

# Home

## Week 3: Home in the Hands of a Loving God May 7, 2017

I want to take you back to the first time I heard someone teach on hospitality as a part of God's mission, just in case you are having similar thoughts today as I did back then. It was 2009 or so (I'm bad with dates), it was the very early days of Midtown, and we went on a Family Vacation trip, which was a weekend away with all our members. We would go to these ratty camps in the middle of nowhere because we were dirt poor and spend a weekend hanging out and getting equipped by our pastors.

And in one of these weekends, Adam Gibson taught on hospitality. And when I realized he was going to teach on hospitality all weekend, I was a little bit surprised. I was like, "Huh? We're going to talk about *this* all weekend?" And the reason I was so caught off guard by it was I'd never really heard anyone talk about hospitality as a serious spiritual issue. I viewed myself as a missionary because that was part of our vision statement as a church from the beginning: to be a Jesus-centered family on mission with Him. But when I thought of my identity as a missionary I thought almost exclusively about things that happened *outside* of my home. I thought about making disciples at LifeGroup or being a missionary at my job or going to serve the homeless at a shelter or soup kitchen. I had this total disconnect in my brain between the concept of hospitality and my mission as a Christian, such that the idea felt entirely new to me. What I thought about my home was that it was just that--home. If anything, it was a refuge from any amount of mission I was involved in.

And now, looking back at that trip all those years ago and my initial response to Adam's teaching, I realize just how much I had missed the boat. God has taught me over the past several years just how impactful and meaningful the practice of hospitality is to our mission as Christians. And today I want to share a little bit of what God has taught me in hopes that it would help you as well. Go ahead and turn in your Bibles to Romans 15:1-3,7.

### Romans 15:1-3

We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me."

In these verses, Paul is giving a vision for what Christian maturity looks like. He starts off by saying that we who are strong have an obligation to bear with the weak and not please ourselves. He says our motivation is that Christ didn't live to please Himself, but He willingly endured hardship for the benefit of others. And that as we are continually formed into the likeness of Jesus, the effect on our souls will be that we will learn not to please ourselves, or just to do what we want all the time.

This stands out to me immediately, because where is the place where you have the most ability to just do whatever you want to? Your home, right? It's the place where you get to do you. You're the boss, no one can tell you what to do. It's the one place where we can control everything--from the temperature and what channel the TV is on all the way to who lives there and who visits. No other place in our lives is quite like this, where we have such ability to do what we want.

And Paul says that Christian maturity will cause us to more and more not live to please ourselves. Even in our homes. Instead we will do what verse 2 says, "Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up." This posture of pleasing and serving others instead of self will permeate every area of our lives as we follow Christ's example. Considering this, it's not surprising how Paul lands this idea in verse 7:

**Romans 15:7**

Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.

Paul ends this train of thought by saying “Therefore,” which means “in light of all this” ... “Welcome one another as Christ welcomed you, for the glory of God.” This is a direct tie between the gospel and a posture of hospitality. Ultimately, Christian hospitality is welcoming others as Christ welcomed you. [Hospitality = welcoming others as Christ welcomed you]. If we are a people who have been welcomed in by God, we will become a people who are welcoming to others.

What this means is that our homes are designed to be a weapon for the gospel. Our homes are not intended just for our self-gratification, they are the primary place where we get to act out the gospel of Jesus and display a welcoming God. They aren’t meant to be a temple solely for you to unwind and unplug. They can still be a refuge for you, but also opened as a spiritual refuge for others.

As I prepped for this sermon, I realized that my favorite stories from our church over the years are stories about how our people have applied this. There was a homeless immigrant from Mexico named Luis who was around our church for years, and he got connected because some college students were walking through Finlay Park and stopped to talk to him because he was drinking rubbing alcohol. They invited him to hang out with them, and that was just the first time out of many that our people invited him into their life. He started coming to Gatherings and he’d stop and talk to people in his broken English. People started inviting him over for dinner, some guys invited him into their LifeGroup and eventually we had a few families who ended up inviting him to live with them. One of his favorite things to say was, “You guys caught the wrong Mexican...”

