

1

Cleaning the House and Your Heart

Hospitality is about more than a clean house and gourmet food. It's really about building relationships. In a perfect world, we will welcome drop-in visitors and find an uncluttered place for them to sit. And for invited guests, we will do a little planning ahead—drag out the vacuum, clean the bathroom, and think about what we'll serve our guests.

There is, however, something much more important than cooking and cleaning. What is essential in building relationships through hospitality is the condition of your heart and attitude. Hostessing may come naturally to you, or maybe you feel you need some help in developing your hospitality skills. Either way, God asks us all to welcome guests to our table. Do we do as He asks with joy or with a sense of obligation? All of us have our own unique ways of sharing this gift. So let's look beyond the snack table and see what's available at the main buffet.

God sets a feast table of blessings before you, and He pours grace into your life. Hospitality is a gift He wants you to open. He wants you to smile with pleasure and say, “Thank you, I can hardly wait to use my gift. It’s going to be so much fun!” He knows it is just perfect for you.

Does hospitality fit you as if it were tailor-made the first time you try it on? Or is it a little tight in the shoulders? Is it a fun thing you want to use right away, or are you ready to return it? As God has showered you with His love and graciousness, He wants you to mirror His love and graciousness to His world—using your gift of hospitality.

To prepare your heart and attitude for this gift, this first chapter is a collection of devotionals that will help you see the spiritual value of serving others through hospitality. Reflect on these thoughts and think about ways you can love others.

The Menu Varies

Do you love eating out? There are so many restaurants I enjoy. The Cheesecake Factory and Chez Panisse are two of my favorites. They aren’t alike. One is large and bustling, and the other is small and intimate. There’s another difference.

The Cheesecake Factory menu reads like a

book. It's overwhelming. Chez Panisse has one selection; the chef decides what to make each evening. The Cheesecake Factory's extensive menu mixes and matches basic sauces and simple ingredients in endless variations. Chez Panisse relies on the excellence of local, fresh ingredients and the creativity of the chef. Whether you prefer to have unlimited options or just one choice, both these approaches are sure to satisfy and delight.

I thought of the way God serves a menu of choices in my life. Sometimes my life is the Cheesecake Factory. He mixes and matches His basic truths with what I need. I long to feel His love, and someone appears offering the very thing I crave. I pray for direction, and I suddenly remember a Bible verse, or just the right verse leaps off the page as I read. If it's discipline I need, God gives a life lesson. He serves me from His extensive menu of love, grace, forgiveness, comfort, discipline, and compassion in endless combinations. But sometimes, like the chef at Chez Panisse, God offers one choice—served His way.

Whether God gives me what I need in the moment, like the short-order cook at the Cheesecake Factory, or whether He provides the same loving truth elegantly presented like the chef at Chez Panisse, God serves me the very best. He doesn't

sugarcoat the meal. He doesn't force me to eat what He provides, but I am not served something else. If I gorge on junk food, God will not chastise me into accepting His meal, even though He's disappointed with my choices. He will, however, offer His truth on a silver platter again and again until I recognize that what He offers is marvelous and savor it.

For the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the LORD, who has compassion on you (Isa. 54:10).



Food for Thought

- What lesson is God trying to serve you today?
- Are you ready to sample His menu?
- Can you remember a time God gave you just the morsel you needed? How did you respond?
- God gives us just what we need to grow in faith. You may be the one offering your guests just what they need that day.

Savories

Life often rolls along in a steady repetition of work and play. It seems nothing big happens; life is made up of lots of little things. Each day seems like the day before. I get sucked into life's rhythm, and I don't take time to notice the tidbits of delight sprinkled around me. And there are plenty:

- fresh figs from the farmers' market
- clean, crisp sheets on my bed
- gas prices down a nickel
- a short wait in the checkout line
- a favorite song on the radio
- a ruby-red sunset with purple clouds
- a funny comic strip
- an unexpected phone call from a friend
- fresh flowers on the kitchen table
- a sleepy morning hug from my son
- the smell of autumn in the air

I savor tiny treats that flavor my days with sweetness. They take the tart out of my mood. They season my outlook with positive thoughts. These are the morsels God slips in my day. Little blessings.

