

Brad Johnson

How to Give a Party

Every culture has its own nuances. Would you agree with that? You just have to know what they are. I have discovered that no matter where you go, there are some elements that transcend all cultures.

No matter where you go or who you meet, everybody needs to be loved. Everybody needs to feel secure. Everybody needs a purpose, a reason to live their life, and the more I'm around people the more I discover that most people also love a great party. Would you agree with that? How many of you love a great party? Did you know that when you and I are at appropriate parties we are responding to something that God created within us? God created within us something that's very responsive to a party atmosphere. There's a story about a party in the Bible.

“Jesus said, ‘There was once a wealthy man who threw a great dinner party’ (Luke 14:15, The Message). Let's stop right there. Would you please circle the word “great” and circle the word “party.” This man is throwing a great party. Alright? Now let's keep reading. “. . . and invited many. When it was time for dinner, he sent out his servant to the invited guests saying, ‘Come on in; the food's on the table.’ Then they all began to beg off, one after another making excuses” (Luke 14:15-18, The Message). The wealthy man said to his servant, “Get out into the city streets and alleys. . . Go to the country roads. Whoever you find, drag them in. I want my house full.” (Luke 14: 21,23, The Message)! Wow! At first glance this seems to be little more than a wealthy party thrower. But if you will scratch just below the surface and see what Jesus was

really doing here, you'll find out that Jesus was teaching people about God. The wealthy man in the story stood as a representative of what God is like, and there's a lot that we learn about God from this story. For instance, it's very clear to see that God loves it when people connect. All the way back at the beginning of time the first thing we know about God is that He was very creative.

And God went through a little habit at the end of every day. He'd create something on day one, and at the end of that day He would put His stamp of approval on it, and say, "This is good." Day two He'd go out, and He'd create something else, and then at the end of the day He'd look it over, and He'd say, "This is good." Created man. He said, you know, "This is good." Do you know the first time the Bible records that God said something was not good? Here's Adam in this idealic setting, almost like paradise, I mean gardens around him, trees that are heavy laden with fruit, animals everywhere, and God looked at Adam and said, "It is not good for man to be alone." People need connection. So God put Adam to sleep. He took out his rib, he fashioned from the rib Eve, a beautiful woman. I have always wondered. What went through Adam's mind when he woke up? I mean, all he'd ever seen were trees and animals. That's all he'd seen, so he looks to the right and he's a little groggy, and he rubs his eyes and there's a tree and you know a cow. And he rubs his eyes again, and he looks to the left, and there is this woman. Well, the English translation of his first words at that moment are, "And Adam declared, 'This is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bones.'" But the exact rendering from the Hebrew is, "Hot diggidy dog." It's right there in the Bible. Yeah.

Somebody told me a long time ago God did not make any of us to be the Lone Ranger, and even if He had, the Lone Ranger had Tonto. God wants us to connect with each other, and God wants us to connect with Him. Did you know God wants to live in connection with you? All the way back God chose a people group through whom He could work throughout the course of history. God led a group of people with whom He had formed community out of Egyptian bondage. When Jesus Christ, God's only Son began His ministry on this earth the first thing He did was to gather around Him 12 people that He could train and form connections with. Paul, a great preacher, was never alone. He always had friends with him.

I think it was the theologian Dean Martin who sang, "Everybody Needs Somebody Sometime." Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 (NIV) says it a little bit better. "Two are better than one . . . if one falls down, his friend can help him up." God loves it when we connect. But we learn even more about God from this story - about the great party thrower. God loves it when people celebrate. God loves a good party. Some folks are surprised by that. I've had conversations with people who envision God as an ogre or some kind of angry deity or some type of cosmic killjoy, but that's not what we discover about God when we read the Bible. Here's what I would challenge you to do. If you do not have a copy of the Bible yourself, get one; begin to read it and just ask God, "Will You show me what You're like while I read this?" You'll get into the Old Testament, and then you'll see that there are lots of festivals that are initiated for different reasons and different seasons of life. And who do you suppose thought up these commemorative parties? God did.

