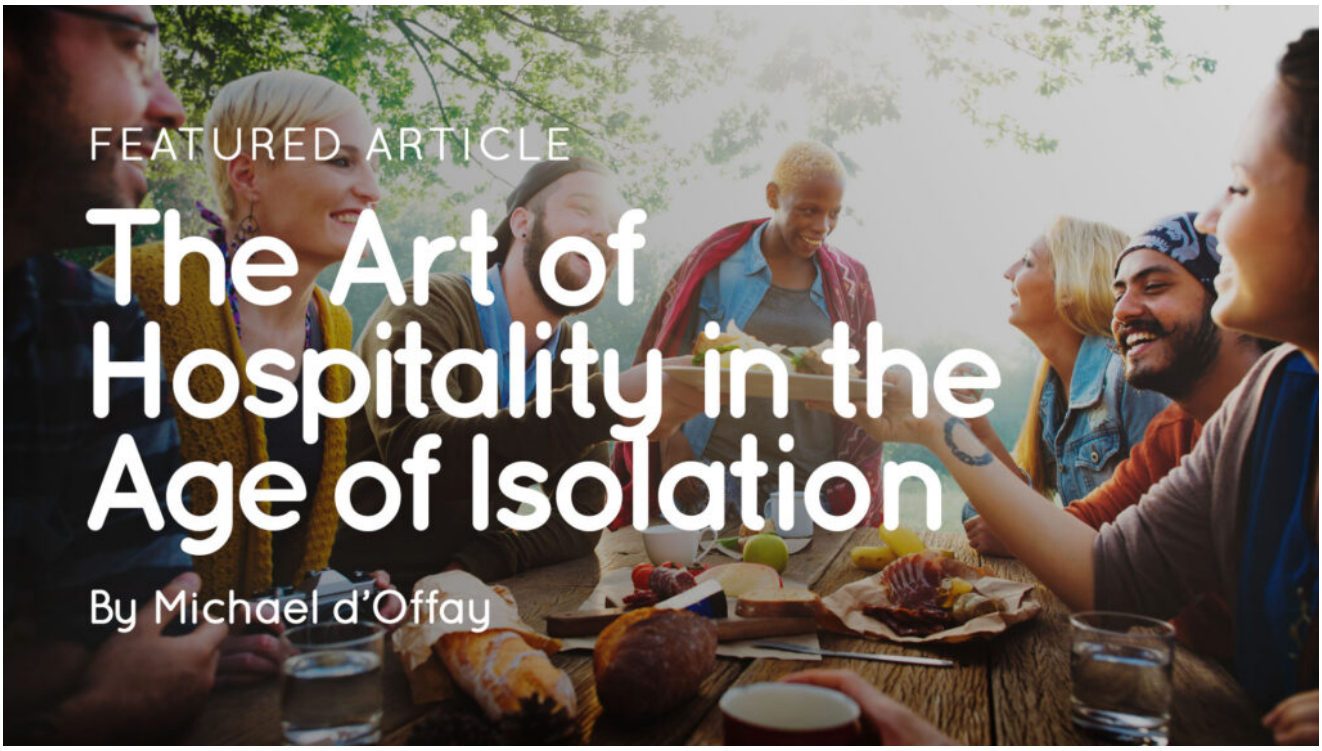
The Art of Hospitality in the Age of Isolation

Michael d'Offay 25 July 2019



As people are more isolated and suspicious of others than ever before, loneliness has become a modern epidemic. In light of this, God's call for us to practice hospitality is more important than ever.

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The Greek word for hospitality literally means 'to love strangers'. In Biblical times, this was practiced by showing kindness to others by opening one's home, sharing a meal and welcoming them into one's life. This is why Scripture tells us, 'Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling' (1 Peter 4:8-9). The command was to practice it without grumbling, since this kind of love challenges us out of our comfort zones.

This is very real to me as there are times where having people in my home has been challenging. I enjoy my privacy and by nature I'm an introvert, but God (and my open-hearted wife!) has continually stretched me to host others, to practice a kind of dinner-table Christianity, to let others see my life and family – flaws and all.