God doesn't sugarcoat life, but He does spice things up with pleasant sensations. When I enjoy the goodies, I find it's easier to pass over the taste of bitterness that threatens to sour my world. God

offers me a banquet of bite-size delicacies that keep me from simmering in bland, tasteless stew.

From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another (John 1:16).



Food for Thought

- What savories have you enjoyed today?
- What ordinary joys have you overlooked or been too busy to enjoy?
- God shares small joys with you. Do little things come to mind you could share with guests? Make a list, then try adding a little something to your next gathering. It could be favorite foods, special music, a party favor, or fresh flowers.

Study the Recipes

I love to try new recipes. My husband and son know I want them to be completely honest when they rate a new dish. If they like it, it's guaranteed to appear on the dinner table again. If they don't, they won't see it again. Sometimes, if a dish is just on the brink of being great, we try to decide what would make it better and give it a second chance.

New recipes are my way of experimenting. Some chefs cook by instinct, but I am not so gifted; I need a recipe. I read and reread the instructions to make sure I'm heading in the right direction. Details matter: chop or mince, simmer or boil, teaspoon or tablespoon. I check the recipe.

I confess that I am not so obsessed with the details of my faith life. Sometimes my efforts are half-baked at best. I am slow to rise and seek to expand my knowledge. A seasoned cook works hard in the kitchen, has practiced techniques, and tries the recipes of others. A mature Christian works hard and is on her way to mastering the disciplines of the Christian life. But what recipes did she follow?

The Bible shows us recipes that are just right for every occasion.

- How to Love? Try 1 Cor. 13. These verses list all the attributes of love and how to use them as God does in the world.
- Want a better prayer life? Look at Matt. 6:7-15. This verse is a recipe for prayer. It tells us how to praise God, give Him thanks, and ask for His mercy and protection.
- How to build more faith? Try Eph. 6:13-18.

Here you will find all the ingredients you need in the battle for a strong faith.

These passages and many others can become favorites you will want to taste again and again. God's Word is a feast; it will fill every hunger you have. It helps to study the recipes.

Dear Father, renew my desire to dive into your Word. Help me to seek your guidance first. Amen.



Food for Thought

- Do you have favorite recipes you repeat often? What verses do you cling to?
- Have you been looking for help in all the wrong places? Reconnect with God's Word. It may be as simple as subscribing to a daily devotional. There are many to choose from. See the resources section for a list.

My Cupboards Overflow

I'm embarrassed by the bounty in my cupboards. I go to the grocery store and purchase anything I want. I don't budget for the cost of a loaf of bread, gallon of milk, or bag of chips. I buy them without thinking. It is unsettling to me to know

that many must budget to put food on the table, and some have no food at all. I am able to try new cereals, spreads, sauces, crackers, sodas, cookies, or ice cream flavors. I indulge in cherries whenever I feel like it. I purchase tiny pints of blueberries all summer. I'm embarrassed not so much by the food in my cupboards, I guess, but by my ungrateful spirit. I take food for granted.

Food is not the only abundance I take for granted. Hospitality is sometimes one of them. I find it easy to throw a big party, so I tend to forget the importance of a small gathering. I go over the top with an event, but sometimes don't think about the small welcome that would mean so much to a guest. I overdo. And the gathering becomes all about me and my house and my skills at pulling off a big shindig. I take my gift of hospitality for granted.

God has poured His abundance into my life. He's given me many blessings, from the food on my table to the peace in my heart. I am the steward of those gifts. Being a steward means sharing. All I pour out will flow back to me many times over. Taking my gifts for granted does not honor God. We are given much and expected to share, not hoard.

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over,

will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you (Luke 6:38).



