to express "evidence of [our] unique personalities." Decisions between "Cincinnati Chili or Wild Boar" have replaced decisions between meeting this need individually or trying to gather a group of believers to meet the need.

To be clear, I think Ms. Stewart's book on *Entertaining* is a delight. And Beth and I often put a great deal of work into hosting meals in our home that express who we are as a couple and are designed to please our guests' gustatory sentiments as well as their social sensibilities. *But*, we do not do well if we confuse this for biblical hospitality; *and* we do even less well if these meals in our home are the *only* things in our lives that come close to expressions of hospitality.

Over the past two messages, we have been confronted with a *biblical* understanding of hospitality. For some of us, it may have greatly challenged the way we have always thought about hospitality. So we now, as believers, have a choice before us. And it is not about whether or not to make poached salmon or braised beef, to seat guests in the kitchen or the dining room, or to put wild flowers at the front door or candles on the table. It is about choosing to embrace a lifestyle that is characterized by hospitality – and not allowing small dinner engagements to become the defining expression of our kindness to strangers. It is about showing the redeeming love of God to others – just as we have discussed over the past two messages.

¹ Stewart, M. (1998). *Entertaining*. (p.12). First published in 1982.

The expression of biblical hospitality will cause outsiders who come to know you and your family to marvel, they will and wonder and ask, “What is it that is so great that you are willing to gladly part with your money, your time, your emotional energy, your physical energy...” You see, believer or unbeliever, we are wired to think this way. We naturally want to know what will make people part with things of value. If you tell me you just bought a car for \$2000, and it’s raining outside, I’ll probably be pretty content to glance at it from the window. But if you tell me you just bought a car for \$90,000, I don’t care if it’s a lightning storm with pouring down hail, I’m going out to see the car! It’s the same reason we are eager to meet fiancées. If she is so in love that she is willing to give herself to this one person for the rest of her life, he must be worth meeting. *The true value of people and things in our lives is measured by what we are willing to give up to please them or acquire them.* Christ said,

The Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it².

So here is the crucial question: Do we practice hospitality in a way that causes outsiders to wonder who it is that is so great and wonderful that we are willing to part with significant time and possessions in order to please them? In our serving of the needy, will outsiders see that behind the least of these is our great and precious Christ? Or will they simply think we are just more nice people. Biblical hospitality requires nothing less than a readiness to commit radical sacrifice for the displaying of Christ’s glory. Why? Because this is what the cross required; and hospitality and the redemption earned at the cross flow from the same place: The love of God for strangers. As I warned last week, this kind of hospitality is far more risky than cozy dinners on Sunday afternoon. Yet, it seems that few of us have exposed ourselves to the risk of this type of hospitality. Many of you, I’m sure, are familiar with the famous quote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi in response to a question about why he did not want to become a Christ follower:

“Oh, I don’t reject your Christ. I love your Christ. It’s just that so many Christians are so unlike your Christ³.”

While it is true that Mr. Gandhi’s defense will not suffice before God, his criticism rings in our ears. Beloved, may we practice our hospitality in such a way that would stop the mouths of other Mahatma Gandhi’s in the making. As we seek to grow in our understanding and demonstration of hospitality, may we function as bright luminaries, reflecting the grace that flows out of redeeming love in our joyful practice of biblical hospitality. [Let’s Pray].

Review & Preview

Tonight we plan to bring this series to a close. And I would like to spend the majority of our time being as practical as possible about our hospitality at the Chapel. To do this, we’ll answer the following questions: How much hospitality is too much hospitality? How do I begin to show biblical hospitality? Can I serve a meal to guests on Sunday afternoon and still

² Matthew 13:45-46.

³ <http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/552.htm>

call it hospitality? What about when I am on the receiving end of hospitality? And, is there a special role for women in hospitality?

Before we begin, I want to very briefly review where we have come from and share with you a few passages that make the call to practice hospitality clear for believers. In our first sermon on this topic we discovered that the command to demonstrate hospitality is as least as old as Abraham and it is embedded in the very clear demonstration of God's love to strangers – as first expressed in God's love toward Israel and then ultimately demonstrated in Christ's work at the cross. In short, we considered hospitality across the whole of redemptive history. We ended with this question: Why should we show hospitality? And we answered it by saying, because, we, unlike all other peoples in the world, have been shown hospitality by God himself. To deny hospitality, is to deny the grace of God in our own lives.

