

Hospitality

Good morning everybody. If you have a bible, turn with me to the book of **Luke, chapter 19**. If you're new this morning, you're joining us towards the **tail end of a series** we've called *In Knoxville as it is in Heaven*. In short, it's a series all about the ways that we join God in his desire to bring more and more of heaven to earth; how that is his ultimate goal, and how we get to participate with him in it.

And then we've talked about a number of **different specific ways** that we do that. We've talked about *intimacy* with God, *confession & repentance*, *discipleship*, and last week Marcus talked through *generosity*. Which, by the way, **one of my favorite things** to come out of his teaching was that, right after the sermon, one woman in our church came up to our staff and said, "do y'all have Venmo? Because I'm gonna Venmo City Church's staff money for you all to go out to lunch and figure out how we're going to fit more people in this building and navigate COVID concerns at the same time. Because we've got to figure something out." And we gladly accepted her immediate application of the teaching. We love it when people respond with obedience to the Scriptures around here, but we especially like it when their obedience results in us eating free food. So there you go.

But that's **everything we've discussed** so far: all these different ways that we participate with God in bringing more of heaven to earth. **Today, we're going to** move on to talking about how we join God in bringing heaven to earth through something called *hospitality*. (Now, if you were here in week 1, you might remember that we *said* this week was going to be on "mission." *Mission*, or existing for the good of our city and our world, is massively important to us at City Church. But the more we thought about it, the more we realized that *mission* could really describe all or *most* of the things we talk about in this series. So we decided to *narrow* the discussion a little for this week and talk specifically about *one aspect* of that mission, and that's *hospitality*.)

Now, chances are, **when you hear that word** *hospitality*, it brings certain images to mind. We think of it as hosting and entertaining and feeding people in our home or apartment. Right? So if you're a little older, maybe you tend to think of *this* (Martha Stewart in her pre-prison years). If you're a little younger than that, maybe for you it's something like *this*. If you're younger still, maybe it's like you and a few of your friends hanging out in front of your plant wall with the LED strip over it. Or if you're in college, maybe you think of *nothing*. You're going "yeah, I literally live in an oversized shoebox of a dorm, so showing hospitality isn't really even an *option* for me."

But whatever you tend to think of, right from the start, I **need to ask you a favor**. I need you to do your best to forget everything that comes to mind when you hear the word *hospitality*. I need us to try to just have a *blank canvas* in our mind to begin with. Can we try to do that? Because the word *hospitality* has come to mean some things in our society that aren't necessarily bad *things*—they just aren't really what the *bible* means when it *uses* that word. *Maybe you're really good at the American version of hospitality. Maybe your apartment looks like something right out of an Instagram ad. Maybe your house looks like Chip & Joanna just left. Maybe you're really good at cooking really unique, quasi-healthy-but-still-delicious meals that blow people's minds. And that's awesome—good for you. I'd love to have your help the next time I have people over at my house.*

But while those may be some great ways to show hospitality, I want to show you this morning that **those things aren't what hospitality is**. While those are great *expressions* of it, none of them are *requirements* for it. You can show hospitality in those ways, but also in dozens of other ways. In fact, you can show hospitality to people without even owning a house or apartment at all. Because **biblical hospitality is something altogether different**. And that's what we're going to see in today's passage. And I want to try and show you *that* this morning through the story of a man who showed the most incredible hospitality the world has ever seen, without even *owning* a house and without *cooking* a single thing. And that man's name just happens to be Jesus.

So let's **take a look** and see what we can learn. **Luke 19**, starting in v. 1:

[1] Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. [2] A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus (who some of you may know as a "wee little man"); he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. [3] He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd [4] So he (Zacchaeus) ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

*[5] When Jesus reached the spot (where Zacchaeus was), he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at **your house** today." [6] So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. [7] All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a **sinner**." [8] But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give **half** of my possessions to the poor, and if I have **cheated anybody** out of **anything**, I will pay back **four times** the amount."*

[9] Jesus said to him, “Today **salvation has come to this house**, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham (he gets it—he understands what my kingdom is all about). [10] For the Son of Man came to **seek and to save the lost.**”

What a story, right? Now, chances are many of us who grew up in and around church have heard that story before, complete with songs and illustrations and maybe a felt board or two. Now, if you *didn't* grow up in church and you have no idea what I'm talking about, no worries at all—in many ways, you might actually be better off when it comes to wrapping your mind around this story.