Food for Thought

- Do you take your gifts for granted? What action can you take to help bring you a grateful heart? Prayer?
- How can you be mindful of using hospitality? How can you share your gifts?

Meat and Potatoes

My life is very meat and potatoes. Basic, ordinary, low on side dish excitement. When I listen to the potluck of spiritual testimonials, I feel I have nothing to offer. Do you ever feel this way? I do not have a knock-your-socks-off conversion-to-faith story. My mom and dad told me about God when I was little. I believed them, and my faith deepens over my lifetime.

I am caught thinking, *Why share my faith? No drama. No hook. Nothing to keep the audience riveted.* Instead, my story is slow and patient. God is a powerful force in my life, but there is not a dramatic “save.” I get up every day and try. I try to let God lead. Not the stuff of Hollywood. I share my

story just so others will know God will meet them wherever. He'll pull you out of the gutter, sure. But He'll also find you in the boring carpool lane or the busy fast-food line. God shows up for the ordinary as well as the extraordinary.

As you think about sharing your faith through hospitality, do you worry you will have nothing to say? Happy news: you don't have to say anything dramatic. You may have a faith story of miraculous conversion. If you are comfortable sharing it, by all means tell your story when you can. If you are like me, though, and have only the little things of daily living, share those. I find that many people overlook the little blessings. I watch for them. It's like sneaking a peek at God's glory. I know He's here; I just have to find Him. When you train your eyes, you will see Him everywhere.

Are you meat and potatoes like me? Do you yearn to be special but feel like leftovers? Here's a secret: you are special. God loves your simple meat-and-potato style. He knows there are many who will respond to your brand of hospitality. It's hearty and honest. Hospitality served up as an everyday dish is delicious. There is no need for banquet proportions of grandeur. Tell it like it is.

When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power
(1 Cor. 2:1, 4).



Food for Thought

- Do you wish for a grand story and have only humble beginnings? Write out your faith story; don't pad the details. Tell it simply. Someone out there will relate to this very story.
- How can you find the simple beauty in living with God daily? Train yourself to look for the movements of God in your life.
- Hospitality does not mean you have to put on a show, it means you have to be yourself with your guests.

Get Off the Couch

One Monday morning, my sister Nancy called to tell me she'd had a miscarriage. This longed-for baby, the answer to years of prayer, was gone. We tiptoed around each other's tender feelings and broken hearts. As we talked on Tuesday, we re-

membered that I had planned to give a dinner party for Nancy on Friday. In spite of our sorrow, we decided to go ahead with our plans. I spent Wednesday shopping for the dinner party. Thursday I spent cooking. Friday we enjoyed the dinner party, and it was a needed distraction. On Saturday, Nancy and I escaped by spending the day window shopping.

Finally, on Sunday, I lay on the couch after church trying to muster the energy to put away all the party stuff, do the laundry, and buy groceries for the coming week. Nancy called to chat. I could tell she wanted to go for a walk. Not just a walk really—a hike in the lovely hills near where I live. “Well, okay,” I said. “Sure.”

I relate this story to share what it revealed to me. God is going to call me to do His work—even when I don’t want to. Even when I’m tired and looking forward to spending time doing things that are important to me. I laughed a little. I remembered thinking “called to do God’s work” meant going to Africa or working with the homeless. I’ve learned it also means being available to someone right in my own family.

We went for a hike. I bought enough groceries for dinner. I skipped the laundry. I changed my plans, not because I’m a martyr, but because God

first offered me His grace and it was my turn to reflect it back.

Dear Father, when my enthusiasm lags, nudge me off the couch. I want to shine your love into the world even when my energy level is low. Spark me with the joy of your presence and the desire to share it with others whenever you lead. Amen.



Food for Thought

- Think of a time you wanted to stay on the couch. How did you respond?
- Was there a nudge from the Spirit that got you going? What was it?
- Using the gift of hospitality requires some effort. What will get you moving to unwrap this gift?

It's the Best!

“Can I have the recipe?”

“Sure, it's so easy.”

