

Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality
in Our Post-Christian World



The
Gospel
Comes
with a
House
Key

Rosaria Butterfield

“Artfully woven into the fabric of who we are, each of us possesses an urgency to be included, an ache to be known, and a longing to be welcomed. In this book, Rosaria describes how the good news of the gospel not only meets our deepest needs but transforms us into cohorts who invite others to meet Jesus. Rosaria Butterfield’s enthusiasm for the unparalleled expression of hospitality—the Son of God on the cross drawing all men to himself—is what energizes her to practice radically ordinary hospitality and invite us all to do the same. This book will stir your imagination to generate creative ways to incorporate radically ordinary hospitality into your own life as well.”

Gloria Furman, author, *Missional Motherhood* and *Treasuring Christ When Your Hands Are Full*

“God strongly advances his cause by raising up prophetic voices of fresh insight, bold words, and powerful impact. Rosaria Butterfield is just such a voice for God in our time. *The Gospel Comes with a House Key* is Rosaria’s heart reaching out to our hearts, calling us to love our neighbors with sacrificial hospitality. This book is going to shake us all up in the most wonderfully destabilizing way.”

Ray Ortlund, Lead Pastor, Immanuel Church, Nashville, Tennessee

“This book isn’t for those who want to live the comfortable Christian life. Rosaria proves there is no such thing. She has a unique way of blending personal story and theological teaching that challenges the reader to engage in areas of both agreement and disagreement. I was sharpened well in both cases.”

Aimee Byrd, author, *Why Can’t We Be Friends?* and *No Little Women*

“It’s easier than ever to live in communities with no real sense of community. Neighbors don’t know neighbors, and our lives are lived online rather than on the front porch. Rosaria Butterfield demonstrates how living a life of radically ordinary hospitality can allow strangers to become neighbors, and, by God’s power, those neighbors can become part of God’s family. I couldn’t put this book down—it’s compelling, challenging, and convicting.”

Melissa Kruger, author, *The Envy of Eve* and *Walking with God in the Season of Motherhood*

“One cannot spend any time at all with Rosaria Butterfield without a renewed sense of how good the good news really is. This book is a needed call to the church to model the hospitality of our Lord. As our culture faces a crisis of loneliness, this is the book we need. The book will inspire you and leave you with a notebook filled with ideas for how to practically engage your neighbors with the welcome of the gospel.”

Russell Moore, President, The Ethics & Religious Liberties Commission

“The biblical call to show hospitality is one of the most overlooked or misunderstood commands in Scripture. We either ignore it or mistake it for what our culture calls ‘entertaining.’ Rosaria Butterfield gives us a vision of hospitality that pulses with the beating heart of the gospel itself. We know a God who sought us out, took us in, made us family, and seated us at his table. It’s a vision that is bracing and attractive. It daunts us, but it shouldn’t. I wonder how different our homes, churches, and culture would look if we took it to heart.”

Sam Allberry, Speaker, Ravi Zacharias International Ministries; author, *Why Bother with Church?* and *Is God Anti-Gay?*

“One of the hallmarks of the people of God is supposed to be hospitality. But in an age of commuter churches, towns disemboweled by shopping malls, and lives that are overscheduled and full of ceaseless activity, hospitality is something which, like true friendship, is at a premium. In this book, Rosaria Butterfield makes a bold case for putting hospitality back into the essential rhythm of the church’s daily life. She sets the bar very high—and there is plenty of room here for disagreement on some of the proposals and details—but the basic case, that church is to be a community marked by hospitality, is powerfully presented and persuasively argued.”

Carl R. Trueman, William E. Simon Visiting Fellow in Religion and Public Life, Princeton University

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*Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality
in Our Post-Christian World*

Rosaria Champagne Butterfield

The Gospel Comes with a House Key: Practicing Radically Ordinary Hospitality in Our Post-Christian World

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For
Kent Butterfield,
faithful husband, leader of our household, father
of our children, my courageous pastor, and
humble disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.
Not one page of this book could have been
written or lived without you.
This book is for you, with all of my love.

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Preface

Radically ordinary hospitality—those who live it see strangers as neighbors and neighbors as family of God. They recoil at reducing a person to a category or a label. They see God’s image reflected in the eyes of every human being on earth. They know they are like meth addicts and sex-trade workers. They take their own sin seriously—including the sin of selfishness and pride. They take God’s holiness and goodness seriously. They use the Bible as a lifeline, with no exceptions.

Those who live out radically ordinary hospitality see their homes not as theirs at all but as God’s gift to use for the furtherance of his kingdom. They open doors; they seek out the underprivileged. They know that the gospel comes with a house key. They take biblical theology seriously, as well as Christian creeds and confessions and traditions.

Offering radically ordinary hospitality is an everyday thing at our house. It starts early, with minestrone soup simmering on one burner and a pot of steamed rice warming on another. It ends late, with Kent making beds on the couches and blowing up air mattresses for a traveling, stranded family. A truly hospitable heart anticipates everyday, Christ-centered table fellowship and guests who are genuinely in need. Such a heart seeks opportunities to serve. Radically ordinary hospitality doesn’t keep fussy lists or make a big deal about invitations. Invitations are open.

Radically ordinary hospitality is reflected in Christian homes that resemble those of the first century. Such homes are communal.

