

JEANETTE STEWART

For weeks she had talked of nothing but the upcoming trip to the zoo. The day had finally arrived! Her small hand in mine, we walked through the entrance gates. "Please, Jeanette, can we see the lion first?"

As we neared the lion's cage I sensed her disappointment. "He's sleeping," she exclaimed. "I wanted to see him do something!" Although we didn't know it, it was almost feeding time. Aroused by the scent of raw meat, the lion began to stir. Nostrils quivering, he began to pace. Looking most intent, he seemed captivated by his pursuit of the origin of the smell. Instinctively, Carrie tightened her grip on my hand. "I wouldn't want to get in his way" she whispered and suddenly shivered.

I was reminded of my trip to the zoo recently as I studied Romans 12:13. In this verse Paul urges believers to practice hospitality. The implication is that we should pursue hospitality with the same intensity that a hungry lion demonstrates when stalking his prey. Never before had I thought of hospitality in that light!

First Timothy 3:2 teaches that a man cannot qualify as an overseer of the church unless he is marked by hospitality. First Peter 4:9 reminds us to offer hospitality to each other without grumbling. Hospitality, then, is one sign of Christian maturity and obedience. But believing that hospitality is crucial is not enough. Acting upon this belief is the true test of our obedience. We must put hospitality into action. Let's consider how.

First comes *planning*. Generally speaking, good intentions remain exactly that unless we formulate a blueprint for implementing action. For that reason, we must plan to be hospitable! Who do you want to invite into your home? A lonely widow, a new neighbor, a struggling student, or perhaps the newcomers at church? Don't limit yourself to those whom you already know. Use hospitality as a way to open new avenues of friendship, to encourage the despondent, to minister to the lonely.



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Also consider selecting guests who can minister to you and your family. When he was still a single medical student, my husband Bill received a dinner invitation from a Christian physician and his family. With his three impressionable children looking on, Dr. Cooper asked Bill to tell how he became a Christian. What a great exposure for those kids! What an opportunity for Bill to articulate his faith in Christ.

What do you want to do with your guests? Historically, sharing a meal together has been a means of showing honor and affection to the invited guest. We need not limit ourselves to dinner invitations though. Be creative! What about Sunday brunch, Saturday breakfast, or coffee and dessert one evening? We recently participated in a "build your own pizza" party. I made the dough. Everyone else brought the toppings. The group concurred that it

could have competed with our neighborhood pizza parlor!

Being hospitable means more than meeting the physical and material needs of your guests. Plan specific ways to minister to your guests' spiritual needs too. Ask them questions. Stimulate their thinking. Share what you are gleaning from God's Word. Learn from one another. Share your struggles. Urge each other on to a greater commitment to Christ.

The second step is *preparation*. Adequate preparatory measures all but eliminate most disasters. Since your goal is to entertain with a view to serve and encourage others, I think it's important to have most things ready before your guests arrive. I recall my friend Janet recounting one of her experiences as a visitor. Invited for dinner at seven o'clock, she and her husband arrived, on time and hungry, only to have their hostess say, "Oh, I'm so glad you are finally here. Now I can start cooking



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dinner!" They did not begin to eat until nine o'clock. It was hard for my friends to enjoy the company of their hostess while she was busy over the hot stove.

Depreciation does require two treasured commodities: time and money. Because most of us are limited in these areas, use your ingenuity. Consider a potluck dinner. Enlist the help of a friend. Don't be shy. Most people are just waiting to be asked.

Many of us are reluctant to invite others into our homes because we think that it's just not good enough. Over and over I have heard people say, "We'll start entertaining in our home when ... we are settled in ... the living room is finally redecorated ... we can afford to serve filet mignon ... the new couch finally arrives." God calls us to serve Him with our best, whether it be hot dogs on paper plates or crab stuffed lobster served on fine china. People

come to visit *you* not to take an inventory of your furnishings. All God requires is a willingness to receive guests into our home, no matter how small or large it may be.

Meeting spiritual needs requires preparation too. This leads us to the third step which is *prayer*. Pray that God will give you the sensitivity and wisdom to minister to the spiritual needs of your guests. It's amazing how a good, relaxing dinner will cause people to open up about their feelings. Some of the most exciting times we've had around our dinner table have been after dinner! I can remember times when we've sat at the table until late at night answering questions for searching friends whom God has brought into our home.

Ask God to show you whom to invite. My husband and I find it helpful to block off time each week to pray for our friends and

acquaintances. We ask God to show us who has needs and whom we could encourage by inviting into our home. Pray too that God will continue to equip you to meet the needs of others. Pray that the time you spend being hospitable will bring glory to Him. Pray for pure motivation in opening your home to others. "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men" (Col. 3:23). If your intentions are not genuine, discouragement is imminent. You may never receive a compliment, a thank you, or a reciprocal invitation. Remember that it is the Lord who rewards our efforts.

The last step is *persistence*. Persist in being hospitable. Paul encouraged the Galatians, "Let us not become weary in doing good" (Gal. 6:9). This exhortation still applies. Occasionally you will feel that you've failed. I can remember an evening that was (from a human perspective) an absolute flop! One couple arrived late, another had to leave early, and in the middle of dinner a sick friend dropped by seeking medical advice from my husband. No one had much in common and try as I did, the evening never really got off the ground. Although I was discouraged, I had to remember that we invited these guests in obedience to God's command to be hospitable. God only requires obedience. It's up to Him to take care of the results.

The essence of hospitality is *practical* Christianity. As I grew up, this was exemplified for me by my family's Christmas celebrations. As the festive season drew near we searched for people who would be alone on Christmas day. College students, couples or widows, all received an invitation for the 25th. We would crowd around our small dining room table to enjoy food and fun. We shared our lives with our guests for that one day, and many lasting friendships developed. I learned early that hospitality is a way of life.

Who says you can't be hospitable? Plan, prepare, pray, and persist. Leave the rest to God. You'll be surprised at the results! ☞