Eventually some of our members found an apartment that he could afford, and we all moved him in and had a huge housewarming party. As he was opening all his gifts and planning where he would put them in his apartment, he started getting teary-eyed and he said, “I can’t wait to start having people over here.” The hospitality that others had shown him was contagious.

Through our people welcoming Luis as Christ welcomed them, Luis met Jesus, got baptized and became an integral part of our family. He became a very dear friend of mine, and for the several years he lived in Columbia Luis was one of the most beloved members of our church. People loved him and he very endearingly called us his family. And as I think about his story, what I realize is that all the amazing things that happened with Luis would never have happened if our people--starting with that group of college students--wouldn’t have welcomed Luis into their lives like Christ welcomed them.

What I’ve learned from stories like Luis’s and many others is that our homes are the one of the most powerful and underutilized tools for the gospel that I know of. Using our homes to invite people into our lives is an incredible way to display the welcome of God and create a sense of home for others. And for the rest of today I want to give you some insights I’ve learned through practicing hospitality for the last eight years.

**1. Hospitality is a command, not a suggestion.**

Something many of us don’t fully realize is that we are commanded in Scripture to live hospitable lives in light of the gospel. I think a lot of us think about this idea more in the “optional” category. Like, “if this fits in your life” or, “if your personality lends itself well to this,” then maybe you should do it. The Bible doesn’t talk about it like that though. What we just read in Romans 15:7 isn’t optional language, “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you.” That’s a command. And it’s all over the Bible:

**Leviticus 19:33-34**

When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

This is an Old Testament example of the gospel story that grounds our hospitality to others in the fact that we once were strangers to God, so now we love those who are still strangers to God.

**1 Peter 4:9**

Show hospitality to one another without grumbling.

This is just one of the New Testament commands that command us to practice hospitality. The book of Titus lists out qualifications for a pastor, and it names being hospitable as a requirement for the job. That speaks volumes, because pastors are supposed to be leading the way in representing God here on Earth. What that must mean is that hospitality is such an integral part of imaging God that He says if you aren't welcoming others as Christ has welcomed you, you're fired. Because you're lying about God.

[To be an inhospitable Christian is to lie about God.] Have you ever thought about that before? God says the way His people live is a living reflection of who He is, and He doesn't want His people to lie about who He is. That's why hospitality is a command, not a suggestion.

**2. You won't drift toward a hospitable life.**

**Romans 12:13**

Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Paul chooses the words, "seek to show hospitality" carefully, because if this is ever to become a lifestyle for you it will have to be a very intentional shift. It won't happen on accident. You won't just go to your house or apartment one night and find your non-Christian neighbors and co-workers there and be like, "Hey, what are you guys doing here?" If you do nothing you will never end up here. People in our culture drift toward isolation and separation, not toward relationship and hospitality.

After the weekend trip I mentioned earlier, my wife and I talked about hospitality a good bit. We liked what Adam taught and thought it could be a great way for us to leverage our home for mission. But for a long time, we never did anything about it. We always felt too busy, and on top of that, we just really liked our house being our house. My wife and I both are introverts to the nth degree, so the idea of more intentionally opening our home to others wasn't the most appealing thing in the world at first.

We got into it in a strange way. Long story short, I ran into this nice lady who was broken down on the side of the road and found out she was homeless and living in her car with her Shih-Tzu. So, we got her car towed and on the way, there she told me that recently they had gotten so desperate for food that she found a box of frozen bacon in a dumpster behind a restaurant, and her and her dog sat in her car and ate frozen bacon for dinner.

And when I heard that story, it's like I didn't even think about it, but I was so overwhelmed at the idea of her eating frozen bacon in her car that I just said, "Okay you can come live with us for a while." I don't even think I asked my wife, I just brought her home with me. We had been thinking about hospitality and this seemed like a perfect opportunity, albeit a big one.

And here's where the story gets good. That first night she stayed with us, we had dinner to talk about what our plan was going to be with her living there, how she could work toward sustainability, all that. I naturally asked her if she had any sort of job, and she said, "Yes, I'm a life coach." I choked on my food and said, "Excuse me?" She explained that people would find her through this website and pay her to do life-coaching

for them over the phone. I don't even remember what I said next. Mainly because I was so overwhelmed by the delicious irony of a professional life coach living in a car with her dog and eating frozen bacon.