Women share recipes all the time. I think it should be a requirement to include the recipe with every potluck dish—especially those perennial favorites. Someone will want it. Lunchtime talks at work often end up as discussions about what to

make for dinner. Using a new idea I just heard about makes the evening go smoother.

I collect recipes. I trade them, compare them, and share them. I'm always searching for new ideas to try in my own kitchen or tracking down old favorites. It dawned on me recently that I don't talk about the gospel with the same level of enthusiasm as I hand out cooking ideas. I am quick to say, "These are the best cookies, here let me give you the recipe." I take more pleasure in giving out confetti cookies than I do in telling someone, "Hey, God loves you. In fact, God loves you so much He died to save you and now He wants to live in your heart."

The Good News is better than hot cookies and cold milk, yet I get more excited about the crumbs. It's hard for me to talk about my love of God. I get tongue-tied. Maybe the thing to do is share the Good News over a plate of cookies! Then the deeds I do will give wings to my words.

Dear Father, may our excitement for sharing the Good News burn with hot-out-of-the-oven enthusiasm. Amen.

Food for Thought



- Think of the times you were excited about

God, surprised by His actions, blessed by His grace. Write out the story to help keep it fresh in your mind. It doesn't have to be your testimony. In fact, it will be even better if it is a small thing that shows the faithfulness of God.

- Pray for an opportunity to share your excitement.



Confetti Cookies

- 2½ cups flour
- 1 tsp. baking soda
- 1 tsp. salt
- 1 cup softened butter
- 2 cups sugar
- 2 tsp. vanilla
- 2 eggs
- 4 cups Rice Krispies cereal
- 1½ cups Mini M&Ms

Combine butter, sugar, and vanilla until smooth. Add the eggs. Mix in flour, baking soda, and salt. Stir in Rice Krispies and M&M's. The dough will be stiff. Drop dough by teaspoon onto a cookie sheet. Bake for 12 to 14 minutes at 350°.

Something Smells Good

Smell is a strong memory trigger. The scent of mothballs instantly takes me back to Grammy Mabel's house on 8th Street. With the attic door open,

the scent of mothballs pressed out on me. I never knew what treasures I might find in that attic.

The aroma of fresh bread is a comfort for many. It makes me think of favorite bakeries or the happy memory of my brother making brioche in our kitchen in Annapolis. He was home from cooking school and practicing on us. His brioche tasted even better than it smelled.

The salty tang of beach air . . . warm, clean blankets . . . construction paper and crayons . . . campfires . . . roses . . . cologne . . . Sunday morning bacon sizzling. Each sniff is a vivid memory.

We can be the aroma of Christ in the world. What does that mean? Waft into someone's life with the scent of Christ. Let the fragrance of your acts of love be a strong memory trigger for others.

A hot meal smells delicious to one who is hungry. A cheery card in the mail smells like friendship to a lonely shut-in. Cleaning a new mother's home whiffs of bleaching care. Rake a neighbor's yard and sniff the musty scent of assistance. Permeate the lives of those around you with the aroma of Christ. Like cologne lingering in a room, they will breathe it in and remember.

For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perish-

ing. To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task? (2 Cor. 2:15-16).



Food for Thought

- Can you be the aroma of Christ? What small thing can you do to show Christ to someone?
- What is the fragrance of Christ in your life?
- Opening your home to guests is a wonderful opportunity to share Christ with others. Their time in your home will be a sweet memory. You can plant a seed of love.

Plan B

My brother is the chef in our family. He's been to cooking school. He's been a waiter in New York City for 20-odd years. I love to visit his home because of the tantalizing aromas. I watch, amazed, as he produces creations I would never attempt.

One year during the holidays he set out yummy nibbles that included spiced almonds. The almonds were so tasty that he had to refill the nut bowl several times as we gobbled them gone. After that visit, I found myself craving those nuts.

I called Brian for the recipe. He dictated as I jotted down ingredients and instructions.

“Yum. Thanks. I’ll try these as soon as I can get to the store for supplies.”

