

Love Of Strangers

by Ron R. Ritchie

Mr. Lynn Berntson and I were talking the other day about the ways in which the energy crisis is a blessing in disguise. For example, I am out of gas this morning. And it is amazing how many people I've met because of this need. You see, what it makes me do is lean on somebody else, rather than my own resources. We were discussing how much we need one another in so many other ways- how we need to open our homes to one another and to minister to one another in a very casual, hospitable way, with a warm place around a fire, with a good meal, and a time to be honest and open with one another, to be caring and praying for others. Because there is such a slowdown in the nation we really have an opportunity to reflect, "Say, maybe we were going a little too fast in every area of our life. Maybe we were going so fast that we did not see our neighbors. We only knew when their lights came on in the morning, or heard them leave for work, or heard their car drive up in the afternoon, but we never did get to see them. We just thought they lived over there because of the noise they made." But suddenly there is this tremendous opportunity presented to us as a family to reach out and to care for one another.

These circumstances have caused me to be very curious about the concept of hospitality and what true hospitality is. I frequently had run across the word in the Scriptures, but had never pursued it until I decided to do so recently.

I came to the book of Romans and found that, in the midst of a passage on the Body of Christ and how we are to function, Paul lays down the principle that we are to practice hospitality, that it is to be a style of life, that as followers of Jesus Christ we are to be known as ones who are hospitable. Then in the book of I Peter I saw that we are to have the right attitude "Be hospitable without complaint." This is difficult, sometimes. Perhaps we do not mind opening our homes. But the people often do not act the way we hope they will, so we complain as soon as they leave the door. Yet Peter says, "I want you to do this without complaint."

In the book of Hebrews there is a fascinating verse in chapter 13 which says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it." This takes us right back to Genesis 18 where we read that as he sat by his tent Abraham saw three men coming along the path. He raced out to them and said, "I beg you, come to my tent and let me share bread with you." He begged them to come, brought them to his tent, had his wife make bread while he had one of his tenderest and choicest calves killed and prepared. He had them sit down, he served them, and he never took a bite himself! That brought up a lot of questions in my mind. What kind of hospitality is that? You could starve to death! It is pretty hard to cook and serve without taking a little piece for yourself. This seemed to be a strange form of hospitality-serving, but not participating.

I finally did a word study and found that to be hospitable, in the original language, means to be a lover of strangers, of those you do not know. Well, I thought I had been hospitable, but I had kept a group around me who are all like me, and do things the way I do, and fit right into my home, and it was a very comfortable situation. But the Word says, "I want you to be a man who is hospitable, a lover of strangers."

I thought, "What am I going to do about this? I wonder if I should evaluate myself. Or should I ask my friends to evaluate what I'm doing?" Then the Holy Spirit prompted me: "Why don't you check with the Lord to find out what you're doing?" I could depend on my friends to cushion their evaluations a little bit. But the Lord is a beautiful evaluator. When he walks into your life, the evaluation has not merely started; it is over. It is so clear where you are, and where he is, and the distance he still must take you in order for you to be conformed to his image.

So I found an interesting passage in Luke 14- verses 1 through 14. We are going to find in it that Jesus sets

himself up as an example of a lover of strangers. Then he gives a lesson on how to conduct oneself as a guest. Finally he turns to the host and says, "By the way, I'd like to talk to you. There are a few problems I see." And he evaluates the motives of the host. Let's look at the first six verses:

The example

And it came about that when He went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, they were watching Him closely. And there in front of Him was a certain man suffering from dropsy. And Jesus answered and spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" But they kept silent. And He took hold of him, and healed him, and sent him away. And He said to them, "Which of you shall have a son or an ox fall into a well, and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?" And they could make no reply to this.

Some think that this is the last week of our Lord's life before the cross, and that this is his last Sabbath. He was going around the countryside teaching the Word and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God, and his disciples were proclaiming that he was the Messiah. Some Pharisees came up to him and said, "Listen, you'd better stop that. Herod is out to kill you!" Jesus said, "Go and tell that fox, 'Behold I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow and the third day I reach my goal.' You tell Herod that my life is in the hands of my Father, not in his hands." While he was with those Pharisees, apparently, some of them invited him to have bread.

The Pharisees were an interesting group of men. Their name means "Separatists" and they were called that by their enemies, not by their friends, just as the followers of the Way were called "Christians" first in Antioch by their enemies. It was not a complimentary term. It did not build one's ego up to be called a "Separatist". But they had brought this upon themselves. As religious leaders of the nation of Israel they were so separated, so caught up in the laws of Moses, as well as the new laws they were bringing forth, that they could hardly get near the people, or near anything which they considered "unclean". They had many complex rules and regulations in this area.

