

Generous Community

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[0 : 00] Well, it was about 32, 33 years ago, I think now, that I woke up one Sunday morning and took myself to church. It was the first time that I'd ever made that decision for myself.

I was 21, 22, something like that. So, yeah, it doesn't feel like it was 30 odd years ago, but it was quite a while ago now. Now, I've got to say that when I went to church for the very first time, I was quite apprehensive in terms of what to expect.

But I pulled up in the car park, I walked towards the front door, and the welcomer on the door at that time, who I didn't know at all, it turns out he was a farmer who was married with two young children. And as I walked up to the door, he welcomed me, stuck his hand out, he welcomed me, and he engaged me. He didn't just say, hey, good morning, and hand me a bunch of stuff.

But he actually engaged me. He discovered very quickly that I was new to the church. He asked me if I knew anyone in the building. I didn't. He said, well, let me take you right now, and I will sit you where my family is currently seated.

[1 : 18] And he said, I'll join you in a moment when I'm finished here at the welcoming doing this job. He introduced me to his family. As soon as he had finished his welcoming, he came and sat with me.

In the course of the coming few weeks, he included me in his community group. He engaged me every Sunday, invited me to other things.

He introduced me to other people. And he, within a matter of no time at all, invited me to his home to enjoy a meal. And over a number of period of times, he did the same thing.

And they continued, in fact, to show hospitality to me for the course of 18 months to two years before it finally came to me what it meant to be a Christian, before I became a Christian.

So over the course of that time, this young family took this young, with a bunch of rough edges, this 21, 22-year-old, into their home and showed hospitality to me.

[2 : 21] That's where we're headed today in this message. So if you've got the St. Paul's app, when I open it up, you've got three points there that we're going to go through as we discover what is hospitality and what is the purpose of the hospitality.

So we're looking at Luke 14. This passage opens with Jesus. He's at a dinner party in the home of a prominent Pharisee. He's been invited in to this dinner to be set up to fail by the religious elite.

As he was attempted to be trapped last week with the religious expert, now in the home of the Pharisees, he's set up to fail. All eyes are on Jesus to see whether he will heal this sick man in their presence and therefore break the Old Testament law of the Sabbath.

He heals the man and he ends up trapping the religious leaders in their hypocrisy once again. They are silent. That's what we are told.

They are silent. Nothing has been learnt from this moment. Nothing has been confessed. Just silent. And so in verses 7 to 11, Jesus pushes the point in a bit deeper.

[3 : 46] So he tells them a parable that revolves around first century cultural expectations. Not dissimilar to some of the cultural expectations that we might have nowadays.

At a dinner party, the host would have the place of honour. That's pretty standard. I mean, after all, they're the one hosting the thing. They would have the place of honour and everyone is seated according to their importance to the host.

We do a similar thing nowadays at a wedding reception. You know, you don't walk into a wedding reception and just go straight for that long table at the beginning.

You know, I'm going to plonk myself right here. Free seats. No one's here yet. So I'm just going to plonk myself there. You don't do that as a general rule. But when you look at the list and you go, I'm on table 15 at the back corner with the photographer right next door, kitchen door, you kind of know

they were looking to fill tables.

You kind of know where you fit. Protocol in the first century demanded that you would not grab a seat too close to the host.

[5 : 05] Always sit further away so that the host would elevate you to a better seat, especially in front of everyone else. Always sit further away.

Now these gatherings were expensive. Expensive feasts. Not because of how much it cost, but because of the expectations that were attached to them.

We even have a phrase for it nowadays. No such thing as a free lunch. First century Palestine was a class orientated society.

Being connected to people at the top of society was essential for you to advance in society. And people at the top of society would engage people a couple of rungs below them in society so that they could expand their power base in society.

And all these alliances and power networks were conducted through hospitality. Dinner parties like the one that Jesus has just found himself in.

[6 : 19] You brought people into your home and then those people owed you a favor. It's called the patronage system.

Advancements through connections and using of people and relationships. You only ever invited people into your home or went to another person's home if you knew that you would gain something out of it.

Out of that connection. And Jesus is using that protocol to illustrate a profound spiritual principle about who is part of God's great feast.

It's in verse 11. All those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

That's the profound spiritual principle. Those who think they qualify for salvation will discover that they don't.

[7 : 30] That's the profound principle. And Jesus is saying this into a dinner party with a room full of people who think they qualify.

To claim God's approval as a right on the grounds of position in the church or reputation in the community or good works achieved is in fact grounds for disqualification.

But what Jesus says next reveals a different kind of hospitality that reveals the values that drives God's kingdom.

