

PERSPECTIVE

JULY 2020

GENEROSITY & OUR HOME



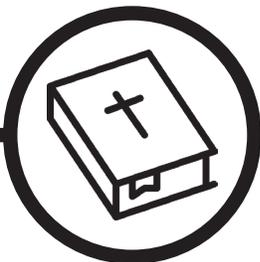
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July

Generosity & Our Home

We moved into our first house in 2018. We had only been married for a year before we decided to leave our apartment in Marietta and move to Smyrna. While we packed up our bags, we had many fixer-upper projects planned. However, we also had Mount Vernon's "Year of Evangelism" on our minds as we prepared to move into a new neighborhood, a new community, with people who needed to hear the gospel. Go and proclaim the gospel—it's just that simple, right? I had this foolishly idealistic picture that we would move into our brand-new house, run into one of our neighbors, and strike up a conversation that would lead to the gospel. Obviously, that did not happen, and my ideal picture of sharing the gospel with my neighbors turned out very differently than I expected.

I know every neighborhood is different, but most of us don't casually walk outside to strike up a conversation about the gospel with our neighbors. In our current culture, most Americans come home from work and retreat into their homes, avoiding people like the plague. Jesus taught us to "lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Matt. 6:20). We faced the question of whether our comfort keeps us from being generous. Do we care more about things, like a home that will rust and destroy over time, or do we care more about the people that come into our home?

Thankfully, we have been so encouraged and equipped by the teaching of our elders and through a book they gave to the whole church. Trisha and I devoured *The Simplest Way to Change the World: Biblical Hospitality as a Way of Life*. We highly recommend it if you want to start being generous with your home and begin building relationships with your neighbors with the hope you can one day soon share the gospel with them.

This year at Mount Vernon we are thinking about generosity. We've defined generosity as being joyfully open-handed with what we have for the sake of those we love—family, church, community, and world. In light of that definition, we ought to think of biblical hospitality as *being joyfully open-handed with the home God has given you for the sake of those closest to you*. When we say "those closest to you" we don't only mean by proximity, but also by relationship. It may be easiest to start being generous with those whom you already have deep relationships. We are so thankful that many members of Mount Vernon do this regularly, and it's one of the great things about being a part of our church. Be at our church long enough, and someone is going to invite you to their home.

As you read this, our prayer is that you would see the great blessing of being generous with your home, and that you would not only use your home as a respite for souls of believers, but also as a battleground for the souls of unbelievers.

THE PROBLEM OF AMERICAN HOMES

Sadly, there are several obstacles to being generous with your home. First, in American culture, homes are looked as retreats and sanctuaries from a full day of work. It is no wonder that many homes are equipped with car garages where people can simply pull into the driveway after a long day and step directly into their homes. There is nothing wrong with having a car garage, but the way homes have been constructed have contributed to a culture of isolation in neighborhoods. If you really want to avoid your neighbors, you can.

Second, our culture implicitly teaches us that our homes exist merely for our relaxation and entertainment. This idea is built upon the even deeper lie that our homes are *ours* and are here to serve *us*. Maybe you come home from a long day of work, or start your evening after hours of taking care of children, and you just want to sit down, rest, and maybe watch some Netflix. Your home is a good gift from God to be enjoyed even for the purposes of rest, but if that's *all* you think your home is good for, then you are missing God's purpose for you to be generous with your home.

Trisha reminds me that an American's view of hospitality is radically different from an Indian culture's view of hospitality, and frankly, most other parts of the world. It is very common for Indian households to invite others over for tea and spend extended time with their guests. How different this is from the American temptation to keep to ourselves and compartmentalize our homes as places of retreat where we can rest and relax. In stark contrast, the New Testament calls Christians to be hospitable (Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9). The Bible calls us to an outward focus and to serve others with the gifts God has given us.

