

Setting the Table, Part 2: Christian Hospitality

Victory Life Church, Central — Sunday, September 15, 2024

Introduction

Christ has welcomed us, all of us, every part of us, to His table. The key is that you have to heed the invitation, you must come to His table. For some it's shame that keeps them from coming to the table of hospitality, for others it's self-righteousness (as represented by the two different brothers in Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son). Jesus reveals God's incredible mercy and love, keeping an open seat with an open invitation to the table of hospitality.

The hospitality of Jesus sets the table for people to encounter God's transformative love.

The point of Jesus' hospitality wasn't just a meal, it was that in his presence, there was an encounter with God's love. God's love has transformative power. Now those who have heeded the invitation and have been transformed by God's love are invited to welcome others with the same level of welcome and hospitality that transformed us.

Romans 15:7 (ESV) Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

You heeded the invitation to an open seat at Jesus' table of hospitality and have experienced God's transformative love, now we are invited to set a table and invite others in the same way. John Mark Comer defines hospitality like this:

"Expressing the welcome of God the Father to all through tangible acts of love, namely through giving food, shelter, and relationship." ~ John Mark Comer

Christian Hospitality is setting the table for others to encounter Jesus.

The foundation of all Christian Hospitality is God's love moving toward us in Christ Jesus. The way in which we live this out is setting a table, creating a space, for others to encounter Jesus. Hospitality, and all ministry in general, is not about you at all, it's about Jesus. We have no power to transform anyone. Jesus does the ministry and the transforming. Hospitality is just setting the table, creating a space, Jesus does the ministry.

Jesus does the Ministry

Jesus is the only one with the power to transform. We simply set the table. The story of Jesus' final meal with His disciples embodies this idea well. John 13 gives a reflection on a powerful moment Jesus shares with His disciples during the Passover meal. When they were finishing dinner, Luke's gospel captures that a fight had arisen amongst the disciples as to who was the greatest among them. Jesus lovingly corrects them with a new perspective, contrasting the way the world sees leadership versus the way leadership will be lived out in His kingdom. He concludes with this statement:

Luke 22:26b–27 (ESV) 26 ...let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. 27 For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.

Pause Luke's account and look at John's account:

John 13:1–5 (ESV) 1 Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. 2 During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, 3 Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, 4 rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. 5 Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

This is a radical moment. Jesus is serving His disciples in ways that broke their categories. He had shared the meal with them, now He takes it a step further and goes to the lowest position and washes their feet. Keep in mind the first few verses, He knew He was about to suffer and die, He knew He had supreme authority over all; He knew Peter would betray Him, that Judas would betray Him, and that the rest of them would abandon Him. Yet he bends down and washes their feet anyway. This is the picture of true Christian hospitality, the table is set and Jesus serves in a way that transforms us by His love.

John 13:12–15 (ESV) 12 When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? 13 You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. 14 If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. 15 For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.

Jesus says that in the same we has welcomed, loved, and served, so we are to welcome, love, and serve. But we have to keep this in mind: Jesus does the ministry, we set the table. It was Jesus leading the meal and washing the feet, but someone poured the water, someone set the table for dinner. If we are to practice hospitality well, we must keep this straight. We have no power to transform people, Jesus' love does. We set the table, we "pour the water," we serve, we show love, Jesus is doing the real ministry.

We practice hospitality by setting the table, serving, and loving, Jesus transforms.

This may seem subtle, but it is important. As followers of Jesus, we are His representatives and His "body." What we do, we do as an extension of and on behalf of Him. We must not think too high (or too low) of ourselves. We are simply vessels of Jesus' power and love.

Hospitality is not a subtle trick of manipulation, but a genuine expression of God's transformative love.

Rosaria Butterfield Story¹

An inspiring story of the transformation of Jesus through Christian hospitality is the story of Rosaria Butterfield, whose life was radically transformed through the power of an open seat at a table of hospitality and genuine friendship.

