

EVERYTHING YOU EVER WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT HOSPITALITY

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

I could see the leaves turning color and feel the slight change in the weather that came every October in the farming district of northern Pennsylvania. We had put all the corn and hay into the barns, and we were ready for winter. It was about 6:30 pm on a Wednesday evening in 1952 when I arrived at the main office of the orphanage where I had lived and worked for the past eight years. I was 19 years old, a senior in high school, and the draft board was breathing down my neck hoping to get me into the Korean conflict upon graduation.

Two men who were in charge of the home met me in the main office and promptly informed me I was to leave the home that evening and not come back. I had the sense that something was wrong; the reasons they gave were weak, strange, and later proven to be untrue. But they had been building a case against me over a number of years, and this was a chance for them to get rid of me. Finally they began heading toward me physically to force me out, and I broke in total frustration and just started swinging. I knocked them both down, then picked one of them up and pushed him through a French door. I slammed out of the office and into the cold night with only the clothes on my back and just started walking. I was angry, scared, penniless, homeless, and alone. I walked eight miles to the town where my high school was. When I finally arrived in town it was about 8:30. I didn't know what to do or where to go, but I remember passing a little Baptist church just as a prayer meeting was breaking up, and I thought, "Not more Christians!" Then, being physically and emotionally spent, I collapsed on the ground. When I came to I was being placed into an ambulance they had sent for. I opened my eyes and saw the one face I was hoping to find in that little town, that of Don Vaughan, my high school English teacher. All I remember before I passed out again were his words: "It's okay, Ron, I'll take care of you. Don't worry about anything."

Since 1949 Don had always been there for several of the kids from the home, and I was one of "his boys." That night he took me into his home because he had already taken me into his heart. I had no future and no hope. But he took care of me for a week, and then he found a room for me on the third floor of an old farm house, provided some money for me to get settled, found me a job after school at a local grocery store, and helped me finish my senior year of high school. He was there when I graduated from high school on a Friday night, and he was there the next day when I got on a train to go to the Korean war. Here was one man, whom I found out years later was a Christian, who opened his heart and home not only to me but to many other "sick" young men and women, and offered love, support, encouragement, and healing year in and year out. He was a godly man who truly understood what the apostle Paul meant when he encouraged the saints in Rome to "practice hospitality" (Romans 12:13). This wonderful "lover of strangers" is now lying on his sick bed a few houses away from the very office where it all began for me so long ago. I picked up the phone and called him Monday, and the first thing he said was, "Ron! How's one of my boys?"

As we turn to Luke 14:1-24, we find a hospitable Pharisee inviting Jesus into his home for a Sabbath luncheon. Now, hospitality is one of the gifts that God has placed into our hearts because hospitality is in his heart. The original meaning of hospitality is to be a "lover of strangers." We can see how, since the days after the fall of Adam, all of us have become strangers to God because of our sin. But God, who is rich in mercy and grace, was willing to reach out in love to all of us who were strangers by sending his Son Jesus Christ to die for our sins. He declares each and every one of us who is willing to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and Savior, no longer strangers but sons and daughters of God, and invites us to recline at table with him forever. In Luke 14 we will see our Lord use this luncheon invitation to lead his host and the guests into the spiritual realities of true hospitality as demonstrated by God the Father and his Son to both the Jews and the Gentiles. The first spiritual lesson concerning true hospitality is to...

I. Provide opportunities for healing

Luke 14:1-6

And it came about when He went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, that 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 one 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.

Now Jesus was still in the district of Perea on the east side of the Jordan. It was once again a Sabbath. There is no mention of our Lord's attending a synagogue service, but somehow after the synagogue service our Lord was invited into the house of a leading Pharisee for the Sabbath luncheon. This leading Pharisee may have been a member of Israel's supreme court, which might explain the need for a hidden agenda, as he and the other scribes and Pharisees were "watching Him closely," which has the sense in the original language of watching with evil intent.