But the **basics of the story** are as follows. Jesus is passing through a town called Jericho. A man named Zacchaeus catches wind of that. Zacchaeus is intrigued enough that he wants to go and see Jesus as he passes through. But there are a few obstacles. One is that there is a large crowd out that day, and it's hard for him to see over them. Now if you want to have your Sunday school mind blown just a little bit, the text actually isn't clear on whether “he was short” refers to Zacchaeus, or to Jesus. It could mean either. I always heard it growing up that it described Zacchaeus. As if the point of the story was to say “Jesus loves short people too!” For clarity, Jesus *does* love short people, but that's not the point of the story.

The point of the story is actually that Zacchaeus was *hated* and *excluded*. The text tells us he was a “tax collector.” We've unpacked who tax collectors are before, but they were one of the most hated and ostracized groups of people by the rest of the Jewish community. Because their profession sometimes involved collecting exorbitant taxes from their own people. They were despised. They were on the very bottom of the social totem pole. You would rather be caught *dead* than be caught talking to or associating with a tax collector. No one wanted anything to do with Zacchaeus. Which explains why he has to *look on from a distance*, hidden up in a tree so that he can see over the crowds.

But then it says when Jesus gets to the spot where Zacchaeus is, he stops. He gathers from what Zacchaeus is doing that he is out-of-place and unwanted, and so he does what at the time, only Jesus would do. He looks up at Zacchaeus and says “I'm coming over to your house tonight for dinner.” Which I think is Jesus' way of saying “I would love to have you over to my house for dinner, but I'm homeless—so it'll have to be at your house.” Jesus sees Zacchaeus, notices Zacchaeus, and initiates a friendship with him.

Now **this**, if you were wondering, is **biblical hospitality**. It's noticing a person you don't know or a person that feels out of place or doesn't belong...and then **taking it upon yourself to do something about that**. The word for *hospitality* in the bible is the word *philoxenia*. It's actually a word made up of two other words: *philos*, meaning *love*, and *xenos*, meaning *stranger*. So *hospitality* in the bible literally means to *love, or care for, or welcome, strangers*. It's the exact opposite of *xenophobia*, which is the fear of or *hatred of, strangers*. So you can begin to see how **biblical hospitality actually has nothing to do with how your house looks, or how awesome or Instagrammable it is...and it also has nothing to do with your cooking**. You might be *inclined* towards *using* your beautiful home or your incredible cooking to *show* hospitality, and that's great—but it's not *required*.

The **only thing that is required** to show hospitality is a willingness to **notice people, and initiate friendship with them**. To recognize people around you who are new, or excluded, or feel out of place...and seek them out in order to make them feel like they *do* belong. *That's* hospitality. So practically speaking, it's the intentionality with which you show up here at the Gathering on Sundays and seek out the people that look new or that you haven't met yet. Hospitality is the degree to which, when a new person shows up to your LifeGroup, you take the initiative to introduce yourself and get to know them, and then grab their number to text them about hanging out soon. Hospitality is the speed with which you notice the person hanging out with your group of friends or in one of your classes who feels like they don't belong or don't fit in, and see it as your responsibility to help them feel like they do. Hospitality is the desire and the intentionality with which you do those types of things. **It's our willingness to make strangers into friends, and then friends into family.**

This is actually a *big part* of the **reason that we have the awkward two minutes** at the beginning of our Gatherings, that some of you love and some of you hate. It's a specific, *designated* time to remember to do the thing that *hopefully* we're doing all the time anyway. Seeking out and welcoming people we don't know. We do it every week because *hospitality* is a central piece of who we are as God's people.