“Good luck.”

Half an hour later the phone rang. “Lisa, those almonds are really a pain to make. I found another recipe for pecans. I think you’ll have better luck with these.”

“Well, okay.” I was disappointed but took down the recipe. But I couldn’t get those almonds out of my mind. Brian obviously thought I wasn’t capable of conquering them. Well, I’d show him.

I bought the supplies for the spiced almonds. But making them was a time-consuming and frustrating process. Even though I followed the instructions carefully, they just didn’t come out quite right.

So, . . . I bought all the supplies for the vanilla pecans. Although the instructions for this recipe were also very detailed, they were much easier to follow. Forty minutes later I was tossing the spices on the pecans and letting them cool.

I hated to admit my brother was right. Even with his expertise, he had found the almonds tedious to produce; maybe he’d just been trying to save me the hassle. Sibling that I am, I assumed he doubted my culinary skills.

I've been through this whole experience with God too. I ask for guidance, then pursue a path of my choosing that causes me frustration. I go back and try again, paying more attention to where I should be. Just as my brother was looking out for me when he suggested which recipe was a better choice for me, God looks out for me too.

God knows exactly where we are and what we're up to. He's ready to help us through the detailed instructions of any task before us. He doesn't doubt our abilities; to the contrary, He has tailor-made tasks to fit the abilities He gave us.

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Eph. 2:10).

God's gifts and his call are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29).



Food for Thought

- What tailor-made task does God have for you? If you're not sure, list skills you love to use. You might find your next step.
- What items on this list will enhance your gift of hospitality?



Vanilla Pecans

- 1 lb. pecan halves
- ½ cup sugar
- 2½ Tbsp. corn oil
- 1 Tbsp. vanilla

Put the nuts in boiling water for one minute. Stir and drain. While the nuts are hot, toss with the other ingredients. Spread in a single layer on a baking sheet and roast for 30 minutes at 350°. Stir the nuts every ten minutes so they don't stick and burn. Pour the hot nuts in a large bowl, sprinkle with the following mixture of spices:

- ½ tsp salt
- ¼ tsp each of pepper, coriander, cinnamon, nutmeg, and allspice

Spread the nuts on a clean surface to cool.
Store in an airtight container.

Spicy Almonds

- 2 cups whole white almonds with skins, blanched
- 3 Tbsp. peanut oil
- ½ cup sugar

Heat the oil in a heavy skillet. Add almonds and sprinkle with sugar. Using a wooden spoon, stir constantly over medium heat until the almonds turn golden brown. Remove almonds to a bowl containing the following ingredients and toss:

- 1½ tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. cumin
- 1 tsp. hot pepper flakes
- 1 Tbsp. sugar



Spread the nuts on a clean surface to cool. Store in an airtight container.

The Oven

Ding. The first batch of Christmas sugar cookies was ready to come out of the oven. I grabbed a hot pad. The oven was cold. What a time for my oven to quit working! Cookies lined the counters ready to go in the oven for the cookie exchange the next day. I put in a desperate call to my neighbor who graciously preheated her oven. I began shuttling cookies back and forth. To say I was frustrated would be an understatement.

My cold oven sat empty into the New Year. It was time to replace the 35-year-old fixture, but with so many commitments at that time of year we couldn't find time to shop for a new one until mid-January. Finally, we made a selection and went home to confirm the measurements.

Monday afternoon I called to place the order. "We'll put the order in next Monday. We've already sent the Maytag order for this week." Delay number one. My wait for a working oven dragged on for four months. Everything that could go wrong, did. The oven was backordered and when one was finally delivered and installed, it was defective. Another wait. The truck bringing the re-

placement crashed. They delivered an electric model instead of gas. Delay after frustrating delay.

It seemed that every recipe I read started with *Preheat the oven to 350°*. I ran out of stovetop ideas, got tired of take-out, and the rainy season kept me from grilling. UGH! When the oven was finally successfully installed, it was almost anticlimactic. I was beaten.