Last week we looked at some common cultural distortions of biblical hospitality and then considered New Testament answers to several basic questions on hospitality. We finished up with this short review:

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.

Tonight, let's begin by taking just a moment to read three plain commands in the New Testament to the practice of hospitality. Let's start with Romans 12. In the context of God's mercy offering our bodies up as living sacrifices, using our gifts to serve the body, Paul says this [read vv. 9-21]. Next, we can turn to Hebrews 12. Here the context is gratefulness for Christ's work that allows us to approach God and for a kingdom that we are eternally part of that cannot be shaken. In light of these promises we offer to God acceptable worship and in our day to day lives this takes on a certain shape. Let's read 12:28 – 13:3. Finally, we can turn to 1 Peter 4. Here is a book written to believers who are suffering for their faith – yet Peter says this [read 4:7 – 11]. With these clear commands now stated, let us begin to answer the questions before us.

How Much Hospitality is Too Much Hospitality?

As I'm sure you are well aware, it is possible to become too caught up in hospitality and that the need to think carefully and guard against this indulgence is important. We've all heard of the person that goes overboard in trying to meet the needs others around them, particularly those in the church. So how do we guard against this? As hospitality most often requires either money, time, or energy (or some combination of the three), I've tried to develop some simple but prudent guidelines for the doling out of hospitality. First, look at your past year's

budget and determine what percentage was spent on entertainment, vacations, and luxury. It seems wise to me to not spend more than 35% of this dollar amount directly on hospitality to remain balanced. Second, as hospitality can be quite time-consuming, one should systematically set-aside two to three minutes per day thinking about and planning to be hospitable. Then, twice a year, especially around Christmas as we usually have extra time because of school breaks, it seems practical to actually engage in the practice of hospitality with an eye toward acts or tasks that can be completed in a day or less. Thirdly, we must consider the issue of energy. If nothing else, hospitality requires energy. Just as it is increasingly important these days to conserve energy in the United States, it is important to conserve energy in life (particularly if you are ageing and now have much more time to conserve energy). The key in this area is to be sure that you hold back some energy – be careful not to deplete reserves. I believe if you follow these guidelines – you will not risk becoming over-involved in hospitality, and you will never have to fear being called names like “co-dependent.”

Are You Kidding?

Am I kidding? In fact, I am. But take a quick step back and recapture that last two minutes on your automatic playback. What was your heart doing when I read through that ridiculousness? Undoubtedly, some of you were not fooled and you guessed my hand half way through the first sentence. Others of us, however, may have been saying, “Yeah, that sounds reasonable... Phew, I’m doing that now... that was not as bad as I thought it was going to be.” And others, perhaps the majority, were just plain confused!

How much hospitality is too much hospitality? This question is almost as ridiculous as the man at a job interview who when offered the job and a generous salary says, “Oh, I’m sorry, that is much too much, it will never do.” It is ridiculous because it would never happen. In the same way, this risk of us showing too much hospitality is teeny at best. For the vast majority of us, the instinct to preserve our own happy lives is way to great to run the risk of hospitality going overboard. If we are using the Bible to define words like love, kindness, and goodness, how much love is too much love? How much kindness is too much kindness? Can we ever be too good to our neighbor?

How much hospitality is too much hospitality? This question takes us right back to where we were last week in Luke 10 where the Lawyer questioned Jesus, “Who [exactly?] is my neighbor?” I can honestly tell you that in my four short years pastoring, I have yet to meet an individual who “hospitaliated” if you will, their way into poverty, no longer able to care for their biblical responsibilities. The question for us is not “how much is too much” it is, “How much was God’s love and kindness for me, the stranger?” We find our answer at the cross.

When “Hospitality” Becomes Idolatry

Nevertheless, hospitality, even biblical hospitality, can become distorted by sin and foolishness. A simple one-liner to help guide you in this area is this: Good becomes bad when it takes the place of the best. In other words, if in your efforts to show kindness, to meet practical needs, to serve redemptively, you find it necessary to sin or to neglect other God-given responsibilities, you need to examine the situation closely. Again, Luke 10 from last week is instructive in this sense. Martha was preoccupied with meeting the physical needs of Christ and his co-travelers when much better would have been to be at

Christ's feet with Mary. Our hearts are often complicated mazes of sin and self-imposed delusions – if you find that you are tempted to remain in the kitchen cleaning while guests in need of your love linger in the living room, or tend toward installing someone's deck on a Sunday morning while the people of God are meeting, or [you fill in the blank], then there may be a fly in the ointment. It is true that biblical hospitality does require sacrifice. However, if the picture becomes foggy about what is good and what is best, especially if others are challenging you (like a spouse), you are wise to bring other Christ-lovers into the situation to help you assess and hold you accountable.