Now, I know some of us probably hear all that and think “okay, yeah but **that's just not how I'm wired**. I'm *introverted*. I'm *awkward*. I get uncomfortable meeting new people and it doesn't go well when I do.” Now trust me, *I* of all people get that—I told you guys a couple weeks ago that *I too* am *introverted*. *I* get uncomfortable in social settings. Sometimes I don't come off that way, but that's just because I've learned to be a *high-functioning* awkward person over the years. So trust me, I very much get it.

But I also need us to see that **the way we're wired doesn't change the call from Jesus to participate in hospitality.** Maybe it just changes the way you *go about* hospitality. *Maybe if you're introverted and awkward, you take a friend of yours who isn't that way, and you go and introduce yourself to the new person together.* Maybe instead of inviting someone out to lunch with just *you*, you invite them out to lunch with you and a good friend of yours who's a little less awkward. Maybe hospitality is something you and your roommate, or you and your spouse, or you and somebody from your LifeGroup go and do *together*. Any and all of that is fine. Your personality might change the way you *go about* hospitality, but it doesn't change *whether or not* you are called to do it. **Every follower of Jesus, no matter what your wiring or personality, is called to love and welcome the stranger.**

We **talked two weeks ago** about how biblically, **love is** placing someone else's good ahead of your own. And I want you to see that, in a way, that's *exactly* what we're doing when we show hospitality. When you decide to make yourself a little uncomfortable by walking over to the new person, or the out-of-place person, and striking up a conversation...what you are doing is putting *them* ahead of *yourself*. You're putting *their* comfort above your *own*. Because chances are, *they* already *feel* awkward. So *hospitality* is when you say to yourself, "I'm willing to *embrace* a little *more* awkwardness so that this other person can feel a little *less* awkward." Does that make sense? It's a way of putting them ahead of yourself. Hospitality is love in action.

Now, additionally, I want you to see that this idea of **hospitality doesn't just stop here** in the gospel of Luke. Hospitality is *all over* the place in the New Testament as an instruction to followers of Jesus. Take a look at a few examples with me on the screen...

Romans 12:13

Share with the Lord's people who are in need. *Practice hospitality.*

Hebrews 13:2

Do not *forget* to show *hospitality* to strangers, for by so doing, some people have shown hospitality to *angels* without knowing it. Evidently, if you want to meet an angel, hospitality is a great way to make it happen. Just FYI.

1 Peter 4:9

Offer *hospitality* to one another without grumbling. "Without *grumbling*—" Sounds like a word for us introverts in the room.

Nearly *any time* the New Testament gives **practical instructions to a community of followers of Jesus**, somewhere *in* it is the reminder to *show hospitality*: to love and welcome the strangers in their midst. It's such an important characteristic of followers of Jesus that in **1 Timothy**, it lists *hospitality* as a qualification for *leaders* in the church. Evidently, you can *fire* me as a pastor if I'm not regularly showing hospitality. That's how big of a *deal* it is to God. *Hospitality* is of undeniable *importance* for followers of Jesus.

But here's what I want you to see as well: **not only is hospitality of great importance. It's also of great consequence.** Hospitality is one of the primary ways by which the good news of Jesus reaches more and more people in our world. And it's been that way throughout history. Let me read this quote from you from a pastor in Portland named **John Mark Comer**. It's long, but so very good. He says this:

Historians argue that [hospitality] is the primary way that the gospel spread at such a rapid pace. From a few hundred people eating together in an upper room in Jerusalem, to over half the population of the Roman empire in just three centuries [...] [The early Christians] did this with no political power, no legal protection, under waves of persecution and millions eaten alive in the arena. With no internet, no sound systems, no printing press, no church buildings, no stages, and no celebrity pastors. The gospel just spread from one house to the next, from one table to the next, over bread and wine. And it changed the course of human history.