This is the seventh time in the gospels that our Lord has come into conflict with the Pharisees over what one could or could not do on the Sabbath. Now besides Jesus, some scribes and Pharisees and this man who was suffering from dropsy were invited to Sabbath lunch. It appears that this man was placed in front of Jesus so that the Pharisees and scribes could watch what he would do on the Sabbath. The Lord and everyone else understood that dropsy would eventually be fatal if the buildup of body fluids around the heart and lungs was not stopped. Once again we get a picture of the fatal spiritual condition of the nation of Israel in this man's physical condition. We can also see the hardened hearts of the religious leaders, the shepherds of Israel, whom we might have expected to say to our Lord, "Jesus, we have a dear man in our community who is suffering terribly with dropsy, and we all know it's just a matter of time before he will die. We have prayed for him and our best medical people have tried to help him, but all to no avail. We have heard of your love and mercy toward the sick, and we were hoping that if we brought him to this luncheon you might be moved to heal him, to the glory of God." But instead they placed this sick man in front of Jesus, setting Jesus up in the hope that he would do something to break the Sabbath.

Jesus looked at the Pharisees and scribes and, knowing their hearts, asked them a question before they could speak. "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" For once again the Jewish leadership was sticking to the letter of the law rather than the spirit of the Law. It was true that one was not to work on the Sabbath, for if he did he would be accused of lawbreaking, resulting in death by stoning (see Exodus 20:11; 31:15). But over and over again our Lord was seeking to teach the people that the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. In the early history of Israel the Sabbath was designed by God so his people would experience rest, resulting in a deep inner joy. It was a foretaste of that spiritual resting from all work that the people of God would one day attain in Christ. Our Lord teaches us in Hebrews 3-4 to strive, to work hard at entering our Sabbath rest. What does he mean? We're to work hard to stop depending on ourselves to accomplish what God wants us to accomplish in this community. We're to work hard at depending on Jesus Christ, resting from our labor so God can work in and through us.

In the days of Jesus, however, the Sabbath observance had become largely external and formal, and there was more concern for the letter of the law than for the needs of humanity. Jesus had a desire to walk before his Father and keep the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses never said you couldn't heal someone who was sick on the Sabbath. Although Jesus upheld the authority and validity of the Law of Moses, his emphasis was not on its external observance, but on the spontaneous performance of the will of God that formed the basis of the Law. His clashes with the religious leadership came over the 39 principles they had added, the "traditions of men."

"But they kept silent. And He took hold of him [the man with dropsy], and healed him, and sent him away. And He said to them, 'Which one 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." Our loving and merciful Lord evaluated the immediate situation: He saw the Pharisees' hearts, he knew it was the Sabbath, and he looked at

the sick "stranger" before him. The man's life hung in the balance, and there was no reason to wait another day before offering him physical and hopefully spiritual healing. He reached out with a heart of compassion and healed him immediately, with no comment, and sent him away. It was an amazing moment. Was there rejoicing? Not from the Pharisees who were present.

Once again our Lord was seeking to demonstrate to the nation of Israel how spiritually sick they were, almost unto death, and how willing he still was to offer them spiritual healing, and to do it quickly. He then challenged the religious community with the reality that the Law of Moses did not forbid them from saving their sons or oxen from a fatal death if they fell down a well on a Sabbath day, but rather they would immediately pull them out. So our Lord, upon seeing the immediate physical danger of the sick man before him, healed him quickly without breaking the Sabbath. And the Pharisees did not rejoice; they were speechless. You see, when Jesus came to the luncheon, he came to offer life. But they had set up a hidden agenda to try to trap him, using the food as a distraction. Now, God does not call us as Christians to open our homes and our hearts with a hidden agenda. All of you have been to homes-I have-where they give you a fortune cookie with a Bible verse in it or something. You kind of wonder, "What is going on here?" especially if your hosts haven't built a relationship with you. They're just doing their thing, but their heart isn't in it.

One woman was trying to lead her husband to the Lord. She called me and told me her husband had left her. When I asked her why, she told me she had Bible verses all over the refrigerator door, Christian songs playing all the time, and Bible verses attached to all the food inside the refrigerator. She put tracts in his lunch and a tract on his car window in the morning. She had a Bible on his side of the bed and a Bible on her side. I said, "If I were your husband, I would have left you long ago! That's harassment!" She was truly harassing her husband with Jesus. She said, "What should I do?" I told her, "Go get a grocery bag and put all that paraphernalia in it, then ask God to forgive you. Ask him to give you a heart for your husband, for who he is just as a human being." To make a long story short, she did that, and I had the joy of seeing him come into the kingdom. She was there, because she really did love him when all the silliness was over.