And sure enough, she was. We lived in a tiny 1100 sq. feet house off North Main St that was about 80 years old, and she would go in her bedroom and take her calls, and we could hear every word of it because our house was so old and small. It was just utterly baffling. But she was very well-spoken and gave off a good front. I wish I could find those people and sit down with them and just say, "Boy, do I have a story for you!!"

She lived with us for several weeks and stayed with another couple from our church for a while, and then one day she went somewhere and didn't come back home. Like, at all. And she left her dog at home, which was the very last thing in the world she would have done. So, we knew something was wrong. A few days later we get a phone call, and find out she's in jail. She wasn't getting out anytime soon, so we ended up having to give her dog away to someone on Craigslist. I guess I should have added another point here called "It doesn't always end well."

Anyways, our first big foray into this idea didn't end super great, but it does make a fun story. After that, we decided to start with something a little simpler might be a good idea. So, we sat down and looked at our schedules, and we discovered that although it always felt like we were too busy to invite people over consistently, we did have Tuesday nights free. So, we decided that Tuesday nights were going to be what we called "Neighbor Night."

The point of this was very simple: let's cook a little bit of extra food on Tuesday nights, whatever we were going to cook anyway, and let's invite someone over. We made it a priority to focus on non-Christians that we were building relationship with as much as possible, but also were open to anyone God put on our hearts or that it seemed helpful to have over. But as much as possible the purpose of this wasn't just, "Let's invite over people we're already good friends with," because that's what we'd naturally default to. We wanted it to be an intentional welcoming of people who may not know Jesus or people who could use a good welcome.

And I just can't tell you how helpful and fruitful this practice of Neighbor Night has been for us. It was a total game changer. We've had some of the most amazing conversations over simple meals in our homes, and we've seen God use these small and insignificant-seeming meals in incredible ways. And looking back I'm struck by the reality that none of that ever would have happened had we not made the decision that Tuesday nights were going to be used for that purpose. We would have just watched Netflix on Tuesday nights, because you don't drift toward leveraging your home for mission.

### 3. It's easier than it sounds.

If you feel any amount of pressure that opening your home for mission and hospitality would be cumbersome or overwhelming, I want to try to help you with that. I think a lot of people when they hear the word hospitality really think of party planning. They think of an ordeal. A lot of effort. Cleaning and cooking and presenting a good image and all that. And I want to free you up from that by telling you that hospitality is none of that. Hospitality is not entertaining, and it's not about image management. In fact, if you are trying to impress people you're going to point them to yourself and not Jesus. I love the way Paul says this in 1 Thessalonians 2:8:

#### **1 Thessalonians 2:8**

Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. (NIV)

Friends, there is a lot more power in sharing your real life with people than in sharing a prettied-up version of your life. What I'm talking about is not party planning, so don't fall for the trap of, "This sounds so

exhausting I could only do this twice a year.” When we have people over, we hardly ever clean up our house. We just kick the toys out of the way and say, “Come on in.”

We don’t cook anything difficult or fancy. We do tacos, or pasta, or pancakes. And we’re not even great cooks, but that doesn’t matter--what matters is the connections made over the food we’re eating. Also, when people do the whole “Do you want us to help you clean up?” thing a lot of people feel the pressure to be like “No, we got it!” That’s great if you want to do that, but we let them help. Because real people clean dishes together. And it makes it easier. This is not a performance. All of this works best when you just do exactly what you would have done anyway and invite other people into it.

I have a friend who if he ever invites someone over and they say, “Oh we’re already cooking tonight,” he’ll say, “Well just bring whatever food you are going to eat over here.” Because again, the point is relationship, not food.

Another friend who has young kids said that whenever they have people over and they need to start bedtime routine, do baths and stories and prayers and all that, people will often be like “Oh I guess I better get going then.” And (depending on the person), he’ll either invite them to stay and help with bedtime routine, or he’ll say, “Sorry, you ate our food so it’s mandatory that you stay and help get the kids in the bed.” Now, that might sound crazy to you, but I think that’s brilliant and here’s why: when my friend has non-Christians over for dinner, they get to witness what it looks like for a Christian family to disciple their kids.

