

# *Loving the Least*

## **Your Life Mission:**

**Luke 14:12-14**

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Many people visit cemeteries on Memorial Day. They place flowers on graves or just pause to remember and give thanks. Have you ever strolled through a cemetery and looked at the epitaphs? I have. One grave marker read, "He was just a man, but he walked with God." What a tremendous tribute! The marker of a hypochondriac read: "I told you I was sick." I'm afraid mine will read: "Gone to another meeting!" or "Had good intentions!" Ouch! Memorial Day calls us to pause and think about how we want to be remembered. Wouldn't you like to be known for your deeds rather than intentions, for pursuing and fulfilling God's purpose for your life? Wouldn't you like to be known for completing your mission?

We've discussed your mission these last few weeks. In fact, I know five things about your life mission. God wants you to (1) defeat death, (2) prove how great his will is, (3) reproduce life, and (4) reach the entire world. The fifth thing God wants you to do with your life is seen in Christ's comment to a leading Pharisee.

It was a Sabbath and Jesus was eating in the home of this Pharisee. The leader had invited friends, neighbors, dignitaries and many others. It was a banquet, and I think you would have liked this Pharisee. He had to be warm, friendly, and generous to become so influential. His banquet was a hot ticket. People even jockeyed for position at the table near him. After Jesus gave those status seekers some advice, he later turned to his host and said:

***When you put on a luncheon or a dinner... don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors. For they will repay you by inviting you back. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the godly, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you.*** (Luke 14:12-14, NLT)

Although Jesus directed these words to a respected leader who excelled at hospitality, God prompted Luke to record it for us. What does God want us to know? What are we being instructed to do? How do Jesus' words to this Pharisee impact our life mission?

First, every believer has a call to host people. The Bible urges us all to practice hospitality. Paul wrote:

***When God's children are in need, be the one to help them out. And get into the habit of inviting guests home for dinner or, if they need lodging, for the night.*** (Romans 12:13, NLT)

God wants you to develop the habit of hospitality. He wants you to personally care for his children and be known for it. Peter wrote:

***Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.*** (1 Peter 4:9, NIV)

God knows that hospitality is work. It isn't easy. It isn't cheap or convenient. There will be reasons to grumble. Yet, if you grumble, the work won't go better. Your life will become drudgery, and you won't see or enjoy many of the blessings. Besides, grumbling by nature is inhospitable. Do you want to be hosted by a grump? A positive attitude is critical. The writer of Hebrews helps us cultivate one. He declared:

***Don't forget to show hospitality to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it!*** (Hebrews 13:2, NLT)

Would you welcome people more often into your home, feed them, and open a bed room to them, if you thought you had a 1-in-10 chance of entertaining an angel? If 1-out-of-10 strangers you hosted was an angel, how many angels would you have entertained this year? I think many of us would answer "zero". We are not as hospitable as we like to think.

We may be reluctant to host others because we are busy, preoccupied, disorganized, financially stressed, messy, or afraid of disapproval. We may host friends, but steer clear of strangers because of fear for our safety. One reason early believers were more hospitable is they teamed together. In that way, they shared the burden and lessened the risk.

I'm reminded of Buddy the blind horse. A city couple met Buddy when they took a drive in the country. A tire on their car blew and they ended up in a ditch. The farmer brought Buddy to pull them out. He hitched the horse up to the car and then yelled, "Pull, Nellie pull!" Buddy didn't move. He cried, "Go, Buster go!" Buddy just stood there. He then hollered, "Pull, Cocoa pull!" Still nothing. Then the farmer nonchalantly said, "Pull, Buddy pull!" And the horse easily dragged the car out of the ditch. The couple stood there appreciative and utterly amazed. The wife could not contain herself anymore. She blurted to the farmer, "Why did you call your horse by the wrong name three times?" He explained, "Oh, Buddy is blind. If he thought he is the only one pulling, he'd not even try."

I think we are like Buddy. We're more apt to pull with others. We'll do things if we know we are not alone, and hospitality is best done in teams. Bethany was a community known for hospitality. It was in their name "house of dates," and the people were hospitable. Jesus and his followers often stayed, rested and dined with people from Bethany. God ordained that we as a congregation would carry that name in this community and region. Additionally, Rochester, Minnesota is a community called to hospitality for the sick and needy. It is the chief business of our community and what we are known for in much of the world. Teaming for hospitality is in our name, and it is in our call.

The leading Pharisee didn't have trouble hosting people. Jesus didn't tell him to host people. He was already doing it. Jesus didn't tell him to invite people into his home or share

food. It already was his custom. Instead, Jesus said “When you put on a luncheon or dinner,” do this. Change the invitation list. On the current list were friends, associates (brothers), relatives, and wealthy neighbors. How does that differ from your list? Jesus put forward a new one. He told the host to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. Those folk had no income, no marketable skills and no influence in their community. The host could not profit from serving them. His goals could not be advanced. They could not repay him. The investment would bring no return in this world.

Although Rochester is known for hospitality, most every one expects to be repaid. The hospital looks to get paid. The hotels and restaurants expect money, but what about you and me? Our God loves his poor, crippled, lame and blind children as much as those who are wealthy, influential and industrious. He cares for them. Who shows that care to them?

When I was in graduate school, we had our first daughter. Diane worked evenings as a nurse in a hospital while I studied and cared for our baby. One evening the baby spiked a high fever. We had discussed the situation with our doctor; but as I sponged the baby off to get the temperature down and then paced back and forth holding my sick daughter, I frequently called my wife at the hospital for reassurance. Writing papers, reading books, watching TV, talking with friends, nothing mattered. Only my daughter! None of you parents think that’s admirable. You know that’s normal. If you have the heart of a parent, the suffering of your child squeezes out any other concern, any other activity, right? It even squeezes out other people on the invitation list. When you have only so much time, only so many resources, you focus on what concerns you most. The afflicted children!

When the first believers received the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, they experienced the love and heart of God their heavenly Father. From that moment on, God’s lost

and hurting children were carried in their hearts. When we are filled with God's Spirit, we are not only flooded with a passion for God. We also carry a passion for his lost and hurting children. God's hurting and afflicted children, those we might see as the least, become the most to us. That is so true and so compelling that Jesus said in the final judgment when he separates the sheep from the goats, the forgiven from the damned, he will focus on our treatment and love of the least. Jesus said:

***I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me... Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.*** (Matthew 25:35-36, 40, NIV)

If Jesus focuses on this in our judgment, then doesn't it follow that this is our life mission? With Jesus' words to that Pharisee God is not only calling us first to hospitality; but second, every believer has a divine invitation list to call. If you receive Jesus so that he dwells within you, then his heart lives within you. Has his heart influenced your heart and your invitation list? God has an invitation list. Is it your list? Who is on your relationship list? Who is on your invitation list? How are you treating the stranger he sends you? Do you have a shot at entertaining angels? Are the poor on your invitation list? Are they in your prayers?

Let's not be remembered for good intentions. What practice or habit will you form to obey Jesus and fulfill your mission? Will you do something daily, weekly and monthly? Will you pray daily, give weekly and invite monthly God's precious children (though they are afflicted and can not repay you) into your home or take them to dinner? What will you do? Will you team with others in hosting and helping them? The least of these need your relationship as much as they need any assistance. Will they get a few bucks from you or will they have you as their friend... and as their family? Do you understand your life mission?