In the book of Psalms, there are a lot of instructions about how we are to worship God. We find directives like these: shake the tambourine, shout for joy, laugh, and dance, and sing. Who

inspired that? God did. When Jesus Christ, God's Son was born, invitations were sent to Wise Men from the East and shepherds from the hills and an angelic choir provided background music. Whose party was that? It was God's party. Jesus launched His public ministry and performed His very first miracle at a party. It was a wedding reception, and what He did there ensured that the party would last for hours longer. It's amazing. In the gospel of Luke Jesus tells three stories in a row. He tells the story about a sheep that was lost and then it was found by the shepherd. He tells the story of a valuable coin that was missing, and then the woman who owned the coin found it. And He tells the story about a run-away son who comes home to his father. Each of these three stories are followed by a time of celebration by a large party. Do you know what Jesus was describing about these recoveries and discoveries? Jesus was teaching us what the kingdom of God is like.

What I want you to do is do a kind of a quick mental picture of two large strong rivers running their course in parallel lines and then slowly and surely they begin to work their way toward each other. Imagine what it would be like at that place where they meet. Wouldn't there be this huge surge, a powerful force that would rush forward? Well, that's the dynamic of these two ideas colliding in Scripture that God loves when people connect with each other and connect with Him; and God loves to celebrate . . . two powerful components. I know God loves this because God loves a party where people are deepening their connections with each other and with Him. He loves a celebration where joy is high and love is flowing and those who might come just to watch will get a glimpse of what heaven can be like. There is power in a good party. Do you believe that? But let's add to that even one more element. God loves it when there's a crowd. This is the heart of God.

I'm going to give you some deep theology. Put on your mortar boards. Put on your scholarly thinking. Are you ready for it? With God the more the merrier. Now it's deep...with God the more the merrier. Think about it. The greatest party of all will be at the end of time when followers of Jesus are gathered together in heaven. The Bible describes what that party is going to be like. It'll be next to a flowing river. The lights will never go out. People will never get tired. The food will have no calories. Okay, I made that up, but the other parts are true, and I'm sure you know, that last part . . . it's just going to be a blast. In preparation for heaven, every time a man or a woman or a teenager or child crosses the line of faith and places his or her trust in Jesus Christ to be the forgiver of his or her sins, to be the leader of his or her life, the Bible says that the angels in heaven celebrate. And here's the deal. God wants to have a party like that for everyone. God cannot imagine heaven without you.

Second Peter 3:9 declares that God doesn't want anyone to perish. He wants everybody at His party. The story we read just a few minutes ago gives us a peek at God's heart. Now, some who were invited to this wealthy man's party, they refused to come, had all kinds of excuses, and they begged off. But this did not stop the king or the wealthy man. What he said was, "I just want then to give invitations all over." So he told his servant, "Go everywhere you can to everyone you see and just invite everybody to come." Don't you imagine some people were shocked by that? You mean I made his invite list? You mean, he's got a place for me? He is waiting for me? He'd be honored by my presence? Did you know that the answer to all of those questions as it concerns God is yes? He is waiting for you. He has prepared for you. He would be honored to have you with Him. I mean it's just extraordinary.

Like I said earlier, when you and I are at appropriate parties we are responding to something that God has created within us. What I want to do for our last few minutes together is talk about the components that go into a great party. I mean, how can you be ensured that the parties you have are great ones? There are four items that I'm going to give you and then we'll be done, so let's get started.

Number one: love a lot. Love a lot. If you're going to have a great party; you have to have a lot of love.

It's not just so that an elite group of people can, you know, get together because, hey, the invitation list is for everybody. It's not just a feel-good experience. This is all about a compelling passion within the people of God to do all that we can to ensure that no one misses out on connection with God and connections that come from being a part of God's family. It is the burning realization that broken people can be healed, that lonely people can be adopted in to God's family, the confused people can find purpose and direction in life. That guilty people can once again have peace of mind. And all of that is possible through Jesus Christ, God's only Son.

Acts 4:12 says it as plainly as you'll ever find. Salvation comes no other way. No other name has been or will be given to us by which we can be saved . . . only this one. Which one? Jesus Christ. May I ask you a question? If you are a Christ follower, does your heart beat with a passion for those who are headed for a Christ-less eternity? I hope so.

Those of us who've had our lives changed by the love of God just desire deeply to share his love with everyone we can.