They get to see something that they would otherwise never get to see: a real Christian family doing real life and praying to their God for their kids. Where else in the world will they get to see that, other than a Christian home? He said that many times he’s just sat there and smiled because here is this non-Christian person they had over for dinner reading the *Jesus Storybook Bible* to their kids at bedtime. That is some Jedi missionary stuff right there. That is beautiful.

A friend of mine told one of our pastors this past week about a family who was being hospitable to single people, and how that was helping them not feel alone and not feel like they need to get married right away. That’s a wonderful use of Christian hospitality, and that kind of stuff is even more important for Christians who are same-sex attracted and faithfully following Jesus in a way that may mean they never get married. Hospitality is such a simple way to look out for people--even people sitting around you as we speak. None of this is complicated stuff. You just must do exactly what you would have done anyway and invite other people into it.

For me, the most helpful thing about instituting Neighbor Night is that it took most of the planning out of it. For example, what used to happen is that I would meet someone and I’d be like, “Man I think it would be great for us to hang out with them.” I’d tell them the classic Southern line “Hey, we should get together sometime,” and then I’d try to remember to talk to my wife (“try” being the key word) with the intention of trying to find a good time that we could have them over. We’d get out our calendars and look, and most of the time somewhere in that process it would fizzle out and get dropped completely. Now, instead of that whole ordeal all I must say is, “What are you doing next Tuesday?” It’s infinitely easier.

So, people in the room like me who are not especially gifted at planning, I want to talk to you for a minute. If you never know what you’re going to do tonight until tonight gets here, that means you’ll probably never end up practicing hospitality. Life sloppiness can keep you from obeying this command, because opening your life and home to others takes a little bit of forethought. It doesn’t take much though--it might even be just one text a week saying, “Hey what are you doing next Tuesday?”

#### 4. Hospitality is a posture, not just an event.

Most of what we've talked about so far is using your house for mission, and that is incredibly important for the reasons we've already talked about. But hospitality is also bigger than having an open home--it's having an open, inviting, welcoming life. It's about being a hospitable person in light of the gospel, wherever you find yourself.

Christine Pohl wrote a book called *Making Room*, and in it she argued that hospitality is a "theology of recognition." She says that in a world where so many people feel brushed aside, forgotten about or invisible--hospitality is a very tangible way that we can communicate to others that we see them. The act of noticing someone and stopping to talk to them and caring about them enough to ask good questions--all of these things scream at people that, "I see you! And I see you because God sees you. He has not forgotten about you." Instead of being yet another person who walks by with our minds completely occupied and our eyes glued to our screens, we get the opportunity to see others.

I'm not naturally very good at this. I'm an introvert and a thinker, so I can easily get lost in my own thoughts and not notice other people. So, when we moved to Lexington two years ago, I decided that I needed to make some rules for myself to help me be more intentional and cultivate a lifestyle of hospitality. One such rule for myself I call The Always Rule. The reason I had to come up with this rule was because over the years I realized that when I see neighbors out and about in our neighborhood, that's my best chance to meet them start a relationship. But doesn't it just always seem like the wrong moment? Like, every time I see someone walking by that I don't know it's when I'm already doing something. I'm taking out the trash, or I'm getting my kids out of the car, or I'm unloading groceries. It always feels like the wrong time. So, what happens is I just politely wave, they keep walking, and if I ever see them again it will probably be months or even years.

So, when we moved to Lexington I created The Always Rule. And what the Always Rule means is simply that if I ever see a neighbor I haven't met yet, I have pre-decided that I'm going to stop whatever it is I'm doing and meet them and have a quick conversation. So, a few months after we moved in, I was walking to get my mail and I saw a guy walking his dog. As I'm walking through my yard it was like the Holy Spirit whispered, "The Always Rule..." into my ear and I was like, "God I'm busy right now. I must get the mail. And I'm thinking...about important stuff." And then He was like, "Always means always," and I was like, "Okay fine..."