A third obstacle to being generous with our homes is the temptation to limit our relationships to a very small circle. This may lead you to avoid inviting new church members into your homes as an opportunity to get to know them better. Jesus understood the temptation to only fellowship with those whom you are familiar. The Pharisees objected to his dining with sinners and tax collectors. He responds to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means: I desire mercy, and not sacrifice. For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:12). Have you looked at your home

as a hospital for the sick who need the Great Physician?

A final obstacle is simply getting over the hurdle of finally meeting your neighbors. Say you walk outside your house to take out your trash at the same time as one of your neighbors. The conversation could go like this: “Hey, my name is Bill. What’s your name?”

“My name is Bob.”

“It’s nice to finally meet you, Bob.”

“Yeah, it’s great to finally meet you. It’s sad that we’ve both lived here for ten years and never met.”

We can all probably imagine the conversation going like this. You may think it is too late to start a relationship with your neighbors. It’s not! We don’t have to feel bad about not knowing our neighbors, but we can commit today to leverage our homes in order to build relationships with our neighbors who need the gospel.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT BEING GENEROUS WITH YOUR HOME

We’d like to invite you into our home. Our house was built in 1953 and currently has 1,100 square feet of room. When you walk into our living room, you’ll first be met by Leslie, our large dog who won’t leave you alone until you touch her. There is no dining room, just a living room and a kitchen with a small table we use for meals. There is no dishwasher, so handwashing the dishes is a daily chore. If you are anything like us, you examine your home and think there is no way we can have people over. If you struggle with fear of man, like we do, then you may think your house needs to be in perfect condition because you don’t want anyone to think you just got done filming an episode of *Hoarders*.

We know this mentality is not easy to break. We still struggle with trying to present our home in such a way that people will be impressed. However, Jesus teaches us to be generous in poverty or abundance, shack or mansion. We see how he commended the widow’s offering when she gave simply two coins, which was all she had (Mark 12:43). Are you giving Jesus all you have when you open your home? Do you let excuses and sometimes even sinful thoughts keep you from hospitality?

- ✦ What if they don’t like me?
- ✦ The house is a wreck!
- ✦ I’ll have to cook!
- ✦ We have too many kids (or a dog).
- ✦ My house or apartment is too small.
- ✦ People won’t like our neighborhood.

The hard truth is that you have no one to impress. God calls you to be faithful and to be a steward of the good gifts he has given you. Most people will just be happy that you are inviting them over to your house and not theirs.

I wish I could give you the cure to end these kinds of thoughts and excuses, but I think the best way to start is to put words into action. Colossians 3:23–24 reminds us, “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.” Once you start being hospitable and learning creative ways to be generous with your home, those thoughts and excuses will be whispers in the background.

HOW WE BEGAN

Let me tell you what we did the very first time we practiced hospitality in our new home. This story will include a number of good principles that we learned from reading *The Simplest Way to Change the World*.

Our plan was to do a cookout to get to know all the neighbors that lived closest to us (best place to start). The easiest part of this plan was we didn’t even have to invite people into our home because we did it in our front yard. Moving outside takes away the pressure to “entertain” with a spotless home and fine dining recipes. The food was cheap, easy, and unimpressive: hot dogs and hamburgers with potato salad and chips. We knew we wanted to meet as many neighbors as possible, but we didn’t want to do it alone. Jesus even commissioned his followers to go into towns in pairs teaching that “the harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.” So, we made it a team effort and invited the Butts family, who at the time still lived in Smyrna. Inviting the neighbors over was as simple as me going to each house with Nate, Timmy, and Daniel and telling them that we had some food for the neighbors. From what I remember, every neighbor came over to eat and chat with us. We even invited the guy who was at our house preparing an estimate to fix our gutters. Our goal wasn’t necessarily to share the gospel with them, but to start the foundation of building relationships with our neighbors, which almost three years later has led to many gospel conversations since that first cookout. Plus, we got to spend time with the Butts, strengthening our relationship as church members.