Hospitality, quite literally, **can change the world.** And **if you're a follower of Jesus, God wants to invite you into this long tradition his people have always had from the beginning.** He wants to use *your* hospitality to change things in your world. There's some debate among biblical scholars, but most of them agree that this is what the author of Hebrews is trying to say with that odd-sounding passage about "showing hospitality to angels"—it's referencing an Old Testament passage where God's people welcomed in strangers who turned out to be angels. More than likely, it's trying to *use* that story as a way to *motivate* God's people *towards* hospitality. It's saying, in essence, "you have have *no idea* what God may use our hospitality to *accomplish.*" And the same is true with *us*.

Let me put it even more *soberly* for us. **The days of the church growing by inviting a bunch of people to a service on Sunday are numbered.** It may still work that way for a while, and probably will last a little longer here in the Bible Belt, but I need you to know that Sunday services as a primary means of growing a church is not going to work much

longer in North America. But to be honest with you, I'm 100% okay with that. Because that was never Jesus' primary strategy for welcoming people into his kingdom. His strategy for reaching people has always been people. And a big part of that is hospitality. One central thing God wants to use to change the world is you and me, as followers of Jesus, befriending strangers, showing them the love and compassion of Jesus, and welcoming them into friendship. It's hospitality.

And hospitality can change people. Just look at the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus. Jesus says he's coming over for dinner, and just by that act of inclusion, something changes in Zacchaeus. He immediately says that he is going to give half of his possessions to the poor, and anything that he has taken from anybody, he is going to pay back four times over. Just so we're clear, that is a majority of his wealth that he's going to give away. Now we don't know how wealthy this guy was. But no matter what, that's a big deal—I can't even think of the most charitable celebrities who give away a majority of their wealth. That even makes Oprah look kinda greedy.

But what we're witnessing here is the hospitality of Jesus changing a person from the inside out. Because Zacchaeus now has Jesus, he no longer needs his wealth. So he gives it away. And because of that heart change, Jesus says of Zacchaeus, "salvation has come to this house." Now just to make sure we don't hyper-spiritualize that: Jesus doesn't just mean this guy said a prayer and now he'll go to heaven when he dies. He means this man has been rescued out of his former life of taking advantage of others—and into something altogether better. He has been changed as a human being, as a result of this encounter with Jesus. And because of that, a little more of heaven has invaded earth. And that has happened because of hospitality.

Hospitality can change people. I have heard people say about many of you in this room that they had all but written off Christianity and Christians, until they met some of you and you welcomed them into relationship, cared for them like they had never been cared for before. I have heard people say about our LifeGroups that they had no idea that friendships with other Christians could be genuine and real and not fake and hyper-spiritual—and that you showed them it was possible. God has used so many of you in this room to change people's hearts towards the gospel and Christianity in general, and he has done a lot of it through your hospitality. That's the power of loving and welcoming the stranger.

And one reason we know that hospitality changes people? is because if we are followers of Jesus, hospitality is actually what changed us. Notice the last line in our

passage: “*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.*” You may not have thought about it in these terms, but Jesus seeking and saving the lost is hospitality. **You see, hospitality doesn’t start with us mustering up some courage to walk across the room and talk to somebody. It actually starts with what Jesus did for us.**

Ephesians 2 puts it this way:

*...remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners (“xenos,” strangers) to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. **But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.***

What happened for us and to us in the cross of Jesus is the single greatest act of hospitality the world has ever seen. In the cross, Jesus sought out us when we were strangers to him. He *welcomed* us when we were alienated from him by our sin. He saw you and I, *separate* from him, excluded from his promises, and he brought us *close* through his death. The cross was Jesus putting *our* good above *his* comfort. It was the *truest expression* of hospitality. **This echoes throughout the Old Testament too. Anytime God encourages his people to show hospitality there, he says “welcome the strangers in your midst, because you were strangers, and God welcomed you.”**¹

Us learning to show hospitality actually starts with us understanding that we are recipients of hospitality. God isn’t asking us to do anything he has not already done for us, a million times over. **And when you understand that, walking across the room and introducing yourself to someone seems like a relatively small ask. Befriending someone who’s different than us is a relatively small ask. I’m not saying it’s not awkward, I’m not saying it’s not uncomfortable. I’m just saying it is a natural response to what Jesus has done for us.** Jesus came to seek and to save those who are lost. And *his* mission motivates *ours*.