When I was a young pastor over at Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church, the Lord began blessing our high school ministry, which was very small. We gathered together a staff that loved kids and loved Jesus. It started to grow and kept blossoming, and we ourselves didn't know what was going on; no one was taking any credit for it. Our small group became two hundred fifty or three hundred kids who attended our Sunday morning "Dialog" in the church gym. This was before the Jesus movement, and you just didn't hear about those kinds of things in 1969. It wasn't long before other Presbyterian ministers in our area heard about this growing ministry, and invitations were offered to our staff to share with them what the Lord was doing among us. One day I was asked to attend a lunch with my senior pastor and a senior pastor from another church. I thought we were meeting to have some fellowship among kindred spirits over a meal. But it became clear that the other pastor had a hidden agenda. He began to talk with my boss about our youth ministry. We quickly found out that he was not rejoicing with us about the spiritual healing and maturing that was happening among the teenagers; jealousy and anger started showing through when he told us he thought it wasn't fair for our church to have so many young people. He wanted my boss to see if they could arrange to have a set of buses come by our church each Sunday morning and take half of our kids to his church. He was trying to figure out how to get in on a good thing without a relationship. He wanted the numbers, but he didn't want to love them. Talk about a hidden agenda!

That's why we have to be very careful in our hearts when we offer hospitality, that it's pure. We need to pray that the Lord will use it to his honor and glory, and we'll leave all the silly tricks out of the conversation and the meals. We need to watch every meal very carefully to see who's who and what's going on, and to be led by the Spirit on how to be sensitive, good hosts so that men and women who come into our homes sick leave healed. Our Lord wants us as his spiritual children to be lovers of strangers, expressing our love in such a way that they can become spiritually healed, not misused by a hidden agenda or some evil plot.

The second spiritual lesson we find is...

II. When you are a guest, do not exalt yourself

Luke 14:7-11

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; saying to them, "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."

In the culture of the Middle East at that time (and still the case today), when a family hosted a great banquet or a wedding feast, they would have the servants set up round tables for the meal. Cushions were set up in a U-shape around three sides of the table so that three people could recline at each table. The place of honor was in the center of each U-shape, the next highest to the left, and the last to the right. So in any given feast the host might have as many places of honor as tables set up. Everyone knew what seat was the place of honor among the three seats. Normally all the guests would stand around until the host came in and pointed out who was to sit in the places of honor.

It is interesting that our Lord again used a feast to demonstrate a spiritual truth. In the account of the banquet given in Luke 13:29-30, our Lord taught the people that only those who place their faith in him as their Messiah and Savior would eat with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the prophets, and also the Gentiles. And in that story the Lord taught that "some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last." Now in this story he is about to teach them the spiritual principle that "everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted."

We don't know how many people were in the Pharisee's home that Sabbath afternoon, but we do know that they did not wait for the word from the host, but almost rushed to the tables to take the places of honor. Our Lord may have been thinking of Proverbs 25:6-7: "Do not claim honor in the presence of the king, and do not stand in the place of great men; for it is better that it be said to you, 'Come up here, than that you should be put lower in the presence of the prince, whom your eyes have seen.'" The host and the other people could not see that this man Jesus really was the King of the universe, for he was clothed in the robes of a servant, waiting for the host to tell him where to sit.

The apostle Paul would write some 30 years after our Lord's resurrection, "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...." (Philippians 2:3-9.) Our Lord wanted to use this parable to demonstrate that these spiritual leaders of Israel were not interested in humbling themselves. They were interested only in their own power, position, and pride. So they rushed to the places of honor; they didn't ask the host where to sit, but just took what they each thought was their rightful place, and ended up fighting over the places of honor. They weren't shepherding the sick community; they were working very hard to get to undeserved honor.

I hope you never get to see the early tapes of my first few years at PBC! I don't want anybody to know how bad it was when I first arrived. Ray Stedman summed them up for me one day in a loving rebuke when he said,

"Ritchie, why do you always seem to want to be the baby at every dedication, the bride at every wedding, and the corpse at every funeral?"

That was rather to the point, and I didn't know what to do about it. I asked the Lord to deal with me concerning my pride, which drove me to want to sit at undeserved places of honor. Shortly after that rebuke, I found myself waiting at a red light at the corner of Middlefield and Page Mill late one Thursday night after a long elders' meeting. I asked the Lord whether he was trying to say something to me through Ray. The Lord placed a verse on my heart from 1 Peter 5:5-7:

"You younger men...be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you."