In fact, there were at least seven types of Pharisees. There was the Shechenite Pharisee, who followed the laws of Moses so that he could make material gain, much like the insurance man who joins a church because he expects to find clients there. Then there was the Tumbling Pharisee, who walked around all the time with his head bowed to the ground, to show all that he was humble. There was the Bleeding Pharisee, who walked around all the time with his eyes closed so he would not see a woman and thus sin. But he kept running into buildings and trees and women, and walking away bleeding! Then there was the Mortar Pharisee with the square hat like those used in graduation ceremonies. He wore that hat down over his eyes so that as he walked among men he would see no indecencies or impurities. There was the "What-do-I-do-next?" Pharisee, a novice who was just learning the law of Moses. He would go ahead and do whatever he knew to do, then go to a teacher and say, "What do I do next?" Then there was the Fearful Pharisee who followed the law out of fear of the Judgment. What a way to live! Then there were the true Pharisees, who loved God with all their heart, mind, and soul, and their neighbor as themselves.

I do not know which group came with Jesus to this meal - probably a mixture of them all - but they were invited in with Jesus on a Sabbath day to eat. Right before Jesus was a man suffering from dropsy, which is a build-up of water around the heart and lungs or in the limbs. Until the disease is cured, the water keeps accumulating. Now, we don't know how this man got there, whether it was by invitation, or whether he was planted there as a trap for Jesus.

We find in studying the Scriptures that this is the eighth incident of Jesus' healing on the Sabbath, so I suspect that it was a trap. We have three clues: 1) we have Pharisees; 2) we have a sick man; and 3) it is the Sabbath. The Pharisees' idea was: "One who works on the Sabbath is a lawbreaker. Jesus heals on the Sabbath. That equals work. Therefore he is a lawbreaker. Thus he is a very dangerous person to have in the community - in fact, so dangerous that we must plot to kill him." And so the tension and the pressure in this situation is great.

But the Lord, "the loving one", who loves people- even Pharisees of all types, but is especially delighted with

the type who is obedient- walks among them anyway. He knows their hearts. Look at verse 3: "And Jesus answered and spoke to the lawyers and Pharisees...." "Well," you ask, "what was the question?" The question was sitting right there. They were saying, "What are you going to do, Jesus? Are you going to eat with us, or are you going to get involved with this stranger? You know it's the Sabbath, and you know how we feel about that. But we want to see one more time what you're going to do." You would think in the seven previous instances God would have made his point clear. But they were pressing for an eighth time, to be able to accuse Jesus.

Keep in mind that Jesus said that he never said one word or did one work without checking in with his Father. This was the key to his life, and it must be the key to our lives. So it is apparent that the Father gave his son the freedom to get involved. And Jesus looks down, sees this innocent person who is sick, and feels all the pressure, all the inconvenience, all the misunderstanding. And he heals him, and sends him away.

Then he turns to the lawyers, those who were knee-deep in the Scriptures, and he turns to the Pharisees, who were so proud of their ability to interpret Scripture and make it alive and real, and he says to them, "Which of you shall have a son or an ox [In the context of this passage, "son" is not the best translation. It really should be "a donkey or an ox", as indicated by the marginal note in the New American Standard Version.] fall into a well, and will not immediately pull him out on a Sabbath day?" Proverbs 12:10 says that a righteous man has regard for the life of his beast. He is saying, "Listen, it's easy for you to stand back and to be objective, and to be theologically uptight about what's happening. But this man is suffering. And he is much more important than any animal. And you know that the Law says that if an animal falls down a well, you can pull him out on a Sabbath. But if a man is suffering on a Sabbath, according to you, we are not to get near him."

By this statement the Lord evaluates their lives- how they're treating strangers, how blind they are getting, how much selfishness is creeping in, how picky they are being. And he says, "Listen, I know if that were your ox, he'd be out of that well in a minute! You wouldn't care if it were Sunday, or Thursday night- he'd be out! Which of you would maintain the attitude you are exhibiting if it were your own?" And the answer, obviously, is that none of them would. They would move right to the rescue.

You notice that at no point did they make a reply. In fact, they did not even praise the Lord that the man was healed. There is not a word to the effect that they all rejoiced that Jesus the Messiah could come among them and heal this sick man in front of their very eyes. They never saw what was really happening. All they saw was that he was breaking the Law, he was working on the Sabbath. And the Lord said, "Listen, I'm the Lord of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Your own laws condemn your thoughts right now. That's how much in trouble you are as leaders."