I get to meet a lot of the new people that come around and stick around our church. And once people have been around a while, **one of the questions I always love to ask** is “what made you want to stick around our church family?” I’m always interested in the answer to that question. Because the reality is that there are hundreds of churches in Knoxville. And quite a few of them have cooler services than us, more programming and ministries than us, I’m positive they have better *preaching* and *teaching* than we do...so I’m always *curious* to know what makes people stick around *here*.

¹ See Exodus 22:21, Deuteronomy 10:19

Do you know what people's answer is to that question, probably nine times out of ten? They say "well, I was checking out a lot of different churches. But when I showed up at City Church, somebody, or multiple people, came up and *talked* to me. They introduced me to people, they showed me where things were and explained things to me. They invited me to lunch. They invited me to check out their LifeGroup." Nine times out of ten, that's what makes people stick around our church: *you guys* welcoming them in. It's *hospitality*. ~~It's almost like the bible was right or something.~~ **Listen: that's better than any sermon I'll ever preach. That's better than any Gathering we'll ever have. That's better than any ministry or program we'll ever offer.** And I believe *that* is how God is going to change the world.

So we'll just **close things out here**. Back when I was living in South Carolina, a guy we'll call *Brian* started coming around our LifeGroup. He was invited by another couple in the group. And from the beginning, Brian was really **clear with us about two things**. One, was that he wasn't a follower of Jesus and didn't want to do any of the "Christian stuff" we did (we didn't tell him that he kind of already was, by being around our group). And two, that he was gay and didn't want anyone to try and *change* that about him. But he kept coming around. We kept inviting him into things and including him in things and having him over—just did our best to show hospitality to him.

And then, one day, Brian and his long-term boyfriend of three years **broke up**. We knew for a fact that Brian didn't have many friends who weren't also friends with his boyfriend, so we just regularly checked in on him. Asked him how he was doing, kept having him over for dinner and just gave him space to grieve the loss of this relationship. Gave him space to be hurt and disappointed and served him anyway we could in the midst of all that.

Eventually, I was **giving Brian a ride home**. I pulled into his driveway, and before I could say "see you later," he looked at me and said "okay, I have a question for you." I said "okay." He said, "from the moment I started coming around this group, my ex told me that you guys were *dangerous*. He said you guys only wanted to convert me and change me. He told me that if I kept hanging around you guys, you would tell me everything about my life was wrong, because Christians are nothing but 'hate-filled bigots.'"

"But," he said, "at every point, you guys have been *nothing* like that. I have felt more loved, more accepted, more cared for by you guys than I have any group of people in my life—even my own family. And oftentimes, more than I have by the gay community.

Because even *they*, as soon as I started hanging out with Christians, all *they* did was act passive-aggressive towards me and tried to talk me out of it.”

So then I said, “man, I’m so thankful you feel that way about us. But what’s your question?” And he said “my question is why all these so-called ‘hate-filled bigots’ keep inviting me over for dinner. My question is why these ‘hate-filled bigots’ turned out to be the most *loving* people I’ve ever met in my life.” A few weeks later, Brian told me that he still didn’t believe in God, but that “if he were to believe in God one day,” it would be because of his experience of love and acceptance by our group.

Friends, believe me when I say: God can use hospitality to change the world. To bring aspects of heaven to earth. And he wants to use *us* to do it. There is no grander, no more worthwhile mission in the world than what God is inviting us into, through the love of Jesus. So let’s join him in it. Let me pray for us to that end.