Part of the problem when we're tempted to be proud is that we don't believe God is going to take care of us, so we have to take care of ourselves. This passage says to cast it all on him, and he will take care of us. If you're wrapped in robes of humility it means you're resting in Christ-back to the Sabbath rest. I'm not a young man anymore, but the truth of this verse still grips my heart and pulls me into line when I am tempted to at least become the "corpse at every funeral" rather than just my own.

Our loving Lord is encouraging his spiritual children to reflect his character by becoming lovers of strangers, inviting these strangers into our hearts and homes with the hope that our time with them might provide some emotional or spiritual healing. He also wants us to live our lives in humility before him rather than spending time seeking to exalt ourselves to undeserved places of honor. When we are invited to others' homes and enter in an attitude of humility, men and women can approach us without feeling intimidated, and they can find out who we are so that there's life and conversation. And in that conversation there may be great opportunity to share the truth of Jesus Christ, just by our life and the way we treat them. It can open doors so you can turn around and invite them to your home. Now the third principle Jesus offers the host of this luncheon is....

III. Review your guest list

Luke 14:12-14

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 [only] your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and repayment come to you. 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."

As our Lord looked around Him He could see that most of the people at the luncheon seemed to be kinfolk, friends, or rich neighbors of the host, all of whom sometime in the future could repay this present luncheon by having a party themselves and inviting all the same people. They all knew each other and were on the same plane socially. The makeup of the party would be the same, only the host would change. Our Lord saw that the motive of the host's heart was one of selfishness, security, and exclusiveness. In reality the luncheon was a picture of what sort of ministry the spiritual leaders were conducting among the people of God in Israel: exclusive, self-promoting, and immediately rewarding. But the lifestyle he wanted them to have would set up a picture of how to have a ministry the way he did. He walked among the rich as well as the poor, among those who were of reputation as well as those without reputation. It seems as if he constantly had people from both spheres, both rich and poor, come to him and feel very comfortable with him. But the wrong way to give a party is to have a very select list.

So he said, "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." This principle would certainly challenge the motives of their hearts, as it might our own. Our immediate temptation might be to say, "But Lord, those kind of people will never be able to invite us to their house for a party. And Lord, those kind of people are not really our kind of people; they have no manners, no

social graces, no business cards and contacts, no clean clothes. Lord, get serious, that kind of party would be a waste of time and energy in this day and age." But our Lord's challenge to this Pharisee was really a summary of his whole life and ministry. Remember in the beginning of his ministry he quoted Isaiah 61 in the synagogue of Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord." (Luke 4:18-19.)

The Young Couples Class used our house last night for a get-together of about about sixty people. The Young Couples Class always brings their kids, lots of them! And the kids know very few rules: "Can I jump in the hot tub before we take off the cover?" "Can I go upstairs and play with your computer?" "Can we swing from the chandelier?" I was all over the place. As I mentally looked over the list last night, out of all those people who were in our house I think there were only two who could ever invite us to their home. All the rest were still struggling; they'll probably never be able to repay in like manner, at least while I'm on this earth! That's the right way to give a party, though. It was so much fun, so much joy, so pleasurable-all the babies, all the different kinds of people from all walks of life.

On the other hand, Friday night we were with some friends talking about how we had been at a party where we were absolutely dead mackerels. We were not on the normal guest list, and the host slipped us in. Everybody knew that we were slipped in, and it was just as if we were invisible for four hours. Have you ever been invisible for four hours? You eat your pâté. They talk about everything that you don't know anything about, and they make sure you don't know. They talk about all the people you don't know, and you have nothing to say. No one wants to talk to you, because you're not on their list and you aren't getting on their list.

The Lord wants us to have a love for strangers, as we saw reflected in his own ministry, regardless of their physical or financial condition. What the Lord wants us to see is the spiritual condition of all those strangers around us. Some of them are spiritually bankrupt and crippled by some addiction or legalism, others are lame because of some sin in the past or present, and then there are those who are spiritually blind to the truth of God. It may not seem very rewarding to reach out to those kinds of people on this earth, but our Lord promised those who are willing to trust him and to live as he lived on earth that there are two rewards: You will be blessed with a sense of wholeness, peace, and joy; you feel right about who you are and who you're with as you love and minister among the strangers of this world. And then because you have placed your faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you will be rewarded by God at the resurrection of the righteous.

