

The Practice of Community Part 2

a sermon in the series
A Gospel-Oriented, Mission Driven, and Community-Centered Church

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I Peter 4:7-10

But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. 8 And above all things have fervent love for one another, for “love will cover a multitude of sins.” 9 Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. 10 As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

We continue today discussing how we practice community. In our last message we demonstrated from the text that the foundational motive of all we do for each other is love—fervent love—“And above all things have fervent love for one another, for “love will cover a multitude of sins.” The word *fervent* tells us something about this love we are to have for one another; it is a kind of love that stretches you. The word *fervent* means stretched or extended out. You and I are to become completely vulnerable as we extend ourselves beyond our comfort zones and love people. Loving in this way, we forbear the sins, flaws, and oddities of others. The world notices that we genuinely care for one another and is convicted by the demonstration of fervent, sin-covering love. Jesus said love is the main program of His kingdom when it comes to evangelism. Evangelism 101 is “that you love one another as I have loved you.”

Today, we continue to learn how to practice community by examining what Peter says next. He says that a community of believers is to be hospitable and serve one another. Actually these two commandments are the demonstration of fervent love. They are the exercise of selfless love.

I. BE HOSPITABLE TO ONE ANOTHER

Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. (1 Peter 4:9)

A. Misconceptions About Hospitality.

For example, there's a whole industry in America called the hospitality industry. We're talking about motels and hotels and even the food industry. They all come under the umbrella of hospitality. Even some churches have hospitality committees or greeters and that's all they do. They make everyone who comes into the building feel welcome and loved. We call that hospitality, but I think that is a misconception of what Peter and the New Testament means by this word *hospitality*. Just because you stay at a Ramada Inn or a Best Western doesn't mean you experience hospitality. First off, it's not free so therefore it biblically disqualifies it from meaning hospitality. But then there's another misconception and that is hospitality is entertainment.

I'm going to use the word *entertain* frequently this morning for the word *hospitality* because the Bible uses that same word. For example, Hebrews 13:2 says to not forget to entertain strangers for by doing so some have unknowingly entertained angels.

The words *entertain* and *hospitality* are exactly the same Greek word. When today we speak of hospitality and entertainment, we mean something completely different than Peter. Today hospitality is more a performance, something to rival a *Southern Living* or *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine layout. The home has to be just right—decorations—best tableware—elaborate food. It becomes a performance in itself when we “entertain” guests. This is not the notion that Peter had when he uses this word *hospitable*.

That's not the kind of hospitality the Bible is commanding because that in itself is deceptive. You can throw a great party, and it might be awesome. It might make the social column of *The Paducah Sun* but that's not what Peter's dealing with here. That kind of hospitality is not the way we normally live. Your house doesn't always look like it could be on the cover of *Better Homes and Gardens*, it's not something Martha Stewart would take pride in, and not always do you eat off of the best china. Paper plates are quite convenient, aren't they? And there's nothing wrong with them. That kind of entertainment is all about projecting the right appearance. It's a performance to gain the acceptance of the approval of others. This is not about others it's about you and what others say or think about you. This is not biblical hospitality.

There's nothing wrong with having a big event where you use the best china and the candles are exquisitely lit. There's nothing wrong in having an awesomely decorated table. That's not what he's saying here. That's not the kind of hospitality he has in mind.

B. Definition of Hospitality.

The Bible word for hospitality comes from a Greek compound word. A compound word is a word formed by joining two words together making one word. The word *hospitality* comes from the words *love* and *strangers*. Peter is actually saying, “love strangers.” That’s the actual Greek meaning here. Love strangers.

C. The Practice of Hospitality.

The biblical concept of hospitality is the sharing of home and meals with people you may not be acquainted with. This goes back all the way to the Old Testament and it comes into the early church. One of the reasons why the command to Christians was to open up their homes even to complete strangers was because they did not have a Motel 6 and they didn’t keep the light on for you because there was no inn to keep the lights on. It wasn’t a normal custom. There were some inns but they were more like a bed and breakfast, it wasn’t a hotel. So when a person was traveling through, where did they stay? They stayed by the hospitality of others who opened up their home. You see this in Abraham and Lot. In Lot’s case he opened his home to strangers. He didn’t know they were angels.

You see hospitality when people in the Old Testament stayed out in the town square and someone came up to them and said, “Do you have a place to stay?” “No.” “Come with me.” That was the custom and culture of that day. Of course, in our culture that’s not practiced so much. We live in a very insecure and unsafe world. But if you move into the New Testament you see the Apostle John speaking in his later epistles telling his readers to help Christians, especially evangelists by giving them a place to stay. This is hospitality. He wanted them to give them a bed to sleep in and food to warm them and to help them on their way because these are brothers.