So, I walked up to him and I say what I always say, "I don't think I've met you yet, what's your name?" And from there I meet my friend Stuart, and we have a pretty good conversation. I find out that he's a single dad and is struggling through some things. We exchange numbers and I tell him that we'd love to have him over sometime. A few weeks later we start texting, and I invited him to come over for a drink and hang out. And he said no. I don't know if the pastor thing scared him that much or what, and he eventually said that he'd rather meet up at the neighborhood park.

So, we meet up at the park and the first question Stuart asked me was, "That day when you bee-lined up to me to talk to me, why did you do that? No one ever does that." I just told him that we like to know our neighbors and I hadn't met him yet. Then he says, verbatim, "Oh. Well I don't know what I believe about God, and I don't know anything about Martha or Lucas or Mary, but it was just weird. I was having a really bad day and there you were, this pastor, bee-lining up to me to talk to me. I thought maybe God sent you to talk to me that day." And I don't know if I have ever more fully realized that even through our reluctant obedience, God can make other people feel seen in a beautiful way.

Fast forward a year and a half, and Stuart still has not stepped foot in my house. But we have hung out quite a lot. He's still not a Christian, but he's been coming to our Gatherings at Lexington for over a year now. And my favorite story about him is that at the end of our *Precious in His Sight* series a few months ago, Stuart took me to lunch one day. During lunch, he told me all about what he didn't like about the series--things he thought we didn't realize or cover well, etc. We had a good conversation about it all, but at the end of the lunch, I'm thinking he's probably not going to come around anymore. But then he pays for my lunch, and

with the change he hands me a \$50 bill and tells me to take my wife on a date with it because he knows we don't get out much. And then he hands me an envelope with a check for our church in it for \$5000. And then he says, "I'm thinking about joining a LifeGroup." So, hospitality is not always an event, and it doesn't always happen at your house. It's a posture of invitation and recognition everywhere you go. Even as you walk to the mailbox.

I was talking about this sermon with some of our pastors this week, and I was shocked by how many of them made the connection that part of the reason they are now a pastor is because an older Christian at their college invited them into their life. Through the simple gestures of ordinary Christian college students meeting freshman who are trying to figure out what type of people they are going to be and saying, "Hey do you want to hang out?" we now have several of our pastors. They were sitting there in our meeting and they were like, "Wow--that changed my entire life." That's amazing to me, and it shows that God uses hospitality disproportionately to what you might expect. These things that seem so small end up changing lives in extraordinary ways.

##### 5. People are desperate for this.

This quote from Phil Vischer, who created *Veggie Tales*, sums up the opportunity we have well:

###### **Phil Vischer**

I am growing increasingly convinced that if every one of these kids burning with passion to write a hit Christian song or make that hit Christian movie or start that hit Christian ministry to change the world would instead focus their passion on walking with God on a daily basis, the world would change.... Because the world learns about God not by watching Christian movies, but by watching Christians.

This is what the people around you need! They need to see the normal life of a normal Christian who loves and trusts Jesus. Your neighbor who thinks all Christians are hypocrites needs to see you put your kids to bed and pray to your God. Your co-worker who feels invisible needs to be taken aback by the fact that you invited them into your home and cared enough to ask good questions about their life. The people that God has put around you need to see that you are willing to sacrifice a couple hours of TV to provide a sense of belonging for them. They need have an entire conversation with you where you don't check your phone a single time. That might just be the most countercultural thing you can do today.

People who are inwardly decaying from loneliness even though they look fine on the outside need to be welcomed into your life, but they will probably never initiate relationship with you if you leave it up to them. I find that a lot of people I meet really do want more substantial and fulfilling relationships, they just aren't going to be the ones who initiate it, because most adults are horrible at making friends. And here's the thing: if you are a child of God who has all the affirmation and security of Jesus, that frees you up to take the initiative. You can risk a rejection. You can risk a turned down invite and move on about your day with zero harm done to the worth of your soul.

I saw a perfect example of this the other day when my family was at a local park. There was one other family there, and it was one of those situations where historically I'd just smile and pretend like no one else is there to avoid awkwardness. But I've been trying to apply the Always Rule even when I'm out in social situations like that, so I decided to talk to them.