I was recently made aware of a situation in which a young woman was having a very difficult physical problem. She needed to move out of her living situation in order to regain her health. I called up a couple who are part of this spiritual family and asked them if they would check out this situation and give me some suggestions as to who might be able to offer her a spare room in their home for a few months until she could get back on her feet. After a couple of days I received a phone call from this couple who had taken the time to interview the woman and pray about the situation. They had finally decided that they were willing to become lovers of this stranger. She now lives with them, and we can all join with them in prayer that this woman will be physically and spiritually healed.

Our loving Lord is encouraging his spiritual children to reflect his character by becoming lovers of strangers, toward the end of providing some emotional or spiritual healing. He wants us to live our lives in humility before him rather than spending time seeking to exalt ourselves to undeserved places of honor. And now we have been called to review our guest list to make sure we include not only our family and friends, but also the physically and spiritually handicapped. Finally, our Lord will offer the host of this luncheon a fourth spiritual principle:

IV. Prepare to be slighted

Luke 14:15-24

And when one of those who were reclining at the table with Him heard this, he said to Him, "Blessed is everyone who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!" But He said to him, "A certain man was giving a big dinner, and he invited many; and at the dinner hour he sent his

slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first one said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused.' And another one said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused.' And another one said, 'I have married a wife, and for that reason I cannot come.' And the slave came back and reported this to his master. Then the head of the household became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' And the slave said, 'Master, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.'"

The Jewish people had the prevailing idea that once the Messiah arrived and set up his kingdom, they would all participate in a continuous banquet (see Isaiah 25:6-9). Our Lord picked up on that statement and began to teach them a parable: The man was the Lord God, who for some 1500 years had made plans to have a great dinner for the Jewish nation. So he sent out invitations in advance for many in the nation to come to the banquet he was preparing. Finally the day came when the meal in the kingdom of God was ready, so he sent out his servants to summon all those who were invited, "Come, for everything is ready," symbolizing the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus. This was the feast in which all from the Jewish nation who had placed their faith in God and his Son Jesus would recline at table with Abraham and his spiritual seed. But each and every one who was invited found some excuse not to come. The Lord gave a party for Israel, and very few came! They were so busy with the cares of this world, the burden of riches, and the pleasures of life that they refused to leave them for the banquet they had been invited to in advance. The bottom line was that they did not like him and treated him with indifference, contempt, and deceit.

"And the slave came back and reported this to his master. Then the head of the household became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame.'" The Lord had the party anyway. This is a beautiful picture of the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ as he reached out to the spiritually handicapped within the nation of Israel and invited them to come into the kingdom of God. But once the slave brought all of them in there was still room for more, and so they went out into the highways and along the hedges and compelled the Gentiles to come in, that his house might be filled. In this statement we find once again in the heart of God his love for the estranged. We also see the terrible judgment placed on all in the nation of Israel at that time who had received the invitation but refused to come. They would not get a second invitation.

Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Hospitality would be a great title for a book if one were called to put on numerous dinner parties. But as we can see now from Luke 14, our Lord wanted us to understand that the true meaning of hospitality is becoming, by his power, love and grace, lovers of strangers with a view toward their physical, emotional, and spiritual wholeness.

Our Lord used this luncheon meal to show the Jewish nation through the man with dropsy how spiritually sick they were and how willing he was to heal them if they would humble themselves and accept him as their Messiah. Some of the Jews accepted him as their Messiah, but most rejected the invitation as well as the Host and his Son. So our wonderful Lord and lover of strangers turned to the Gentiles, and as many as received him as their Lord and Savior, he gave the gift of eternal life and a ministry of reconciliation.

That little English teacher a long time ago said, "Ron, I'll take care of you. Don't worry about anything, you're coming to my house." For almost forty years now we've had this relationship, and just recently it's been growing deeper and deeper. (This is a man who married but never had children.) I told him Monday, "You know, Don, every time I call you, I know your name is Don, but why do I want to say Papa?" There was a long silence on the phone. Then he said, "Thank you, son." I was a stranger, an alien, homeless, and he brought me in and made me a son, I'll recline at table forever with the Lord because of him.

The good news is that in this generation our risen Lord is still a lover of strangers, Jews and Gentiles alike. You may be at this moment estranged from God, but he will welcome you to his banquet of eternal life if you

will just accept his invitation of love and forgiveness as expressed in the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus.

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