

# Pass the Potatoes, Please

BY JIMMY M. DORRELL

**In the mystery of God's upside-down ways, God uses common acts of hospitality to strangers to overcome cultural barriers with others and bring us closer to him.**

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I chuckle to myself as I gaze around the dinner table. Alongside my wife and four children sit three men who look, act, and even smell strange. These are dinner guests most households would report to the police if they walked up their front steps. All three either have been or are presently homeless and it certainly shows. One wears filthy jeans and has a long, unkempt beard. Another has tattoos engraved all over his face and sports an Elvis-like hairdo. The third sits in his wheelchair, propping his dirty, amputated leg against the chair rail. We join hands for the mealtime prayer and the food begins to fly around the table.

The evening is like few traditional family meals and not like anything my parents modeled for me. The bearded fellow, Kruger, is an ex-offender who has spent time in prison for stealing cars. When he returned from the Vietnam War addicted to drugs, he had to find a way to support his habit. Though his appearance and social skills suggest he is uneducated, quite the opposite is true. He has taken classes at a community college for over ten years, with no intention of graduating; he just enjoys learning about chemistry, physics, and other sciences. While he talks for hours about the unique properties of acids, bacteria, and atoms, he spills gravy down his shirt.

Next to him sits the tattooed man with a personality like no one else. Between bites of food he makes jokes and nonverbal expressions to draw attention to himself and away from the tedious chemistry lesson of Kruger. His story is amazing. Darrell grew up in a bar with his mother filling drink orders. He considers himself the “bad apple” of the siblings and tells the stories to validate his assessment. All over his body are scars from knife fights and several car wrecks. He even has been hit by an eighteen-wheeler as he tried to cross an interstate on foot while intoxicated. Add to his physical scars and tattoos the challenges of his adult-life schizophrenia, and the

mix was intriguing. To combat his mental battles, Darrell will self-medicate and binge drink for days, at least until he blacks out. After he awakens from his slumber and initial embarrassment over this “crazy” behavior, he will return to the pawn shop to retrieve his bicycle and once again begin his dumpster-diving routine.

Craig hardly raises his head during the entire meal; he just keeps eating and eating and eating some more. No wonder that his appetite is so large, because he has spent most of his adult life in the streets, usually looking for a meal or place to sleep. Like Darrell, he has a lifelong alcohol addiction that influences his every action. One night, drunk under a local bridge, someone attacked him with a knife and cut his upper leg so deeply that it had to be amputated to save his life. After a miserable recovery time in the nursing home, he was back on the streets, but now wheelchair bound forever. “Pass the potatoes, please,” he says, and he continues eating.



Who sits at our dinner tables is an important indicator of our spiritual condition, though it is often ignored today. Indeed, Scripture measures spiritual maturity not by our use of religious language, church attendance, or Bible knowledge, but by common acts of feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and entertaining strangers. These are the unquestionable outward signs of inward faith that lead to the prepared Kingdom (Matthew 25:34-36). According to Jesus, our “neighbor” is the one who stops to help the person in need, not the one who lives next door. A rejected half-breed Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) and old widows (1 Timothy 5:9-10) normally shoved to the fringes of society become models of the truth for their simple acts of compassion in the face of religious bigotry. Their unpretentious, sacrificial kindness to those in need identify them as the children of God. Common acts of kindness, especially to the stranger, are the ways of God and his call to us.

Jesus’ “working lunch” with Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) both exemplifies true hospitality and reveals our aversion to rubbing shoulders with strangers. The Master initiates the visit instead of being invited, but Zacchaeus joyfully complies and is “happy to welcome him” into his home (19:6). During the unscheduled visit, conviction, repentance, and salvation come to the chief tax collector’s house. Yet instead of celebrating the transformation of their economic nemesis, the community responds by condemning the Son of David for eating with the sinner. How blind we are to the work of God!

Biblical hospitality has little to do with prepared invitations and dinner parties for selected guests. Instead it involves spontaneous common acts of daily life, especially with those with whom we rarely share life together. Eating a meal together, drinking a cup of coffee, or going to the zoo with a homeless person, an international, an ex-offender, an addict, or an agnostic

is the stuff of hospitality. Sharing common acts of life with those who are different socially, racially, economically, and even morally creates an environment of mutual love, understanding, and growth among people separated by prejudice and cultural distance. In the parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:15-24), Jesus encourages us to quit trying to solve all the calendar conflicts of the usual guests for our house parties, but to “go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame” to fill our homes for a more heavenly-type banquet.

We resist these simple acts of hospitality, however. Reared in a culture of fear—of television broadcasts of crime, threats of litigation, and insurance disclaimers—we dismiss these scriptural appeals as out of touch with reality. The haunting question “What if...?” drives our decision making. How can we bring poor, crippled, blind, or mentally ill people, ex-offenders, immigrants, or addicts into our homes, yet still protect our family and possessions? Surely God does not expect us to risk such a significant level of exposure.

Yet God does just that! Risking beyond cultural norms is exactly the stuff of faith. Willingness to appropriately love and show compassion to people who are different and in need is the beginning of spiritual vitality. In those encounters, the Holy Spirit can bring new confidence in our purpose and joy in our vocation. As our fears are overcome, our prejudices are challenged and frequently our presuppositions are erased. In these common acts of hospitality, like sharing a simple meal of hamburgers, we begin to see others as uniquely fashioned creations of God with names and stories.

Often these encounters teach us more about God and his Kingdom than all the Sunday school classes we have attended.

Like most spiritual discipleship, movement toward hospitality to the stranger comes through baby steps, through consistent and growing acts of kindness in guided institutional settings. Before we invite the homeless man

into our home, we can visit the local soup kitchen or shelter to gain a new level of comfort among people who may come from a completely different background. We can volunteer at the food bank, lead a Bible study at an alcohol and drug treatment facility, mentor the child of an incarcerated parent, or tutor a young person in juvenile detention. With each visit, familiarity overcomes formerly imagined fears; we begin to notice our common-

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alities instead of our differences. With new confidence and call, we are much more prepared to open our homes, share our possessions, and overlook the differences that divide us. Like Jesus' initiative with Zacchaeus, we can boldly go into settings that were formerly uncomfortable to us and where others disapprove.



As our homeless guests prepare to leave, I glance again around the table at my own children who are finishing their meal and giggling at each other. I wonder what this kind of experience means to them in their adolescent worldviews where coolness is determined by whom one hangs around and what clothes are worn. These ragtag men, eating at our dinner table, are anything but acceptable by their peers' standards. Yet as we see Kruger, Darrell, and Craig to the door, one of the teens says, "Dad, this was sort of cool. Let's have them back soon." The others chime in, "Yeah, this was sort of fun!"

Later I wonder at how the mystery of God's upside-down ways, experienced through acts of hospitality to strangers, supersedes cultural standards and brings us closer to him.

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