When Hospitality is an Expression of Guilt

Lastly on this topic, there is a type of hospitality that is driven by unbiblical guilt. It sounds like this: The husband says "I suppose it would be good for us to help him out (*sigh*)... you know, this means we'll have to cancel our cookout." Wife: "By cookout you mean that I asked you to do some chicken breasts on the grill so I wouldn't have to mess the kitchen tonight?" Husband: "Well..., yea, I mean that is cooking – out, isn't it?" Beloved, I assure you that husband and wife will help out, but it will not be hospitality, at least for one of them. Why? Because it is not driven by the pounding rhythm at the heart of hospitality. What is that pounding rhythm? We've said it many times and in many ways throughout this series, but I am happy to say it again – it is God's love for the stranger, the foreigner, the alien, the poor, the needy, the naked, the widowed, and the orphaned. It is nothing less than redemptive love – love that put Christ on the cross for us, while we were yet sinners⁴.

How Do I Begin to Show Biblical Hospitality?

So we've answered this question of how much is too much. With that settled, a very obvious next question arises: How do I begin to show hospitality?

The "Unnatural" of Hospitality

On this past Wednesday night I asked my flock to help me finish this sermon series by coming up with practical applications from the previous two sermons. They sat in small groups and brainstormed. One group stated, "It's more than dinner!" Another person likened it to the same type of love in action you often see in a home. There is not a lot of discussion about whether or not to make dinner for the family tonight. It is a natural and almost automatic expression. Of course you would make dinner. But that is natural. Hospitality lifts us up out of ourselves and calls us to act unnaturally. To take God-like expressions of love and to show them to those unknown to us or to those in need.

Romans 12 is chock full of this unnatural behavior – and it all flows from this transformation of our hearts that is taking place in verses 1 and 2. Consider what the believer is called to in the very same context of hospitality in Romans 12: Outdo one another in showing honor... contribute to the needs of the saints... bless those who persecute you... associate with the lowly... repay no one evil for evil... never avenge yourselves... if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink... overcome evil with good⁵. This is so unnatural that we must be literally trans-

⁴ Ephesians 2:1-7

⁵ Romans 12:9-21

formed to accomplish it. We must be indwelt by God himself through his Holy Spirit. Hospitality, is unnatural in every way. So here's a tip: When watching for opportunities to practice hospitality, move toward that which repels you. Keep in mind that things that come naturally, do not need to be commanded.

A&O x 4

And this brings us to our next point. In the health care professions we have, as you know, a multitude of shorthand expressions. One of them is A&O x 3 or A&O x 4. This means alert and oriented to person (1), place (2), time (3), and situation (4). As you seek to grow in the practice of hospitality, keep these elements in mind. The first three elements, person, place, and time are often pretty obvious, although issues of timing and appropriate place may require some thought. Situation, however, can occasionally require a bit more discernment. Let me share the vulgar extreme that is sometimes seen before bringing us back to a more balanced approach. This is someone pretending at biblical hospitality. The gift, the help, the care, comes with strings attached. Hidden or unspoken expectations. Sometimes it's as overt as requesting repayment for what seemed to be given as a gift. More often, however, it is the process of subtly humiliating the recipient so that your generosity is highlighted against the backdrop of their need OR your wise-living resulting in abundance for giving is highlighted against their poor decisions or reaping of consequences. People who approach hospitality this way act as if they believe God owed them the cross. It is a sick and twisted perversion.

With that warning sounded, hospitality should be marked by biblical love. This means we are working with a redemptive mindset – helping people move toward Christ and the cross, toward gospel-living. This means hospitality looks like, at times, teaching someone to fish versus giving them a fish. Or, perhaps, we do both. Wisdom is required. But it is very important that we not become paralyzed by not having a full understanding of the situation at hand – and this is easy for us to do, particularly if something besides redemptive love is driving our hospitality. None of the commands to be hospitable in the Bible are prefaced or followed by instructions to cross-examine the recipient. So be wise, but be bold, knowing that your reward is in heaven.