In the early 1990s, Rosaria Butterfield was a tenured professor of English and Women's Studies at Syracuse University, deeply immersed in feminism and LGBTQ+ advocacy. Her worldview was deeply rooted in secular humanism and social justice. During this time, she wrote a critical op-ed piece in 1997 about the Promise Keepers, a Christian men's movement, attacking what she called, "the unholy trinity of Jesus, Republican politics, and patriarchy." Her article was sharply critical; she is incredibly brilliant, skeptical, and thought movements like this was all that was wrong with our culture.

However, in an unexpected turn of events, in response to her op-ed, she received a letter from Ken Smith, the pastor of the Syracuse Reformed Presbyterian Church, and his wife, Floy. And she was adamant about reading all her mail, especially her hate mail. Instead of responding with hostility or debate, they asked good questions and invited Rosaria to dinner. This invitation marked the beginning of an unexpected journey.

Rosaria initially accepted the invitation out of curiosity and a desire to understand the people she had criticized, considering Ken and Floy her unpaid research assistants. What began as an intellectual pursuit soon turned into something much more profound. Over the next several months, Ken and Floy Smith welcomed her into their home regularly, especially on "the Lord's Day," engaging in conversations that were both intellectually stimulating and deeply personal. Their hospitality was characterized by sincere openness and genuine love, which stood in stark contrast to her previous experiences with Christians.

Throughout 1997 and 1998, Rosaria continued to visit the Smiths, gradually forming a deep connection with them. They did not pressure her to convert, nor did they invite her to church, but instead treated her with respect and kindness, showing her the practical embodiment of the love they spoke about. Through their friendship, Rosaria encountered the Gospel in a new and compelling way. She was especially drawn to the singing of the Psalms in four-part harmony by these musically literate Presbyterians.

In 1999, through the persistent hospitality of Ken and Floy, the drawing of the Holy Spirit, and the presence and love of Jesus within this Christian community, Rosaria Butterfield came to embrace Jesus personally. Her conversion was the result of the transformative power of authentic Christian love and community, rather than a single persuasive argument.

Rosaria's story illustrates the profound impact that Christian hospitality has on people, especially those far from God. It demonstrates how extending open hearts and genuine friendship can create spaces where transformation flourishes.

Now, Rosaria and her husband Kent, also a pastor, alongside their whole family, give their lives away to their neighbors in what she calls "radically ordinary hospitality."

"Radically ordinary hospitality — those who live it see strangers as neighbors and neighbors as family of God. They recoil at reducing a person to a category or a label. They

see God's image reflected in the eyes of every human being on earth.... Those who live out radically ordinary hospitality see their homes not as theirs at all but as God's gift to use for the furtherance of His kingdom. They open doors; they seek out the underprivileged; they know that the gospel comes with a house key."² ~ Rosaria Butterfield

Everything in our life is a gracious gift from a generous God. In expressing the love of Jesus to people, we see all that we have as an opportunity to show that love in tangible ways. Maybe it's not opening your home every night of the week for people who hate you. But just because it might not look exactly what Ken and Floy did for Rosaria, or what Rosaria and her husband now do for their neighbors, doesn't mean we excuse ourselves from the call toward being hospitable.

Integration

Romans 12:13b (NLT) Always be eager to practice hospitality.

Christian Hospitality is setting the table for others to encounter Jesus.

"Hospitality means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people but to offer them space where change can take place."³ ~ Henri Nouwen

Christian Hospitality is creating a space for others to encounter Jesus.

¹ Rosaria Butterfield tells her conversion story throughout her book, "The Gospel Comes with a House Key," but a more brief version she wrote in this article: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/2013/02/my-train-wreck-conversion/>

² Butterfield, Rosaria Champagne. *The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World* (p. 11). Crossway. Kindle Edition.

³ Henri Nouwen on Hospitality — <https://henrinouwen.org/meditations/hospitality-2/>