In telling this story, we want to help you think about how you can be generous with your home. It’s amazing how that first initial cookout with our neighbors ignited a desire to continually use our home for God’s purposes. We have never done a hospitality event the same way as the first, but there are a few things we always keep in mind

when planning to be generous with our home. The first thing we think about is whether we will invite church members or our neighbors. For a while, we decided to do at least one event with church members and another event with just our neighbors. However, in the case of our first cookout, we wanted to have both church members and neighbors. This is a great practice because it's important for unbelievers to be exposed to the love Christians have for other Christians. We have never had an event where our neighbors didn't like meeting our church friends.

We also think about what we will do at the event. Most of the time it involves food, whether we cook it, buy it, or we ask people to bring their own. We think it's important to budget for hospitality, but you really don't have to spend a lot of money. Remember, you don't need to break your back over the food or washing the dishes, because most people are perfectly happy to bring their own food or help clean up just to spend time with you. You can do game nights, watch parties, book clubs, Bible studies; do it indoors or outdoors. Eventually, you won't even have to use your home. We are lucky to live in Smyrna and have a city park right inside our neighborhood where we have invited church members and neighbors to hang out.

The last big detail we think about is the goal of this event. We want to have 1 Corinthians 10:31 on our minds; "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." You don't have to think too hard about this. When we invite church members over, we always want to deepen our relationship with them, but sometimes we want to ask them what encouraged them from the sermon, or how we can be praying for them. Sometimes we give counsel during these times. When it comes to our neighbors, we do something similar. Do we want to focus on relationship building or do we want to try to start a gospel conversation? It's important to have gospel conversations arise naturally in conversation. We want to avoid forced gospel presentations and instead let the hope of the gospel flow out of our established relationship with our neighbors.

We still make excuses and are by no means doing hospitality perfectly. We are still tempted to want to use our home for our benefit only. Yet, every time we choose to trust God and seek to be good stewards of the home he has given us for the sake of those closest to us, we have only been blessed. The blessings of being generous with your home will help you avoid the bad thoughts and excuses, but most importantly, it will motivate you to be further generous with your home.

PERSONAL STORIES OF GENEROSITY

God will bless you if you are faithful to be generous with your home. Obviously, we don't mean that God will give you a bigger house just because you open your small house to others. We are referring to the spiritual blessings we receive when we take what God has graciously given to us and use it to serve others. Deeper relationships is one blessing of home-centered hospitality. Sometimes this leads to life-long friendships built around the bonfire in your backyard. It can lead to confessing sin at the kitchen counter and seeing a brother or sister restored through repentance. It can mean saving a marriage through the godly counsel of a couple sitting in the living room.

We want you to catch this vision for being generous with your home. We don't think it would take much convincing for you to be generous towards church members. I think we all can agree that being generous towards our neighbors is tougher and doesn't come as naturally as it does toward people we are already connected to. But I want you to know that it is worth it. Being generous with your home towards your neighbors is worth the struggle, the mistakes, and sometimes the awkward moments. I want to show you the blessings we have experienced so that you too would catch this vision and desire to be generous with your home.

Frank and his roommates lived in the rental house next to us. I didn't know any of his roommates, but I did know Frank because he sat on the front porch of their house every evening. He came to our first cookout and that's where I met him. Since then, I would greet him each day when I came home from work. Sometimes I would go over, and we would chat. Over time, we had a good relationship, and I started to learn that he didn't have a job and was on disability. Sadly, their house was frequented by the police, and we suspected they had connections to the crack house across the street from our house. Still, I felt that he trusted me, and he trusted me enough to come over one day to ask if I would be able to drive him to the grocery store. I did, and we talked on the way to Kroger about where we grew up and how we ended up living next to each other. In Kroger, our conversation turned to more spiritual things when he asked me about my job working at a church. In most cases, this is easy for me to get to the gospel, and we talked about what Jesus did on the cross to save sinners if they repent and believe in the finished work of Christ. I had no idea if he really trusted in the gospel, and he along with his roommates moved out. I can only trust God with whether or not Frank truly believed the gospel, but I know I would never have gotten to that point if we weren't generous with our home at that first cookout.