Making Time or Changing Lifestyles?

Our next point has to do with our time, and you could state the question like this: To be hospitable, is it required that I *make more time* for hospitality OR that I *change my lifestyle* for hospitality? Ahhh, that is a loaded question... I can almost hear our chairs groaning under the weight of the implications as they bear down on our shoulders. Let me say two things here. First, in the end, this is a question each family must answer for itself. No one answer will suffice in every situation. But let me suggest that if your life is so packed that there is literally no margin in your schedule, your budget, or your energy expenditure – that is, if you continually live in survival mode – there is only a very small chance you will be able to fulfill the command to help others survive. All of your resources are already spent on yourself and your family. Secondly, let me suggest that the Old Testament pictures of hospitality seem to recommend to us patterns in life that intertwines hospitality into the natural course of day to day activities.

Do you remember the pictures I am referring to? All of them are agricultural, which would have been the main means of livelihood at that time. God commanded the Israelites not to reap their fields right to the edge, not to strip the vineyard bare or to gather the fallen grapes, not to return to the field for forgotten sheaves, not to beat the olive trees for their olives more than once⁶. These extras were intentionally left for the sojourner, the poor, the widow, and the needy. In our corporate crusade for efficiency, we know little of this type of thinking. What exactly does this mean for us? I don't have it all worked out, but I think it at least means there is conscious "leaving" of extra. We don't use up all our resources on ourselves. Translated into modern day language, a lifestyle that intentionally, systematically, regularly, and to some degree, indiscreetly, makes provision for those who are in need.

A special note here for elders. For all six of us, as well as those who would aspire to the position, the Scriptures seem to make a peculiar emphasis. While all believers are called repeatedly to "show hospitality," both passages dealing with the qualifications of elders make clear that the elder is to lead a life characterized by hospitality – that is, we are to be known as "hospitable." It is a judgment that others will make of us as they regard our example. We must guard against the temptation to say, "I already work so hard for this church, I don't need to be hospitable too." Where does the energy come for this? From Christ himself. So, dear brothers, continue the good fight.

STOP Building Your Kingdom Here on Earth

Let me issue the corollary of a biblical mandate to you: STOP building your kingdom here on earth. We touched on this last week so we won't stay here long tonight. But make no mistake that hospitality requires your resources. Be prepared to give, to sacrifice, to bless others with your unfettered generosity. John Piper quotes Randy Alcorn on this subject, and I did not have the time to look up the source, but he says this, "God increases our standard of living so that, *we* might increase our standard of giving. Romans 12:13 is very clear: "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." You've perhaps been told that there are no U-Hauls behind hearses. This is not a tirade against nice homes or nice cars or nice vacations. Rather, a warning that these things must not keep us from generous and abounding hospitality. Would we happily sell our \$400,000 dollar homes, give up our multimillion dollar savings, and forsake our luxury vehicles for the glory of showing redemptive love to the needy? And all that God and his grace toward us might be praised? 1 Timothy 5:17-19 says this:

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

Contrary to what the all the financial and investment institutions would have you believe, you can save enough. In fact, you can even save too much⁷. Now I've spoken pri-

⁶ Leviticus 19, Deuteronomy 14, 24

⁷ Luke 12:13-21

marily to the rich here, but the very same applies to believers of all levels of wealth. The lust for wealth is no respecter of persons. Kingdom building on earth will necessarily interfere with kingdom building in heaven⁸. And by the way, it is not enough to simply give large sums of money to the church – God wants all of you. Your energy, emotions, intellect, *your involvement*, and talents. Be prepared to give all in hospitality.

Distinctive Hospitality

Lastly in answering this question about how do I begin to show biblical hospitality, we must discuss the distinction of our hospitality. That is to say, our hospitality must be different than that of the world's. If we think again back to the Old Testament instances of hospitality that we observed, God's commands to the Israelites were very specific, they were to love the stranger as they would love themselves. But the commands also instruct the Israelites to include the sojourner in their festivals and their feasts and the reading of the law⁹. There is no doubt that in being exposed to these rituals and celebrations that the sojourner would have come to know something of the God that the Israelites worshipped. I believe biblical hospitality should always reflect something of that which it is driven by, namely Christ's redemptive love. In your home, the gospel and hospitality should walk hand in hand, openly displaying their affection for one another. In other words, when serving hospitality, Christ should always be on the table.