The Biblical Mandate for Hospitality

In ancient societies, hospitality was more or less a universal norm. Nonetheless, when God redeemed the oppressed Israelites from Egypt, He desired that hospitality would become a deep value among them, which would reflect His nature to the world. God mandated His people, under the law, to care for the strangers who came among them (Leviticus 19:33-34, Deuteronomy 24:17,19). This is because they were once strangers and were welcomed in. They had been recipients of God's kindness and were now called to do likewise.

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The value of hospitality is so important under the New Covenant that to qualify to be an elder in the church, he has to be hospitable (see 1 Timothy 3:2). The old adage for a leader in Israel is that they should have four doors to their home: facing the north, the south, the east and the west – to welcome people in. Hospitality is not a ministry just for leaders, though. This is a command for every believer to practice and for elders to model. Ultimately the Lord God Himself models loving strangers for us. Hospitality is at the heart of the gospel – that we, who were strangers to God, have been brought near and into His family (see Ephesians 2:12-13). We are called to be hospitable because our Father in heaven is.

The Spiritual

Welcoming people into our homes is not just a practical action but a profoundly spiritual activity. This is because when we show hospitality, we are ministering unto the Lord Jesus Himself. In Matthew 25, Christ tells us that when we welcome strangers and meet the needs of others, 'whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me' (v.40). Showing hospitality is welcoming and loving Jesus Himself into our midst. This is an astonishing idea; that, somehow, in even loving the most difficult or needy people, we are loving the Lord Himself. Practicing hospitality as to the Lord is therefore part of our worship to the living God.

The Practical

Hospitality, in its nitty-gritty, is practical. Paul tells the Roman church to 'contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality' (Romans 12:13). Jesus says that even those who merely give a cup of water to those who belong to Christ will receive a reward (Mark 9:41). The emphasis here is that we have a responsibility firstly towards fellow believers. Yes, we are to do

good to all, but our priority is always to the household of faith to which we belong (see Galatians 6:10). This means that those who arrive at church as strangers need to be intentionally drawn into our lives to become family. However, if we do not actively plan to 'seek to show hospitality' as Romans 12:13 says, the household of faith becomes a series of detached meetings rather than genuine family.

Hospitality vs Entertainment

You might object and say that you practically cannot afford to open your home or entertain people. Showing hospitality is not entertaining, however, which is a worldly concept. Hospitality involves hosting. And hosting keeps things simple and informal. If we are called to live out the faith together, simple and informal is the only way to do things.

Here are some tips we have practiced in our home:[1]

1. **Keep it simple.** The aim of hosting is to connect, not to stress. Prepare a simple meal that allows you time together, not one that takes you away from your company.
2. **Let others bring something.** When you invite others into your home, it is completely appropriate to ask them to bring something.
3. **Use your regular cutlery.** Would you use the fancy stuff for family?
4. **Ask for help.** After you eat together, don't be afraid to ask for help to clean up (or to prepare beforehand).
5. **Prepare the kids.** Over the years, our children have shared in the blessing of us hosting. However, we still communicate expectations and boundaries and aim to include them in as much as possible.
6. **Give up the best room.** If you are hosting a family for a conference or outreach weekend, give them the best room. We have often done this and we have been richly blessed in return.
7. **Ask God to use you** to encourage, listen and bring life to the people who enter your home. In Four12, we often host saints from other churches who come in as strangers to us. But the greatest joy of having people to stay in our home is that they leave as family.

He First Loved Us

What marks us as God's people is that we love one another and, astoundingly, by doing this we really show others what God is like. Ultimately, the gospel is God's hospitality demonstrated to us and so we love because He first loved us. As our modern culture becomes increasingly isolated, fragmented and suspicious of others, we are called to move in the opposite spirit. Our churches and homes are not to be walled castles keeping people out, but welcoming households drawing people in.

[1] Adapted from this helpful article I read a number of years ago: http://moneyhelpforchristians.com/practicing-christian-hospitality-how-to-be-a-gracious-host/