So my second point, generous hospitality. He addresses his host in verse 12. 12. When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters or your relatives or your rich neighbours.

If you do, they may invite you back and so you'll be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed.

[8 : 36] Continue on with your patronage system and you will be repaid. But do it according to the kingdom and you will be blessed.

That's two very different outcomes. His basic point is get people into your home that can't pay you back. He's saying practice radical, generous hospitality.

Generous hospitality. Now the word hospitality doesn't actually show up here in this text, but it does in multiple places in the New Testament. In fact, Romans 12 verse 13.

Practice hospitality. Hospitality. The word hospitality is often overlooked for us or again, it's downplayed for us because we look at that word, the English word hospitality, and it doesn't have the force of what the original language does.

The English word here is kind of weak. We look at the word hospitality and we think entertainment. Entertain people.

[9 : 47] Have a dinner party. We think Jamie Oliver and stuff like that. Jesus is talking something very much deeper than that. Something more profound than just simple entertaining.

So here's the definition. Biblical hospitality, generous hospitality, is welcoming strangers into your living space, treating those strangers like they are family so that God can turn some of them into family.

So let's unpack that a little bit. Generous hospitality is welcoming strangers into your living space. Now living space in the Bible is much bigger than the concept of the place that we would call our home, our house.

Much bigger than that concept. It's not just an enclosure where we do family have an element of privacy. Our living space is much deeper than that for most people.

Much deeper emotionally for most people. It is the place where we rejuvenate. It's where we recharge the batteries. It's the place where we are restored.

[11:00] Home is meant to be the place of warmth and food and rest and nourishment and relationship. And as much as possible, it is a place of order and beauty.

Unless, of course, you've got young kids and then, in which case, forget about the order and forget about the beauty thing. I mean, I love the little drawings that you get and stick them on the fridge. But anyway, our living space is profoundly bigger than our home.

And yet it is tightly connected to our homes. Our homes are where we exclude almost everyone else as we seek it to be a place of rest and safety and sanctuary and rejuvenation.

It's very interesting that social commentators, Hugh Mackay was one, a big one on this, who referred to from the 1990s, as community started to fracture in Australia, we started to put up walls around our homes.

Walls that were, in fact, taken down in the 1950s and 60s started getting put back up at boundary fences, walls and exclusion gates.

[12:18] We are trying to, as much as possible, keep the outside world away from our sanctuaries, our castles, a place that we retreat to to escape the world.

And so our homes are where we exclude almost everyone as we seek a place of rest, safety, sanctuary and rejuvenation. And yet the reality is, as we would know, there is no such thing as a perfect home.

There's no such thing as a perfect living space. Sometimes it's because the relationships are so toxic. Or it's just simply because it's not the living space that we actually hope for and long for. No one is entirely, completely satisfied with their home. No one has what they have entirely got looking for in their living space.

All those home re-renovation shows, feed the hope. Better homes than yours. I mean, sorry, better homes than gardens. Shows like that feed the hope that there is a place out there somewhere, there's a home somewhere where I will feel perfectly rejuvenated.

[13:37] A place that offers me sanctuary, a safe place, a place to escape the troubles of this world. And even if you spend an absolute fortune to build your dream home, it won't be.

It won't be. It won't be. Biblical hospitality is the exact opposite of what our culture is seeking to do with our living spaces.

The hospitality Jesus is calling his disciples to is bringing strangers into our living space. The space that would normally be reserved for only for people that we would call family or close friends or people who are like me or people that I like.

It's inviting strangers to be refreshed with the same things that refresh us. It involves inviting strangers not just into our living, into our homes, but into our living space, into things that rejuvenate me.

Inviting them into our favorite restaurants and hobbies and activities. Inviting strangers into our personal space. And since COVID, very few people actually have a personal space.

[15:14] In other words, this hospitality is costly. That's the living space. Secondly, generous hospitality is about welcoming strangers into that space.

Now the word that's translated hospitality all through the New Testament is a word that means love of strangers. Not tolerance of strangers, but love of strangers.

Strangers, if you like, are people who are different. That is different from you, different from me.

That is, they might be from a different race or a different socioeconomic group or just plain different. Whatever that might mean for you. And there are three kinds of strangers that Christians are to practice hospitality with. First of all, strange other Christians.

I say that with a bit of tongue in cheek there. Practice hospitality with other Christians. There are lots of Christians who are strangers. Other Christians are brothers and sisters in Christ.

[16:23] And when we practice hospitality with them, we are treating them like the family that they are. Treating them like the family that they actually are.