So as in the Old Testament, in the New Testament hospitality was taking in Christian travelers or pilgrims. But Peter does something remarkable here. He expands the definition to include brother and sisters whom you do know. What does he say in verse nine?

“Be hospitable to one another.”

Open up your homes to one another without grumbling. Why would you open up your home when the brother and sister have a home? Maybe they don't. Maybe they've fallen on difficult times like we heard at the beginning of the service. Some things happen without any warning that can leave someone in great need. But that is not the end of hospitality. Peter is also encouraging people to open their homes to other believers in order to share a meal with them. He is saying we are to become companions with one another through the method of hospitality.

It's interesting to know that the word *companion* is also a compound word, not in Greek but in Latin. In the word *companion* you have two Latin words: *together* and *bread*. That's the literal meaning of companion—someone you share bread with. Peter is suggesting the way we practice community, the way we become knitted one with another is by eating together, sharing meals together and thereby we become co-companions, pilgrims. All of that through sharing meals together.

Would you mind if I took a few moments and did a theology of food? Yes, there is a theology of meals in the Bible. I don't have the time to be exhaustive, but let me just give you some highlights.

Let's begin with Jesus. Much of Jesus' ministry centered around a table. If you read the book of Luke, you think that's all He did. In fact, many people thought the same. His critics called Him a glutton and a wine bibber. In other words, they said He overeats and gets drunk. We know that Jesus did not commit the sin of gluttony, nor did He drink to the point of intoxication. We know better than that. But His enemies saw Him doing nothing but eating and drinking, so much of the time that was what they said about Him. Notice what He says of Himself, "the Son of Man came eating and drinking." We know He came from heaven to die for our sins but here Jesus says His ministry was to eat and drink. This is important because of who He ate and drank with.

In the days of Jesus and even afterward, who you ate with said a lot about you. For instance, the Pharisees—the religious people—refused to eat with tax collectors, publicans, sinners, and prostitutes. Why? Their theology said if you associate with them you would be like them. You'll be spotted, you'll be soiled, you'll be polluted. They were afraid they would be contaminated by merely association with sinners. So they removed themselves from sinners in the social setting called the meal and wouldn't eat with them. But here comes Jesus and the thrust of His ministry was at a table with sinners sharing the Gospel of the kingdom with them. Why? Because meals are for more than fuel for the body, they are opportunities for community, for bonding, and for becoming companions one with another.

Jesus knew the power of sharing a meal. Even when two enemies come together for negotiations of peace, often those strategic meetings include meals together. Sociologically we understand there is something about being at a table with someone that is more relaxed. The guard is lessened. The walls may come down when you eat with someone. Why? Because at the table you're all equal. By Jesus sitting at the table with sinners He was saying there's an equality, there's an identification. We're not talking about sitting at the table with sinners in this message today, we'll talk about that in a future message.

How in the name of hospitality can you think of trying to sit at the table with a lost person like Jesus if you won't sit at the table with a believer or if you won't invite people into your home to share a meal? Meals together create a celebration of God's grace to us and food is to be enjoyed.

When we sit at a table it is, in all practical purposes, a holy thing. When you go home and have lunch or if you go to a restaurant and have lunch I want you to understand the theology of the Scriptures says that meal is not just a time to fuel your body or enjoy your palate. It is a holy thing. As soon as God made Adam, what were God's words to him? "You can eat the fruit of every tree in this garden..." The first thing He talked to him about was food! God gave us food not just to keep us alive but as a table reminder. Every time you sit at your table you'll be reminded of how good God is. He gives us good food! If you're above the age of 10 you probably only eat things you really enjoy. If you're under 10, mom and dad probably still tell you what to eat because it's "good for you." I'm aware most things that are good for you hardly taste good, but the truth really is you have to develop a taste for good food. We've so addicted ourselves to junk food that when you eat good, wholesome food it doesn't taste as good.

God didn't mean to give you the fruit of the trees and the vegetables of the fields in order to make you endure supertime. "You can't get up until you eat the last pea!" Food wasn't meant for that. It was meant to be celebratory. How is that? The God who causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall has granted you this provision—the good hand of God feeds you. Every time you sit at the table you are to remember this provision.

In fact, much of church lived centered around the meal. I know you've never heard a message on the theology of food. Frankly, I've never preached one. But it's so predominate in the Scriptures and I don't know how we've missed it all these years. In Acts 2:42 after the great Day of Pentecost, the Spirit of God filled the early church and the Bible says,

“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.” (Acts 2:42)

Look at verse 46. He says it again. It must be quite important.

