



Thankless Tasks

Looking to get ahead in life? Don't follow Jesus's advice.

MATTHEW KENNEDY

ON ONE OCCASION when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the sabbath, they were watching him closely... When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. "When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resur-

Matthew Kennedy is youth minister at North Park Covenant Church in Chicago.

rection of the righteous” (Luke 14:1, 7-14).

I don’t spend a lot of time in the motivational section of the bookstore, but being a twenty-something in an era of high unemployment, I hear from many friends about methods for finding success. In years past, Stephen Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* was the bible of self-help success. Before that came Dale Carnegie’s *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. More recently the popular motivational book for people looking for success is titled *Never Eat Alone* by Keith Ferrazzi and Tahl Raz.

The thesis of *Never Eat Alone* is that networking and relationships are the keys to success. Make the right connections with the right people to find success in life. Make friends with the powerful and you can expect favors to help you along. The old adage is true, “It’s all who you know.” The key to success is to earn favor with powerful people in hopes for some kind of payback.

The truth is that it’s good advice. Think of all the jobs you’ve had and all the people you know. Most of the time we find employment through a personal connection. Make friends with people in high places and find some backs to scratch. In today’s slim job market, it’s good advice. It’s un-Christian advice, but good advice.

In Luke 14, Jesus gives some bad advice, but shows us a glimpse of God’s kingdom. Jesus is at a party in the home of a Pharisee, and as was the custom in that day the guests were vying for good seats around the dinner table—not comfortable seats, but places of honor. You wanted a seat of honor to flaunt your own status as wealthy or powerful or influential. You wanted to get close to the host, the one wealthy and popular enough to throw such a party, to show that you are a preferred guest.

Observing his fellow partygoers,

Jesus tells a parable about a wedding feast and a guest who assumes too quickly the right to be in a seat of honor, only to be usurped by a more important guest. The lesson of the parable is that humility is an important virtue in the kingdom of God. This is a theme that runs throughout Jesus’s teaching: “The last will be first, and the first will be last” (Matthew 20:16). “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted” (Matthew 23:11-12). Jesus demonstrated this himself. The Prince of the universe bowed down and lowered himself to assume the job of a servant at his own last supper—to wash his disciples’ feet. Humility is a virtue of the kingdom.

But Jesus isn’t done teaching when the parable is finished. He’s established a principle, a value about humility—but the lesson needs to be hammered home a little bit. The party, the banquet, isn’t just a metaphor for honor and humility in God’s kingdom. It’s a practical application of kingdom values. To demonstrate our faith in God and proclaim his generous mercy, Jesus invites us to make a tangible effort to reflect the equality of heaven. Throw a party, but don’t invite your best friends or “BFFs.” Don’t invite the cool kids or the wealthy acquaintances that you hope to get in good with. Instead invite the most marginalized people you can think of. Invite the lonely, invite the poor, invite the powerless, invite the vulnerable, invite the loser, the awkward, the annoying—“And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:14). Jesus’s message is do not come to this party if your intention is just to get some reciprocal favor.

These words run contrary to the good advice that permeates our culture. Cultural forces of consumerism,

competition, and individualism shape our lives. We desire success at work, popularity at school, and respect and admiration in our social circles. The quickest route to these things is to harness ambition, embrace shameless self-promotion, and climb the social ladder—make those network connections. But with only so much time and energy to devote to these ambitions, the one who wants to make it to the top needs to weed out the time killers. One book on personal success actually gives this label to people who ask of us time without promise of personal benefit—they are “time killers.” Yet that is entirely antithetical to the kind of life Jesus demonstrated. How do we shift gears and truly practice a different hospitality?

Jesus invites us to practice hospitality without expectation of reward or repayment because God was first hospitable to us. God invites us into relationship with him, he invites us to become members of a family, and we are welcome guests of his indiscriminate hospitality. Hospitality and generosity in the kingdom is unlike the back-scratching of the corporate or political world we find ourselves in. It is a kindness and goodness that does not come from ourselves, but from the Spirit of God alive in us.

We all know back-scratching is commonplace in the private and public sectors. For all our talk about social mobility in our free and democratic society, studies have shown that people born into poverty tend to stay in poverty, and people born into wealth tend to stay in wealth. This has to be explained *in part* by the social circles and networks people have. Powerful friends share power with each other.