Because family are the people who we normally bring into our living space. And we're a church here in the halls that is seeking to build this kind of generous hospitality between all kinds of what you might call natural barriers between people.

Across cultures and generations. Christians are also to practice hospitality with neighbours. Neighbours are the people you encounter on a regular basis in your network. Not just literally the people who live beside you. Although that might be a starting place. Most of these people who are your neighbours will not share your beliefs. Jesus did it all the time. He was always hanging out and eating with sinners and outcasts in society. And the vision here is to love them. And hopefully love them ultimately towards belief in Jesus.

[17:32] That is, and this is so essential for us to grapple with. People don't get argued towards belief. People don't get argued towards belief.

They get loved towards belief. And lastly, we're to practice hospitality. The strangers here are those who are needy.

When the great John Newton of Amazing Grace fame looked at this passage, he said this. One would almost think that Luke 14, 12 to 14 was not part of the Bible.

I do not think it is unlawful to entertain our friends. But if these words do not teach us in some respect that our duty is to give preference to the poor, then I am at a loss to understand them. Our instinct is to invite in people that we want to know, who we like, or who will open doors for us.

[18:39] And Jesus says, look for the hurting, the needy people. If we understand anything about God's hospitality towards humanity, then bring them in.

And thirdly, the goal of all of this is to turn some of these strangers into family. When we treat the stranger like family, God will turn some of them into members of his family.

There's something quite supernatural about Christian hospitality. So let's get practical for a moment. What this passage is attempting to do for these religious elite is help them to see how much they fall short to identify their sin.

One of the things that we have a tendency to do in modern society is to assist people to show an element of hospitality from a distance.

We Facebook posts about activism, make a difference in the world. We give money to charitable organisations out there.

[19:51] And yet, some of the most ardent people at pursuing this sort of social justice, this activism, will not invite a stranger into their home.

Will not draw close to the needy person over a long period of time. Jesus is calling radical hospitality here, drawing close to the person over a long period of time and bringing them into your space.

Costly hospitality. Costly hospitality. Now, don't hear me say you shouldn't do the other things. I'm just saying, search your own heart.

Search your own heart. Search your own heart. So let's get practical. Start inviting neighbours and work colleagues and others who are in your network into your living space.

If you find some kind of connection he's building, then bring them into this living space, the church. Start inviting each other at St Paul's into your living spaces.

[21:07] Those who have got a little bit more space, invite those who don't have such space.

Those who are long-term residents of Chatswood, of Sydney, of Australia, invite those who are new arrivals.

Those who have been Christian longer, invite those who have been Christians for less time. Those who have been at St Paul's longer, invite those who are new. Why not host a community group in your home?

Let me just say, as a side point, not in the script at all, how much I value those who open up their homes to lead community groups or to have hosting community groups.

It is no small thing to do it week in and week out. And I'm grateful for you doing that. Very grateful. Or, volunteer to be on the welcoming team.

How about that? It was because someone did that 30 odd years ago for me that I'm standing here today. That and God's sovereignty and grace and everything else.

[22:06] But key, absolutely key in me being here today. It is no small thing. Also, maybe even today, just don't rush off.

Stay. Practice gospel hospitality over morning tea, but not with those you came with or have known for a long time. I'm not sure if you realize that's the reason why we have morning tea.

Like, we don't have morning tea because I'm assuming after you've sat and listened to me, you're starving and you're thirsty. I'm not working on that assumption. Maybe six months ago you might

have been, but we do it as a catalyst for hospitality.

You look all the way through the New Testament, all the way through the New Testament, and see how often Jesus is eating with people. So practice it now, this morning.

So finally, receiving generous hospitality. You see, by now we should be feeling the force and the weight of this. The dynamic and power for us to practice generous hospitality is in fact found in the last section from verse 15.

[23 : 32] And the way that God has been hospitable to us. Someone at the table says, What he's referring to there is the ultimate feast at the end of time.

Which Jess referred to in her prayer, the Bible begins with feasting and it ends with feasting and it's all the way through. And this person at this table is referring to the end time when God renews the world, when all death and suffering and evil is finally dealt with.

And he's referring to this great feast, this blessed feast, where all the jubilees and all the carnivals and all the banquets and the fiestas and the laughter and the festivity of thousands of years of human history won't even come close to this feast.

Not even close to how great it's going to be. The glory and the joy of the celebration which the God of the universe will lay out for those who are his.

It's going to be a magnificent occasion and it will never end beyond human imagination. And the man at verse 15 is confident that he's going to be there.