But then he walks in to eat anyway. Isn't it amazing? All this pressure and conflict going on, and he still goes in and says, "Let's eat." He is not upset; he loves them. Of course he is disappointed that they are rejecting him, but he is not rejecting them. Verse 7:

A Lesson For The Guests

And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table...

In the Arab culture you can see this even today. All the guests come into the dining room which is set up with round tables, each with three seats. Everybody knows which of the three is the place of honor. (You notice that the text says "places of honor"). There may be nine or ten such tables. Then the host walks in and says who is to sit where.

I am intrigued by the fact that Jesus began speaking a parable to the invited guests. As recorded earlier in the Scriptures, he had said that he would no longer speak clearly to the Pharisees, for "they have ears, and they hear not; eyes, and they see not." "Rather," he said, "I will speak in parables I will tell stories, and those who are really interested will be inquisitive about those stories and will ask me more of what they mean. In that way I will be able to see who is really interested." So he tells a parable because he wants to point out some problems he sees in these people. He wants to point out their self-centeredness, their selfishness, their

bitterness. He wants to show them where they really are.

But he wants to do it in a loving way. So he tells a story about some other place. He doesn't sit there and say, "What you are doing here is terrible!" It would tend to ruin your meal, wouldn't it, if the people you invited in started chewing you out for the way you were acting in your own home. So he says, "I want to tell you a story about a wedding. You see, they were watching him with evil intent, but he was watching them so that he could encourage them and set them free from selfishness. His whole ministry was one of edification; their motive was one of destruction. So he says to all these guests,

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, and he who invited you both shall come and say to you, 'Give place to this man', and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher', then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted. "

You have to take this passage and try it on, and you have to see yourself in the light of Jesus Christ. When a man sees himself in the light of Jesus Christ, the only reasonable result is humility. But when a man evaluates himself, all he does is build himself up. He exalts himself. In the business world, where I was employed for a while, we were trained, "You can do it! You're regular tigers! Go sell those pots and pans! Buyers are waiting for you out there!" You started to believe some of those lies, you started to build yourself up. Can you imagine going to a wedding feast and placing yourself as the honored guest before the host shows up? That is what these people were doing. They had a problem, didn't they? There is a passage in Philippians 2 which I think you'll really appreciate. Paul puts his finger right on what was happening here, and how to avoid it. Look what he says in verses 3 and following:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name....

God is the one who is in charge of exalting his Son, and his children. So we are to rest and allow God to move into our lives. We are to come into this life, with Christ, as a servant. Do you remember what he said in Mark 10:45? "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." A man who is serving doesn't look for a seat of honor. And these men were to serve the nation of Israel. But they were parading around like kings, and they drove the people away. They wanted to be the light of the world; they produced nothing but darkness. And to this day, when one is walking in a hypocritical way, we call him a Pharisee.

Jesus says to these men, "I want to share with you how I see you in the light of this man who was sick. You are really missing the point. You really don't care about this man; you're not interested in strangers. This attitude has so affected your life that you are now fighting among yourselves for the seats of honor. You don't even see how blind you are becoming. You're so caught up in yourselves and your own personages that you aren't even aware that you are being blinded, that it's affecting every area of your life- even to the point of sitting down. You don't even know how to do that any more."

Then he says, "I want to talk to you, Mr. Host. I've been watching you, and I've been watching this banquet, and I want to share a truth with you that will set you free, if you'll hear me." Verse 12:

And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and repayment come to you. "

That hit me right where I live. You see, it's exciting to invite your friends. It's easy to invite your friends. It's comfortable when you invite your friends. But the Lord said, "Though I'm not against your inviting your friends, I am very concerned, Mr. Host, about your motives in inviting them." Then he declares the motive- "... lest they also invite you in return, and repayment come to you." We've all been caught in that. In fact, we've been caught even in the reverse of it - "I would love to accept their dinner invitation, but it means that if I go, sometime in the near future I have to invite them back. And what happens if I don't like them in the first place? It is quite an expense to invite two people back whom I never did like, anyway. But to save social embarrassment I have to do that, so that they won't spread it throughout the neighborhood: 'They came to my house for dinner, and I've never been invited back.' "