Can I Serve a Meal to Guests on Sunday Afternoon and Still Call It Hospitality?

Speaking of tables, meals, and serving, we now come to a crucial question: Can I serve a meal to guests on Sunday afternoon and still call it hospitality? Of course! Provided it is driven by redemptive love and is designed to meet true needs. But be careful not to confuse in your mind biblical hospitality for entertaining. Entertaining is a wonderful activity and should be engaged in frequently. Martha Stewart had it right when she said it is one friend treating another. And it is *this* that we are often doing on a Sunday afternoon, versus showing hospitality. There is nothing wrong with that. So why is it important to distinguish the two? First, if we believe that entertaining is equal to hospitality, we may too easily be disinclined to show true biblical hospitality when needed, reasoning to ourselves that we are already doing it all the time. Second, it really is a great bit of foolery for us to tell ourselves that we are meeting the needs of others when we are at best fulfilling their dietary desires and at worst indulging our own social pleasures. Showing kindness to strangers can be arduous labor and we need to develop the fortitude for it. Lifting forks from plate to mouth while talking about sports, politics, and vacations will probably not suffice.

What About When I am on the Receiving End of Hospitality?

What about when I am on the receiving end of hospitality? Now this is a tough question probably worthy of an entire sermon in and of itself. As I alluded to last week, some of us have a strong revulsion to the prospect of being on the receiving end of hospitality. As a pastor I've seen needed hospitality flat-out refused. I've heard things like, "But there are others in the church who need it more." And then there is, probably most commonly, the situations

⁸ Matthew 6:19-24

⁹ Deuteronomy 16, 31

in which you find out about a need months after the time for its being met has past. For whatever reason, the individual chose not to share. Now I want to be careful here by not making broad generalizations, for there are likely many reasons for individuals not receiving hospitality well. It may be shame, embarrassment, guiltiness, a sense of unworthiness, independence, foolishness, a lack of exposure to Christians who regularly practice biblical hospitality, or uncertainty about what strings might be attached, etc.

We do not have time to address all of these, but under many of these reasons lie a common thread: Pride. Beloved, we need to look this sin in the eye and call it what it is and give up our many Christian euphemisms for it. God will, in his sovereign and good providence, choose to remind us of our utter need for him in many different ways and at many different times. It is through these difficulties that he plans to reveal himself again and again as our all sufficient Savior, note Paul's infamous thorn in the side¹⁰. I believe that our inability to receive hospitality is related to a weakness in our faith – we have yet to fully appreciate our utter need before God. It shows up on in our inability to receive his people as his help in our time of need. No matter how Calvinistic we say we are – the white knuckles of human pride dig their nails into the flesh of our hearts, screaming to hang on and we have no idea it is there until God brings hospitality to our doorstep. Want to be a better Calvinist? Learn to humbly and joyfully accept hospitality.

Is There a Special Role for Women in Hospitality?

We have finally reached the last question, is there a special role for women in hospitality? The short answer is no. The Bible does not give us any evidence that women are to take a leading role in hospitality. With that said, let me also say, "Yes." Women *may* have a special role in hospitality. But I share this simply as a cultural observation given our days and times here at the Chapel. What I mean is this: Women are often much more engaged in the lives of those around them. Right or wrong, good or bad, it is often the case. So what does this mean for husbands? It means that you need to look to your wives to help you detect and address the needs around you. Think of your wife as a sort of high-powered, finely-tuned radar. Maybe not so flattering, but it gets the picture across. Ask your wives, "Honey, did you hear about any needs today?" And then be prepared to leverage the resources of your home toward meeting those needs. Be strategic. Be clever. Be intentional. Use all the tools the Lord has put at your disposal to exercise hospitality.

Conclusion

Well, this brings us to the end of this series. I pray that you have been challenged by the Word of God to not only think of, but to practice, hospitality biblically. As I said at the outset of this series, you are a body which already knows much of the practice of hospitality and it is a great joy for each of us pastors to serve among you. If you are looking for the secret to practicing biblical hospitality, it is simply this: welcome others as God has welcomed you, serve others as God has served you, extend kindness as God has extended kindness to you. You see, my friends, we are the guests of God! And Christ himself is God's hospitality toward us. Contemplate Christ and his work and I assure you that you will discover all you need to know about showing hospitality. Let's pray.

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 12 – Paul's thorn was used in this manner.