Point number one: Love a lot. Point number two: invite a lot. Notice this wealthy man in the Bible from our story that we're studying. His invitation wasn't casual. He told his servant, "You go out everywhere you can to everyone you see and urge people to come in. Compel people to come in. Persuade people to come in. My paraphrase, invite them hard. Who can you invite? Well, the answer to that question ought to be easy, those who are closest to you.

In their book, Contagious Christianity, Middleburg and Hybels talk about the power of proximity, because the Bible describes the influence of Christians like salt that's put on meat. And salt that never touches the food for the most part is pretty useless, but there's power in proximity. And every day there are people within our realm of influence that are primed and ready to hear a word of witness for Christ and to respond in a positive manner to your invitation. Now don't you know people who are not quite ready to accept an invitation to come to church? Maybe you've even tried, and they just flat turned you down. You know some people have been beat up by religion in the past. Some people, they just don't understand what Christianity means, and they're frightened about that. Some people have never been in a loving environment like the one that exists in church. So maybe they wouldn't be real open to an invitation to come to church, but they might be open to a party. Ask yourself this question: Who is in my life that I am in the best position to invite?

Jesus even commanded us, “Seek,” and He says if we will, we’ll find. So you say, “Oh, I’m not convinced, but I’m a seeker for the truth. I just want to know if all this is true.” Well, that’s good, and I want to say something to you in just a minute, but first a word to Christians.

Years ago a large religious denomination in Oklahoma asked, as I recall, over a thousand people this question. Why are you attending church? Over 80 percent said, “Not because of the preacher.” Over 80 percent did not say, “Because of the music.” Over 80 percent, better than eight out of 10 said, “We attend the church we do because a friend or a family member invited us to come.” See here’s what can happen if we are not careful. We get our invitation to God’s banquet table of mercy and grace and forgiveness and joy and love and community and connection, but then we don’t participate in sharing that invitation with others. Some people have called this attitude the holy huddle of Christianity. There are a lot of churches where Christians like to huddle together. You’ve seen football huddles. You know, they circle up, and they’ve got their arms over each other’s shoulder. Well, just think about this for a minute. If you’re not in the huddle, the view ain’t that great. You know what I mean? How do I get in? What’s going on inside? Well, here’s the deal. Open up your heart. Open up your arms and bring people with you to the party.

I heard one of the greatest descriptions of this recently at another large church in our country. When that church baptizes people, they allow friends and family members who influenced that person to Christ to gather around their friend at their baptism. They even sometimes allow them to get right in the water with them while they’re being baptized. The pastor of this church noticed that one small unassuming woman showed up at baptism after baptism, standing with her

friends and her coworkers and her neighbors as they were being baptized. The pastor finally asked, “Did you tell all of these people how to become a Christian?” Shyly she said, “No, but I knew if I brought them to this church they would hear how to become a Christian, so I decided to become a bringer.” Isn’t that great? Wow! She was a bringer! My wife, Kim, and I were at the Purpose Driven Church Conference that was a few weeks ago where thousands of church leaders from around the country and several other countries had gathered together where this church staff taught in relevant ways how to help people find their way to God. Pastor Rick was making this very point about bringers who were in the Bible. There was Andrew, who was a fisherman, and he met Jesus. You know the first thing he did? He went to another fisherman. The guy happened to be his brother and said, “Hey, I’d like to introduce you to Jesus.” Because all Andrew knew were fishermen. He told us about Matthew who was a tax collector in the Bible. Did you know that in those days people didn’t like tax collectors? Matthew met Jesus, and he thought, “How can I get all of my tax collecting friends in contact with Jesus?” You know what he did? He threw a party, and he invited all of his tax collecting friends to the party, and he also invited Jesus, so that in a party atmosphere they could rub shoulders with Jesus. These men were bringers. They understood the importance of being a bringer.