The church is not immune to this. It wasn’t all too long ago that I graduated from seminary. My classmates and I would speak about the mysteri-

ous ways God's Spirit would call us to unexpected places after graduation, but the truth is that each of us was consulting our Rolodex for contacts that could help us find jobs. We were looking to call in some favors. This is the way the world works and there is good reason for it. As we seek to staff our places of business and even our churches, we want good people who we can trust—and so we seek out people we know. In a small denomination like ours, it's not hard to find someone's cousin, sibling, or former roommate to come work for you.

Yet, we must ask if this is unfair to those on the margins of social circles. Does it perpetuate closed systems and hegemony? Do those without the privilege of powerful connections

is a reckless trust that asks our entire lives of us—our life, our resources, and even our relationships and friendships.

Let God destroy your social circles. Let God destroy the lunchroom hierarchy. Let God burn up your Rolodex and delete your friend list on Facebook. The task we have is to let faith inspire us to imagine a new community of friends and neighbors and strangers that God calls us into with good purposes. Throw a party and invite everybody (and make sure to invite the nobodies). Be irresponsible with your social capital and spend it on those who are least likely to get you anything in return.

For many of us there are few things more terrifying than leav-

Jesus's message is do not come to this party if your intention is just to get some reciprocal favor.

become forgotten? Jesus preaches that the kingdom of God is marked by a radical equality, one that is foreign to conventional wisdom. The church is called to mirror that equality and as people of faith we have a simple instruction that can be a demonstration of what we believe: expand your social circle beyond your comfort zone.

Elsewhere in Luke's Gospel, Jesus says this: "If you lend money only to those who can repay you, why should you get credit? Even sinners will lend to other sinners for a full return. Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked...be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate" (Luke 6:34-36, NLT).

Jesus asks of us extravagant hospitality and generosity because we who follow him put our trust in God's provision and God's purposes. Faith

ing the comfort zones of our social circles. Personally, I'm an introvert and meeting new people isn't easy for me. What is even more difficult for all of us, whether we be introvert or extrovert, is engaging people very different from us. Perhaps it's people from other cultures, or someone with a very different family background with whom you find it hard to make a natural connection. Crossing social barriers involves risk.

I remember being in third grade, and my elementary school initiated a new program to build bridges between the traditional classroom and special education classes. It was called "special friends." Kids in the traditional classroom would sign up to be a "special friend" with someone from the special ed class, and they would commit to play together during recess two or three times a week. As my teacher explained the program and how kind it would be kind for us to volunteer to play with disabled students, I was inspired to sign up. A few days later I was assigned my special





friend, “Sylvia.” I knew who Sylvia was. Sylvia was outgoing, she loved to play on the monkey bars, and she had Down’s syndrome.

At first I was excited to spend more time with Sylvia, but when I started to ask my friends who they had been assigned for “special friends,” I found out that no one else had signed up. Most of the kids in my class were interested in spending their recess playing basketball and flag football, not in hanging out with special needs students. I started to regret my decision, knowing that all my friends would be on the basketball court and I would be stuck at the monkey bars with Sylvia. I worried that I would start to get left behind, that I would fall out of favor with my friends. So I withdrew from the special friends program, and never acknowledged to Sylvia that we were supposed to play together.

I’ve since grown in my understanding of the marginalization that disabled people experience. When I married my wife, Nicole, I married into a family that included a disabled adult—my brother-in-law has severe autism. As my social circle has widened to include him, I’ve learned some of the social constraints that families of disabled adults have. Uncomfortable stares from strangers, awkward public encounters, and logistical challenges keep both my brother-in-law and his family from having full access to privileges most of us take for granted. It’s easy to feel unwelcome when you’re different.

Someone I admire greatly is the late priest and writer Henri Nouwen. Nouwen was a prolific spiritual writer who was also trained in psychology—and spent a good portion of his adult life teaching at Notre Dame, Yale, and Harvard. Yet, at the height of his academic, writing, and speaking career, Nouwen made the decision to chart a new course of ministry when he was

called to be the pastor at the L’Arche community in Toronto, a community of severely disabled adults. Since the residents at L’Arche did not read, this new home would be a place where his academic reputation would mean nothing and where his wonderful intellect would not be received in the same way it had been.