Martha also lives across the street from our house, and she is a single mom with four boys of various ages. Their family was the first to come to our house for dinner. In almost three years of knowing them, we have had them over for dinners and even Easter gatherings where we presented the gospel. I have mowed their yard more than once, helped them with house projects, and taught their sons some important skills. Trisha has gone on many walks with Martha where they have had spiritual conversations, and I am currently teaching her oldest son to drive.

We are closest to Martha's family. They know we care for them and this, we would argue, is why we have been able to share the gospel with them. We would do anything for this family, and they know that. Yes, they need the gospel, but they also need Christians to care for them and show them the love that overflows from the love we have received in Christ (Mark 12:31).

The Smith household is made up of two single moms with their kids and elderly parents. We didn't know the Smiths until one night we awoke to the sounds and lights of a firetruck and ambulance at their house. We didn't know what was going on but decided to practice some reverse hospitality. We took over a meal and found out their dad had a stroke and was taken to the hospital that night. Eventually we invited the two moms and their children over to our house. Our relationship with them has only grown since then. They have been to another one of our cookouts with some other neighbors and church members. Recently, it has been a blessing for us to talk to them about events regarding race in America because of our close relationship.

Peter and Lauren moved into the house where Frank lived. They came from Chicago to live with Peter's mom Debra. The first time we had dinner with them and their daughter Samantha, they mentioned how they never had a dinner at someone's house before. Sadly, Samantha was taken away by Child Protection Services. They were broken, and I went over to mourn with them and let them know that we were here for them if they needed anything. As I talked to Peter, seeking to give him the hope of the gospel, he mentioned that he wanted to talk to me more about Christianity. This led to Peter and I spending two years studying the Bible, working through the gospels of John and Luke. Thankfully, Samantha came home, and we later hosted a baby shower for their new baby boy. But the blessings of being generous with your home aren't always easy or happy. Peter and Lauren struggled in their relationship. We offered to do marriage counseling, but it didn't go as well as we thought. We sought to trust God even though the counseling didn't seem to work. Sadly,

the result was a broken relationship, and Peter no longer wanted to read the Bible with me. All this was very hard, but we didn't doubt the blessings of entering the lives of our neighbors. Our relationship with them is still there, though not the same as it once was. We pray God will continue to work in them and help us continue to find ways to love them and share the gospel with them

CONCLUSION

We could continue with more and more stories about these neighbors, remembering even the time the church came together to bless these families with Christmas gifts one year. We didn't even mention the relationships we have recently made with Dom and Mica, or Caitlin and Ally. It's amazing to think what God has done through that very first cookout. We have learned so much and have grown so much in our faith through being generous with our home. There are many small blessings we have seen, but we have experienced from God the great blessing that comes through relationships that lead to the gospel.

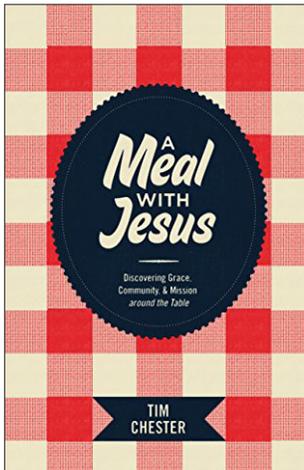
Through our journey in hospitality, God has shown us that while our neighbors are in desperate need of the gospel, what they need first is Christians in their lives who are willing to be generous with what God has given them. It's worth it. I pray you would be generous with the home that God has given you for the sake of those closest to you.

– Kyle Gross

A Meal With Jesus

Written by Tim Chester

Originally Published in the June 2018 Perspective



With an inviting gingham tablecloth, and an interesting title like, *A Meal with Jesus*, I was curious about Tim Chester's book from the start. His aim is clearly to challenge, encourage and equip Christians with a stronger theology of "grace, community and mission" around meals. Chester explains that one important way the Bible says *the Son of Man came* (think "not to be served, but to serve" or "to seek and save the lost") was eating and drinking (Luke 7:34).