This is a pressure we're all caught in. What can happen is that it can become a cycle. You start with this big circle of friends and neighbors and brothers, and you invite them all in. But as soon as you find you don't like one of them you cross him off, and the circle gets a little smaller. And then, have you ever noticed those couples that you invite, and you like him but not her? So you say to your wife, "Which one do you like?" hoping it's the same one. You struggle with that. It's hard to like both of them. So you say, "Well, we can't have them back, because I don't like the wife. If you want to see her, go take her to lunch somewhere." We work on this principle, and so the circle gets smaller and smaller. Suddenly, it's just you and your wife and the dog and Walter Cronkite! And TV dinners! You have cut down all these relationships because you had it all set up in your mind how it ought to come out - "If they invite me, I ought to invite them." Verse 13:

But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. "

We might say, "But Lord, they can't invite us back." You can hear the Lord saying, "Funny you should mention it. Because that is why I came. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and I came to preach the gospel to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, and to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." He says, "Look, there are those who can't pay you back. I want you to invite them among these others. I want you to minister to the lives of these strangers, to reach out to them, because I would reach out to them, and you are following me, and I am following the will of the Father. When the Father gives me freedom to reach out, I obey- not to everyone who is afflicted, but to everyone whom the Father gives me."

You know, these categories- the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, are also a picture of our spiritual condition. We can open our homes today to those who are poor in spirit, to those who are bankrupt, to those who are crippled by legalism and strange teachings, to those who are lame because of sin in the past which has crippled them so that they can't move as you and I expect them to. And those who are blind we can set free by telling them the truth. We can open our homes and love strangers. Jesus says, "The reason that I want you to do this is because this is the concern of my heart. This is why I came. I want you to serve them."

In our own family we had to come to the point of agreeing to do this as a family. You can't do this without that agreement. We do it as a family project, and it's so much fun to confer with one another! We check calendars and dates. And all these strange people show up. You say to them, "Hi! Ron's my name, and this is my wife, Anne-Marie, and my two sons. I hear that you're a friend of so-and-so, and they've sent you by. Wonderful! Please make yourself at home."

Do you know what they do? They believe you. They move into your home and make themselves at home. But there's just one little problem. They make themselves at home the way they make themselves at home in their home. Which is not the way you thought they would make themselves at home in your home! And so you're all upset about how they've made themselves at home in your home, and you can't figure out what went wrong. But they believed you. When you opened your door, symbolically you said to them, "Here is our

home, here are our phonograph records, our refrigerator, here's my wallet, the keys to the car...." You say, "Wait a minute! Why, they might take everything I have." And the Lord says, "Yes, how about that! Yes, that's the risk you run. That is the risk of love. That is the life of faith."

They might take everything you have, but they can't take you or your spirit. We are to reach out, counting the cost, and recognizing that we are not our own; we are bought with a price. We are to serve those in our community, those who need us, those who would love to come in to a warm meal and fellowship, and to experience life. And we found that there are problems. We have had an entire automobile destroyed. But, evaluated from the proper perspective, it is amazing how unimportant an automobile is. And you know, when people come in and make themselves at home in your home, they don't spill hot liquid on your finest tablecloth because they premeditated it; they do it because they're nervous and they get clumsy. They're not out to destroy your property. It's amazing to watch their hearts, to see how they really want to be loving and thankful to you, too.

My sons are picking this up, too. I love coming home; it's so much fun_ "Hey Dad, I want you to meet six of my new friends, and they're staying for supper, and they all brought their sleeping bags!" My sons never ask us, "Can we bring friends?" They only check with us, "When?" I love their attitude. They are already hospitable, and there are all these little people running around. Some of these kids even look like our kids now! I could adopt at least three.

I just want to share with you that Jesus Christ puts everything back into perspective. He says, "Listen, I want you to open your homes, to be lovers of strangers. Evaluate your motives in what you're doing now. I encourage you to move into a community and be the salt and light that I've asked you to be in the first place. I know it will be inconvenient, and I know it will be difficult at times, but there are two blessings, two rewards.

The first is you will be blessed." That means you will be happy. Why? Because you're being like Christ, and that brings great happiness. The second thing the Lord says is, "I'll take care of the rewards in the resurrection." That is a lot of encouragement! One, I'm going to be resurrected, and two, there are rewards. Why? Because I was obeying Jesus Christ. What a joy to walk into a community and be like Jesus Christ! What a privilege to welcome strangers into your home! I encourage you not to neglect it.

Our heavenly Father, we thank you so much that you've told us that when we reach out to one stranger - "Truly, I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of mine, even to the least of them, you did it to me." Lord, we need you to set us free from ourselves. We need you to open our eyes. We need you to show us our neighbors. We need you to teach us to be lovers of strangers. And we need all the wisdom and the patience and the power available to do this task. But we would like to do it in your name, at your time, in your Spirit, for your sake, and to your honor and glory, Amen.

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