So, I looked at their kids and said, "How old are they?" And that led into a conversation where I found out that they had just moved to Lexington from Dallas five weeks ago and they didn't know a single soul here. We talked for a bit and then my kids started losing their mind, so we were needing to head out, and it was one of those situations where it feels kind of weird to invite them to something based on the very limited interaction we'd had, but as we were saying goodbye I just said, "Hey, this might be a little weird, but I know you guys don't know many people yet...we are having a birthday party for our daughter Saturday at our house.

Would y'all want to come?" And before I could even get the words out of my mouth, the husband was like, "Yes! Yes, that would be awesome!"

So, long story short, they came to the birthday party, and now they are in our LifeGroup. And the other night after LifeGroup the guy came up to me and he said, "Man, I've never been a part of anything like this. This is incredible. I'm so grateful we met you guys that night in the park." And as he was telling me this, all I could think about was that if it were not for the Holy Spirit's conviction in my life, there's no way I would have initiated a conversation in the park that night. Because I used to never do that. I sat there and thought about how many mission opportunities I've missed out on because I chose not to initiate a relationship out of the fear that the person would think I'm weird. That they'd look at me like some mean kid in middle school and say, "No, that's weird. I'm not coming to your daughter's birthday party, I don't even know you."

The story of my new friend really makes me wonder: how much awesome ministry is left undone because of our fear of awkwardness? What is left undone in your neighborhood because of your fear of rejection? How many times do you and someone else walk past one another due to mutual insecurity, when a little bit of biblical hospitality might make something beautiful happen? If we could get over our fear of awkwardness, how could God use that to impact Columbia?

### **Conclusion**

So, here's what we're going to wrap up today. The band is going to come back up and play some reflection music for us, and since hospitality is a command for us as Christians, we're going to apply this to our lives. Because if you get to your car without planning for how to implement this into your life, chances are good that you'll forget about it or talk yourself out of it.

So, here's what I want all of us to come up with today: [A name & and night.] I want us all to come up with the name of someone we can have over or invite into our lives in the spirit of gospel-centered hospitality, and I want us to pick a night in the next week or two to do this. If you are with a spouse or roommate, I'd love for you to discuss this together. If you're sitting near someone in your LifeGroup and you'd love to team up with them to do this, feel free to discuss this with them and plan for how you will lean into practicing hospitality. I want all Christians in the room to have a name and a night in the next few minutes. If you want to go ahead and send an invite text, that's perfectly fine too. (Give a few mins)

Okay, hopefully by now all of us have a name and a night. The next thing I'd like to ask you is as you were thinking about this, what were the biggest hesitations that rose to your mind? What was your internal monologue like, and what reasons or excuses popped up to make you not want to do this?

If it was the fear of awkwardness or rejection, I'd love for you to pray and ask the Holy Spirit to help you with that. Ask Him to overwhelm you with the security and love you have in Jesus, such that it frees you to risk awkwardness for the sake of the gospel. Stop and pray that right now.

If it was fear because you feel like you might not know what to say, ask the Holy Spirit to give you boldness and confidence. Know that being genuine and friendly matters immensely more than having the right talking points. Pray and ask God to give you courage and direction on what to say.

If your hesitation was that you're just not sure you want to invite other people into your life because they might mess it up...that you're afraid of sharing the refuge of your home with others...ask the Holy Spirit to help you with this. Ask Him to dig up your self-centered motives and point your attention to Jesus hanging on a cross for your good...Jesus giving up the refuge of His home so He could share His home with you. Ask Him to do that right now.

The last thing we are going to do is remind ourselves that our hospitality is only possible because of God's hospitality to us in Christ. Jesus did what was necessary to welcome us into His home. So, Christians in the

room, we are going to take communion together as a family to remember that through Christ's broken body and shed blood God welcomed us. And because He has grafted us into this mission of welcoming others and because we can't do this alone, I'd love it if you want to take communion with your spouse, or with your roommates, or with your LifeGroup members--or whoever you just discussed this with--as a way of saying, "Together we will welcome others as Christ has welcomed us, and we need each other."

**Pray. Communion tables are open.**