“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house,”

Why do we give credence to going to the temple and having church services with the apostles and we don’t give credence to the next part about going house to house breaking bread? It’s because we are too religiously oriented and not really spiritual. A spiritual man reads verse 46 and he says, “God has put going to someone’s house and sharing a meal on par with going to the temple and hearing Peter preach.” A spiritual man sees that. A religious man doesn’t. Why? A religious man sees nothing spiritual about eating and especially eating someone else’s cooking that he may not like. But Luke wants us to see this is the life of the early church. One is on the same par with the other. In fact, he says not only do they go from house to house breaking bread but,

“they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart,” (Acts 2:46)

By the way, where were they when the Spirit of God came upon them? Were they in the church building or the synagogue or the temple? Not at all. Do you know where they were? In somebody’s home. The upper room was exactly that. It was the upstairs of someone’s house.

One of the qualifications of a pastor is hospitality.

“Consider that many requirements churches typically have for leaders (like a seminary degree) are not required by Paul in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. But what he does require is that they be hospitable. Perhaps this was because church meetings were family meals. How could you lead a meal-meeting if you weren’t hospitable? How could you extend the generous welcome of the gospel if you didn’t welcome people into your home? The meetings of the apostolic churches were shared meals. It’s not that they sometimes had a church lunch, or that they had some food before or after their meetings. Their meetings were meals.” (Tim Chester, *A Meal With Jesus*)

Some of you have never heard that before, but if you've read the book of Acts you've read it at least one time. Their church meetings were centered around the table, not in a building where a man steps up onto a platform and everybody sits like spectators in rows.

“Now on the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight.” (Acts 20:7)

Here they gathered around the table and the room is packed. Maybe not everybody is around the table but that's the reason they met. On what day of the week did they meet? The Lord's Day! Sunday, the day Christians honors the resurrection by worshipping God together. But here Luke is specific that the worship service was about a meal together. It would be like me saying that instead of coming over here we would all meet at the parsonage, if the parsonage could accommodate all of us, and we would have a meal together and at some point I would get up and preach. And it all happens at a table of fellowship.

Let me give you a little bit more on the theology of food. Exclusion from eating with other Christians was practiced by the early church as church discipline. Did you know that? If you did not obey God and were disobedient and unruly and didn't repent, eventually that church was to dismiss you from the table. This is to be practiced today.

Look at 1 Corinthians 5:11. Here Paul is dealing with a man that the Corinthian church, like the American church, has said, “Oh no, we're a church of grace, we celebrate grace! Let live and let live. That's our policy. We believe in the Gospel, that means nobody is perfect.” Paul says they misunderstood the Gospel. This same Gospel of grace not only gives you grace from the penalty of sin but power over sin and if a brother or sister isn't living by that grace you need to warn them because you love them. There are some sins you cannot cover. Sometimes it's a sin to cover sins.

“But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person.” (1 Corinthians 5:11)

Paul explains that the church was to exclude the man from the table of the Lord's Supper, but also he was to be excluded from their personal tables and they were not to sit at his. The discipline only makes sense if meals are important to church life. If meals were not important to

that church then this discipline would have no teeth. The church is somehow expressed through shared meals.

There is a risk of doing this. There is a risk of opening up your homes and starting to invite brothers and sisters from the church in. Hospitality has risk. Food will be spilled and stain the carpet or someone will inevitably break something. There is an expense to host someone in your home. But remember the expense that God has paid to invite you into His kingdom, not as a guest but as a privileged son and daughter.

Why will we refuse to bring people into our homes because we're afraid they'll be critical of our housekeeping or because they may mess up our housekeeping, when Jesus has allowed sinners to come into His very own kingdom and be seated with Him in heavenly places? It just doesn't make sense. It doesn't equate that we could be the recipients of such mercy and not be merciful one to the other?

Notice one other thing and we'll move to the last command. He says to do hospitality without grumbling. I have a simple question. Why would Peter say to do hospitality *without grumbling*? In other words, I'm asking you if hospitality was not required there would be grumbling or complaining? You invite someone over to your home because you want them there. The only reason you would grumble or complain about having somebody over to your house is because Peter says you have to do this. You're supposed to do this. So, in compliance with the Scriptures, you invite somebody but you're not happy about it.

So, be hospitable without grumbling. If we are really to be a New Testament community, we must open our homes up one to another and begin to fellowship around the table in commemoration of the grace of God that has been given to us through Jesus Christ. That's when this church will go to another level, when we're not just friendly acquaintances on Sunday and Wednesday but really begin to develop companionship. Meals together. Bread together. Companions.

One other command listed here in order to practice community is serving one another.

II. SERVE ONE ANOTHER

As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. (1 Peter 4:10 NKJV)

A. Gifts Are Given to Serve One Another.

That means every one of you who are saved has at least one spiritual gift given to you by God. These spiritual gifts are not given to you in order for you to keep and bless your life, but to serve one another with. That's what he's saying here. As you've received a gift, serve. Minister it to one another. Give it to one another. These gifts are not to be abused and used to draw attention to oneself as it's often done. Just turn on "religious" broadcasting and you'll see men with great gifts but they're abusing it to draw attention to themselves. Peter says God has gifted you to help one another. The gifts are God's goodness to you and your neighbor. It is His goodness to you to let you help your neighbor and God's goodness to your neighbor for you to do so. It is good for you that God let's you help someone else. That's a ministry given by God to you personally. That is a grace.