Now, I want to shift gears and say just a quick word to those of you who’d say, “Yeah, I would probably be called a seeker for the truth.” I mean, this might even be your first time at this church or your first time at any church in a long, long time. You need to understand something. When Matthew brought his tax collecting friends into a setting to meet Jesus, Matthew was just a brand new follower of Jesus himself. You do not have to be a long-term Christian to invite people to this party. When Andrew reached out to his community of fishermen and started

introducing them to Jesus, Andrew was right at the starting line of his own spiritual journey. So here's the deal. You can invite your friends to join you on your spiritual journey as well. I promise, it will mean a lot to people you care about that you invited them. All you have to say is, "Hey, I've been going to church lately." And I know, some of your friends are going to be shocked by that, and then you say, "And they're throwing a party for me and for you, and I'd like us to go together." Just as easy as that. So love a lot, invite a lot and beginning today, number three: pray a lot. Now some of you have already been doing this. Pray for those you're going to invite. Pray for those who'll be attending.

Let me ask you a question. When's the last time you prayed really hard? Let me ask it another way. When do we usually pray hard? It's when we're in trouble, isn't it? When our back is against the wall and the chips are down and the tide is high and we're nostril deep in trouble, I mean, we hit our knees and we bang the doors of heaven. We need God's help when we're in trouble.

Heard about a teen age boy who was having a blind date on a Friday night, and he wanted to make a good impression on the young lady that he was going to go out with. And it was getting late in the afternoon. He hadn't gotten her anything yet, so he drives up to a drugstore, and he parks and he runs into the drugstore counter, and he asks the druggist, he said, "I need to buy three one-pound boxes of chocolate." And the druggist said, "I understand that, you know, but I need to be fair and tell you that though I'm in the business of selling all that I can, it's less expensive if you'll buy just one three-pound box of chocolates rather than three one-pound boxes of chocolates." You with me? And the teenage boy said, "Well, I know, but I really need three

one-pound boxes of chocolates instead of one three-pound box.” And the druggist said, “I’ll sell you three one-pound boxes of chocolates instead of one three-pound box of chocolate. Said, “If you will explain to me why you need three one-pound boxes of chocolate instead of one three-pound box.” And the teenage boy said, “Well, it’s like this. I have a blind date tonight,” and he said, “When I go to pick this young lady up for the date, as we’re walking out to the car and get into the car, if she sits next to me in the car,” he said, “I’m going to reach under the seat and give her a box of chocolates.” And he winked at the druggist. He said, “You know what I mean.” He said, “Then when we get to the movie, I’m going to do the yawn move.” You’ve done this. You know. And if she doesn’t move, shrug away, I’m going to give her the second box of chocolates. And then when I take her home for the night and walk her to the door, I’d love to kiss her goodnight. And if she lets me kiss her goodnight, I’m going to give her the third box of chocolates.” And the druggist said, “Well, you’ve explained why you need three one-pound boxes instead of one three-pound box.” He sold him the three boxes. The young man went on his way. That night, went to pick up his date. He was to have dinner with her family first, and that young lady’s dad asked the teenage boy to lead the prayer for the meal. That teenaged boy prayed a prayer unlike any prayer you’ve ever heard come out of a teenager’s mouth in your life. He prayed for every person that was seated around the table, every dish of food on the table. He prayed for every missionary that had ever served in the far corners of the world. He prayed and prayed and prayed and prayed. Finally he got done praying. They had their meal. He and the young lady are walking out the sidewalk on the way to the date. Her eyes are as big as saucers. She looked at him and said, “I did not know you were so religious.” He looked at her and said, “I did not know your daddy was the druggist.” He did not know.

Do not wait until you're in trouble to begin praying. James 5:16 says, "Pray for each other." Pray that seeds of life change will be sown. Pray that your friends and family members will experience God as He touches their soul. Here's what I think's going to happen. You're going to have friends who are seeking. They're in the seeking mode. And I think the quiet voice of God is whisper across their soul while they're at the party. And God's going to start asking them questions like these: There's love here, do you feel it? Wounds have been healed here. Do you see it? There is real joy lasting joy here. Do you want it? So beginning today pray a lot.

Number four and final point: invest a lot. Each spring in Kentucky our church puts on a huge Easter pageant depicting in music and drama the life of Jesus Christ. It takes months to build the set and sew the costumes and have all of the rehearsals. A lot of time and money goes into this to get it right. But it has helped to show Christianity in our area in a way that people can understand. Because of that, it's quite powerful, and it's very compelling. Every spring it's a priority in our congregation to bring our friends and our family members to this event. because we want them to discover for themselves the life-changing power of Christ.