Yes! He came with a clear purpose - to lay down his life to save the lost. Yet, his strategy often looked like... food! The book revisits many passages, especially in Luke, looking afresh at how these ordinary meals were ministry, whether Jesus was the host or the guest. Our Savior welcomed even those who no one else would, by inviting them to a meal, by eating with them.

Food connects people, thus creating amazing opportunities for both fellowship and gospel ministry! I was really helped by some of his ideas and examples about how ordinary people can use mealtimes. There is a helpful section on overcoming the many excuses our hearts can give for not showing hospitality.

Chester covers a lot of ground, hitting on a wide variety of topics related to meals and food that may be of interest or help too. One section, about food in general, focuses on how sin mars all relationships, even our relationship with food. That made me think!

For several reasons, I recommend this book. You'll see afresh the compassionate heart of Christ and the ways he saves ordinary sinners and uses ordinary meals. You'll long for heaven and desire more earnestly to see your friends and neighbors take a seat not only at your table, but at the marriage supper of the Lamb. You'll be more grateful for what meals represent as we receive God's kindness again and again. And, you'll be so thankful! Through the cross, Christ has created a community. Just this past Monday, we had some Mount Vernon friends kindly invite our family over to their home for a simple outdoor meal of barbecue sandwiches. Their goal was that, together, we could welcome and get to know some of their neighbors around a meal. As we talked and ate, I couldn't help but smile as I reflected on this book. The way Christ cheerfully, generously and intentionally shared ordinary meals with sinners, welcoming them, was on display. How beautiful!

– RECOMMENDED BY JAIME BUTTS

Excerpts From the Book

1

"Involvement with people, especially the marginalized, begins with a profound grasp of God's grace. Often our instincts are to keep our distance. But the Son of God ate with them. He's not embarrassed by them. He lets them kiss his feet. He's the friend of riffraff, traitors, the unrespectable, drunks, druggies, prostitutes, the mentally ill, the broken and the needy - people whose lives are a mess. Ultimately Jesus gave his life for them."

– Meals as Enacted Community, p.40

2

"It's not that meals save people. People are saved through the gospel message. But meals will create natural opportunities to share the message in a context that resonates powerfully with what you're saying. Hospitality has always been integral to the story of God's people."

– Meals as Enacted Mission, p.89

3

"We need to begin our interaction with people with a question much more often than we do. Only as we enter into their stories, their hopes, and their disappointments will our message connect and have meaning. We mustn't fear others' pain or hide our own, for Christ is with us..."

– Meals as Enacted Promise, p.127

JULY

These Scripture readings have been selected to help you prepare for the Sunday morning message. Take Up & Read!

July 1	Acts 13:13–25	July 17	Job 19:23–27
July 2	Acts 13:26–43	July 18	Colossians 4
July 3	Psalm 18:43–50	July 19	Colossians 3:1-4
July 4	Acts 13:44–50	July 20	Acts 17:10–15
July 5	Acts 17:1–9	July 21	Acts 14:1–18
July 6	Psalm 52	July 22	Acts 14:19–28
July 7	Psalm 49	July 23	Acts 15:1–21
July 8	Psalm 50	July 24	Psalm 119:105–112
July 9	Psalm 51	July 25	Acts 15:22–35
July 10	Matthew 6:19–24	July 26	Acts 17:10–15
July 11	Psalm 53	July 27	Psalm 78
July 12	Psalm 52	July 28	Psalm 78:1–16
July 13	Colossians 3:1–4	July 29	Psalm 78:17–31
July 14	Colossians 1:1–23	July 30	Psalm 78:32–55
July 15	Colossians 1:24–2:23	July 31	2 Peter 3:1–9
July 16	Colossians 3		

***Sermons in bold**

TAKE UP & READ



Mount Vernon
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