By some measures, one could have called this a step backward and downward in Nouwen’s career. One could imagine that peers and admirers would say, “Wouldn’t his gifts be better used to train and teach and care for other priests and pastors instead of disabled adults?” But in the days he spent serving the members of the L’Arche community, Nouwen would come to know the residents there as his friends, his teachers, and his guides. These were people without power and influence, people without connections to help get ahead. These were people who don’t get invited to parties.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus says this: “When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret” (Matthew 6:3-4, TNIV). I know for people in ministry there is great temptation for earning praise and favor. Many pastors will agree that every once in a while the thought crosses our mind, “If I can’t get paid, at least I should get glory.” This isn’t limited to receiving personal praise. All of us who grew up in this culture of competition have a strain of ambition that runs through us: we want to see fruit from our labor. We want to be effective and productive. We want ministry that gets stuff done!

Yet all God asks of us is to be faithful and trust that he will produce fruit out of our labor in his own way. You may invite a lonely person to your party and get no gratitude from

them. God still honors the hospitality you demonstrate. You may give cash to a needy person, only to find out later they spent it on drugs and alcohol. God honors the generosity you show. You may invest your time and energy in helping a friend, loving and serving and encouraging them—only to see them walk away from you. God honors the love you show. Your reward is not in the results—it is in God’s delight in you.

Christian life and action has the ability to change and transform lives and can contribute much to the world’s common good, but that is not why we follow the instructions of Jesus. We work at righteousness and generosity and justice not because we expect results, but because we believe it is right and good. We give

Hospitality.

Martin’s does not refer to itself as a soup kitchen. It is a free restaurant. Their stated goal is to show hospitality to their neighbors in the Mission District of San Francisco—a large number of whom are homeless, poor, or suffer mental illness. Martin’s has no full-time staff, and can only host a few dozen guests for each meal. Unlike in many other soup kitchens we visited, all the food is made from scratch with nutritious ingredients. The dining room is painted and decorated in warm colors, and next to it is a lovely enclosed urban garden with a picnic table that allows guests to eat outdoors when the weather permits.

We helped serve lunch and after we cleaned up, one of the volunteers took us into the garden to relax and chat.

ply to feed their neighbors for some social good, but to acknowledge the dignity that belongs to their guests as people who bear the image and likeness of God. The unclaimed remains of unidentified homeless people will not ever be able to say “thank you.” Yet Martin’s treats them with dignity anyway. Whether or not someone claims these remains or they go to a pauper’s grave makes little tangible difference in the problem of homelessness in San Francisco, but out of genuine love and hospitality and compassion in the Spirit of Jesus—they are given a dignified resting place. It is a way of saying that each of these people has an equal place in the kingdom of God.

Christians have been rightly accused of being too concerned with

All of us who grew up in this culture of competition have a strain of ambition that runs through us: we want to see fruit from our labor. We want to be effective and productive. We want ministry that gets stuff done!

of ourselves sacrificially because Jesus asks it of us, not because we can earn anything by it.

A number of years ago, when I did youth ministry in Washington State, we took our senior-high youth group to San Francisco for a mission trip. Why would one go to San Francisco for a mission trip? Because although the city is breathtakingly beautiful and full of wealth, it also has one of the highest per capita homeless populations in the United States.

We visited dozens of ministries and organizations doing compassion and justice work to serve the poor of San Francisco. We visited soup kitchens that would feed hundreds of patrons every day. Most of them could distribute a lot of warm meals to a lot of needy people very efficiently, but the place that stood out to me the most on that trip was not a large operation. It was the Martin de Porres House of

She shared with us her story of how she came to work and serve at Martin’s House of Hospitality, and how the garden is a very special part of Martin’s ministry. The garden is not merely a place of beauty and tranquility for guests, but it serves the homeless of the city in another way too.

Every year in the city of San Francisco there are hundreds of people from among the city’s homeless who die and whose remains go unclaimed at the city morgue. Many of them have known identities, but others don’t. The friends who run Martin’s take it as their mission to give these people burial, to place their ashes in the garden. A mural graces the wall of the garden depicting a leafy tree with each leaf bearing the name of the deceased—or a pseudonym of John Doe or Jane Doe if their remains cannot be identified.

Martin’s views its mission not sim-

the spiritual world and the idea of heaven to the neglect of pressing needs here on earth, but it is also true that with eyes fixed on heaven we may accomplish more good on earth than we would otherwise. Doing the right and loving thing should be its own reward—otherwise it’s just power games and back-scratching. Let us do the sometimes thankless work of discipleship, to stretch outside of our comfort zones, to call our enemies neighbors and friends, and to set aside the cultural forces of ambition and gain to instead embrace God’s faithfulness as a life for our own. Obedience to the call of Jesus involves tasks that will not be recorded in history books or even annual reports—they will not help us earn year-end bonuses, but they are remembered in heaven. By his grace we press on. Amen. ■