"good steward of the manifold of grace of God."

We are to serve one another. Open up our homes. Always putting others above ourselves in the name of Jesus Christ and for the glory of the Gospel because this is exactly what Jesus did. Therefore this community is to be an unselfish group of people.

B. The Unselfishness of Community.

We are to be a selfless people. We are never to come insisting our needs be met. Now, let me be very clear but not harsh. I'm trying to be fervently loving as possible with God's help. A few months ago, in a message I said churches are not hospitals. Some of you took exception to that statement. Churches are not hospitals. That's not a Scriptural view of a church. I understand why some took exception to that because it sounds like we're saying if somebody is spiritually ill and not in their full health spiritually that we just cast them aside and don't care about them. That's not the intent of that statement. The intent of the statement is that we should be more biblical in our views of the church because what is a hospital? A hospital is a place where you take care of sick people and that's all you do. Once they're well, what do you do? You send them home. They're not allowed to stay. In fact, today you don't even have to be well before you're dismissed from hospitals.

What that view does is basically make people to see the church as the place where their needs take precedence. They say, "I've got to go to church because I'm spiritually not well. People need to minister to me so I can get better.

Let me give you a better metaphor of what I believe the church is to be.

I believe the church is to be a military base, an outpost in the heart of Satan's territory advancing the kingdom of God. On every military base there is a sickbay or an infirmary where you can go when you are ill. But what is the objective of that infirmary or hospital on the military base? To get you well so you can return to the front lines and fight. I never intended to be understood that we do not care for the spiritually poor or weak. The Bible over and over says that, this text says that, how could anyone believe that I would want you to disregard a brother or sister who is not spiritually vibrant at the moment? No! What we cannot do though, on the other hand, is to have a mentality that every Sunday I need to come and get *my* needs filled. That is what will keep you spiritually sick. The kingdom of God does not operate on that philosophy. The kingdom says it's more blessed to give than to receive. You've been given grace and God has been good to you to let you serve somebody else. That is the grace that ministers to you so that you can minister to others.

Let me tell you why we think of church as a hospital. It's because of the lack of community. It proves my very point. If we only meet once a week and that's the only time you're experiencing life with other believers, by the following Sunday you're going to be spiritually weak and looking for a spiritual energy boost.

One of the reasons that exists and occurs is because we have disregarded God's blueprint for the church and we're not being a community of fervent love, hospitality, and service one to another. A group of Christians are called together to provide for one another so that all are well to take the fight to the devil, not to put you on spiritual disability.

I want to conclude. A group of Christians (more 20 persons) cannot provide the essential ingredients required for community. This group cannot to what we've said today. Impossible. We can do some of it but we can't do all of it. It is too large to function in this way. You may be like one person I heard about who decided, "You know, I don't know anybody at that church. I don't know, maybe we ought not go to that church. They don't seem to be too loving. Maybe we ought to go

find a church that's more loving." But as the couple talked about it they said, "Well, you know, we haven't been too loving either, have we?" So they decided that before they would leave the church they would invite every family into their home for dinner, one family a week, until they had gone through the entire church roll. By the end of the year not only did they enjoy that church but they wanted to stay and were an active part. Isn't that amazing?

Friends, there's no way that kind of community can happen with all of us here. We can hardly get everybody together in one house. It's not possible. It's too large to function in this way. That is why small groups need to be developed within the context of a local church so that the church is practicing community. But for community to develop a small group must meet more than once a month or every other week. In fact, it cannot happen if it meets once a week. I know some of you will say you're not interested in this and it isn't your cup of tea, I understand not everybody will be on board, but I'm preaching to those who will catch the vision of this. I believe you can see this, whether you agree with it or not. This is from the word of the Lord.

For this to happen it has to be more than just another meeting. We all have enough meetings. For genuine community life must be lived in such a way that a dependency emerges that creates strong bonds. This happens as they spend much time together between meetings. Couples have dinner together, men go hunting or fishing, women shop together, children spend a night at the each other's homes, and families attend the sporting events of each other's children. In other words, they live life together. They become an extended family to one another.

This is how we practice community and if this is not our practice we do not have community, at least not yet. You cannot use the word *community* truthfully unless you limit its usage to a group of believers who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, who have taken the brave step of taking their masks off, and whose relationships are built on genuine commitment to suffer together, rejoice together, and make each others interests more important as their own. May God so bless this church to make it this kind of community. Amen.