I baked chicken for dinner that first evening. With the oven warm, I thought, "I'll pop in some banana bread." I went through the familiar motions of measuring and mixing. Yummy smells filled my kitchen again. I smiled. I had really missed baking.

Baking is something I do well, and it gives me great pleasure. I enjoy sharing treats. Baking is a simple gift. While I was without an oven, I felt I was being denied the opportunity to use part of my hospitality talent. That made me cranky, frustrated, and sad. I felt I'd missed opportunities to bring joy and pleasure to others. A couple of those others were my husband and son who wanted a home-cooked meal.

This experience allowed me to see how significant my simple talent is. Hospitality is an integral part of who I am. Yes, I can be gracious without offering a plate of cookies, but it feels incomplete.

We all have certain gifts and special talents. When we don't use them, we miss out. We flounder, searching in all the wrong places for something to do. And the world misses out on our unique offerings. Hospitality happens to be my gift; I want to use every aspect of it I can muster. Everyone has some measure of hospitality, and we honor God when we use that gift.

Dear Father, Thank you for giving me many gifts and blessings. Help me find ways to use these gifts for your glory. Amen.



Food for Thought

- What talents for hospitality do you have? Cooking? Decorating? Party planning? Good listening?
- What aspects of this total package excite you and make you want to get going right now?
- Are you missing opportunities to use your talents? If you want to dig deeper into finding your talents, Max Lucado's book *The Cure for the Common Life* is a great place to start.

Can We Try This, Please?

My son loves to help in the kitchen. Zach's 13 and can handle a knife, and he's becoming a pretty good sous chef (preps for the chef). Zach also loves to know how things work. He likes to tinker and tear apart, and he really likes to watch shows that tell him how it's done, whatever "it" is. When you marry these two interests, you get a big fan of *Good Eats*, a cooking show on the Food Network. The host, Alton Brown, demystifies cooking by explaining the science behind all those reactions, calculations, and combinations. He gets right down to the molecular level. The science of cooking is presented with flare and humor, and delicious creations are the result. When you follow these new lessons, your cooking becomes *Good Eats*. I'm a big fan of the show as well.

A recent episode focused on wonton wrappers. The basic premise of the show: take a chance on a new ingredient. My son was enthralled.

"Let's make those, Mom!"

"What? Potstickers? No! Those are for restaurants." Even though I'd just watched Alton whip up a batch with ease, my reaction was negative. But Zach would not be swayed.

"Let's do it. It'll be fun."

“Well, if you can find the wonton wrappers at the store, maybe.”

I was counting on the store not stocking them. But on the next grocery trip, Zach found the wrappers, and I reluctantly purchased all the ingredients we needed.

Zach had taped the show, so we watched it one more time to be sure we were ready before we started the potsticker production. We measured, we mixed, we stuffed, and we folded just as instructed. They stuck to the pan perfectly, and they steamed free perfectly. They tasted perfect. We were *so* impressed with ourselves.

Zach turned to me and before he could even smirk, I said, “I never, and I mean *never*, would have tried this if you hadn’t pushed me. These are wonderful. Thank you.”

My son’s youthful enthusiasm set the example, and he dragged me along for the delicious ride. It was only potstickers, but it got me thinking. What do I miss because I’m too intimidated to try? Have I lost all sense of adventure? Where’s my enthusiasm? Lucky for me, there are all kinds of ways for God to reach into my life and get me going again. This time He used a child. This time He reminded me there is excitement everywhere

—in my kitchen, around the corner, and across the ocean.

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future (Jer. 29:11).

Food for Thought



- Have you lost your enthusiasm? Is God calling for you to take a look around? What do you see that is beyond your comfort zone?
- What intimidates you about opening your home to guests?
- What leap of faith could you take to overcome your stuck place? Try a small thing.
- If you'd like to try Alton Brown's potstickers, you can find the recipe on Foodnetwork.com. Search for "perfect potstickers."