[24 : 50] He's one of the guys sitting around the table going, yeah, I'm one of the elite, I will definitely be there. And so Jesus urges here or uses this occasion to tell us, in fact, who will be there.

Tells a story about a man, another parable, throws a big banquet. The man represents God. He invites a bunch of people. And Jesus is referring there to the work of the Old Testament prophets who proclaim the kingdom of God that would arrive in the future.

And those who are invited to be part of God's kingdom, the ones who the prophets had addressed with the promises of century, were God's historic people, Israel.

Their descendants are sitting around this table confident they're part of God's kingdom. And they have heard the message of the kingdom of God. And now it arrives in the person of the Lord Jesus. That's the point of this parable. It's now arrived. In verse 17, the message goes out. The kingdom has arrived. Come for everything is ready.

[25 : 58] And the kingdom is here. And yet every single one who's been invited has got other priorities. They come up with excuses. Excuses. I've got a property I need to go and see.

I've got five cows that need me to go and hug them. You know, like I just can't do this. Too busy. Too distracted for God.

And so they come up with excuses. Who does come? Verse 21, go out quickly into the streets, the alleys of the town, and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.

Notice very clearly that Jesus here does not say, or the host here does not say, go out and invite them in.

They are to be brought in. Not by their own doing. They are brought into this feast. Those who have been historically outside the kingdom, the sinners, the outcasts, the Gentiles, are to be brought in.

[27 : 04] The people who are outside God's family are the people who will ultimately eat at the feast of God's family. And Matthew 5 tells us, blessed are the poor in spirit because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

In other words, it is the poor in spirit who enjoy the great feast. The feast of God's kingdom is a pauper's feast.

There are two kind of people when it comes to God's salvation. There are the poor in spirit and there are the middle class in spirit.

The middle class in spirit might acknowledge they are not perfect, but they don't truly think it's much of a problem.

They think they have some stuff in the moral bank. They figure they've got something to contribute to their salvation. The poor in spirit knows that they've done wrong things, but even the good things that they have done were done with wrong motives.

[28 : 23] The good things were done as ways to try to control people or to make themselves feel better about themselves or to find approval or to manipulate God for favours in some kind of way.

The pauper knows that they need to receive hospitality from a radically hospitable God. They need what they cannot repay, what they cannot return.

They don't work their way into the great banquet. They are brought in by hospitable God who is a neighbour to the outcast. God's hospitality is his radically free gift, but his hospitality is very, very expensive.

It costs God everything to lay this banquet of his kingdom before us that we the paupers might be brought in. Jesus Christ, if you like, was part of the greatest in-group in all of history.

In all of each part of the greatest in-group. He was the top of the pile with the father and the son. He dwelt in perfect unity and love forever. And Jesus left that in-group and came to us as a homeless man at the beginning of this journey in Jerusalem.

[29 : 57] We are told he said this, Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head. He went from the greatest in-group to become a homeless man.

He was born in an animal shed, not a home. He was crucified outside the gates of a city on a hillside, not inside the city. He lived in the alleys and the streets.

He was rejected. He was stripped of everything. Why? Because he was paying for our sins so that we could be brought into God's family.

Jesus was thrown out so that we could be brought in. The ultimate homeless man became the ultimate party host.

Our host to the ultimate feast of time and eternity in his kingdom. The feast in the kingdom of God ultimately is the home, the living space that every single one of us is longing for deep in our hearts.

[31 : 09] To be in his presence. That's ultimately what we're looking for. It's what every single human being is searching for, whether you believe in God or not.

It's what you're looking for. This living space. Whatever your living space is right now that you're looking for, for rejuvenation, for hope, for hospitality, for contentment, for safety.

It won't give it to you. It can't give it to you. It is only in the presence of Jesus, in this feast for all of eternity, that your hurts are healed.

In his presence, it is a place of absolute comfort, absolute security, absolute peace, absolute warmth. At the beginning of this journey, Jesus says to his disciples, whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow me.

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. All Christian hospitality is expensive.

[32 : 37] Jesus' radical generosity towards sinners like us is the most expensive of all because he offers us the eternal banquet in the kingdom of God and it cost him everything that we might be brought in.

It cost him everything. History begins and ends with feasting. And for those who trust in Jesus, the end is an eternal wedding feast of joy.

No more tears, no more pain, no more suffering, just feasting and singing with joy. This eternal banquet is the destination for all people who follow the ultimate host.

So take up your cross and follow Jesus and live a life of generous hospitality to increase your joy and so that strangers like me 30 odd years ago might be turned into family.

Amen.