They are deep and wide in Christian tradition and practice. As Christians we are a set-apart people, and we do things differently. We don't worry about what the unbelieving neighbors think, because the unbelieving neighbors are right here sharing our table, and they are more than happy to tell us what they think.

Practicing radically ordinary hospitality necessitates building margin time into the day, time where regular routines can be disrupted but not destroyed. This margin stays open for the Lord to fill—to take an older neighbor to the doctor, to babysit on the fly, to make room for a family displaced by a flood or a worldwide refugee crisis.

Living out radically ordinary hospitality leaves us with plenty to share, because we intentionally live below our means.

In radically ordinary hospitality, host and guest are interchangeable. If you come to my house for dinner and notice that I am still teaching a math lesson to a child, and my laundry remains on the dining room table unfolded, you roll up your sleeves and fold my laundry. Or set the table. Or load the dishwasher. Or feed the dogs. Radically ordinary hospitality means that hosts are not embarrassed to receive help, and guests know that their help is needed. A family of God gathering daily together needs each and every person. Host and guest are permeable roles.

Radically ordinary hospitality lived out in the family of God gathers daily, prays constantly, and needs no invitation to do so. And those who don't yet know the Lord are summoned for food and fellowship. Earthly good is shown as good, and the solitary may choose to be alone but need not be chronically lonely.

We practice radically ordinary hospitality by bearing sacrifices of obedience that God's people are called to offer. We don't think we are more merciful than God, so we don't encourage people to sin against him or violate what the Word of God says. We lament. We soberly know that God calls us to bear heavy and hard crosses, self-denials that feel like death. We trust God's power more than we trust our limitations, and we know that he never gives a command without giving the grace to perform it. But we know that the

struggle is insurmountable alone. When radically ordinary hospitality is lived out, members of God's household are told that they are not alone in their struggles or their joys. Radically ordinary hospitality is accompanied suffering.

Radically ordinary hospitality characterizes those who don't fuss over different worldviews represented at the dinner table. The truly hospitable aren't embarrassed to keep friendships with people who are different. They don't buy the world's bunk about this. They know that there is a difference between acceptance and approval, and they courageously accept and respect people who think differently from them. They don't worry that others will misinterpret their friendship. Jesus dined with sinners, but he didn't sin with sinners. Jesus lived in the world, but he didn't live like the world. This is the Jesus paradox. And it defines those who are willing to suffer with others for the sake of gospel sharing and gospel living, those who care more for integrity than appearances.

Engaging in radically ordinary hospitality means we provide the time necessary to build strong relationships with people who think differently than we do as well as build strong relationships from within the family of God. It means we know that only hypocrites and cowards let their words be stronger than their relationships, making sneaky raids into culture on social media or behaving like moralizing social prigs in the neighborhood. Radically ordinary hospitality shows this skeptical, post-Christian world what authentic Christianity looks like.

Radically ordinary hospitality gives evidence of faith in Jesus's power to save. It doesn't get dug in over politics or culture or where someone stands on current events. It knows what conversion means, what identity in Christ does, and what repentance creates. It knows that sin is deceptive. To be deceived means to be taken captive by an evil force to do its bidding. It knows that people need to be rescued from their sin, not to be given pep talks about good choice making. It remembers that Jesus rescues people from their sin. Jesus rescued us. Jesus lives and reigns. Radical hospitality shines through those who are no longer enslaved by

the sin that once beckoned and bound them, wrapping its allegiance around their throat, even though old sins still know their name and address.

In the pages that follow, you are invited into my home, into my childhood, into my Bible reading, into my repentance, and into my homeschool schedules, shopping lists, simple meals, and daily, messy table fellowship. You will meet my family, my parents, my children, my neighbors, my enemies, and my friends.

If Mary Magdalene had written a book about hospitality for this post-Christian world, it would read like this one.

My prayer is that this book will help you let God use your home, apartment, dorm room, front yard, community gymnasium, or garden for the purpose of making strangers into neighbors and neighbors into family. Because that is the point—building the church and living like a family, the family of God. My prayer is that you will stop being afraid of strangers, even when some strangers are dangerous. My prayer is that you will grow to be more like Christ in practicing daily, ordinary, radical hospitality, and that the Lord would bless you richly for it, adding to his kingdom, creating a new culture and a new reputation for what it means to be a Christian to the watching world. My hope is that daily fellowship would grow your union with Christ and that you would no longer be that Christian with a pit of empty dreams competing madly with other reigning idols, wondering if this is all there is to the Christian life. My prayer is that you would see that practicing daily, ordinary, radical hospitality toward the end of rendering strangers neighbors and neighbors family of God is the missing link.

If this happens, then my prayer will be answered.



Priceless

The Merit of Hospitality

May 12, 2016, 5:15 a.m., Durham, North Carolina

A text message from a neighbor came in: “What’s going on at Hank’s house?¹ Why r police surrounding the house? R u OK?” But my phone was turned off and in the other room, so I didn’t get the message.

Peaceful sleep sounds echoed from my husband and two youngest children. Even the dogs were sleeping. My Bible was open, along with my copy of *Tabletalk* magazine and my notebook. My coffee cup was in arm’s reach, sitting on a calico mug mat that my ten-year-old daughter made in sewing class. Caspian, the enormous orange tabby, was sprawled over the table, under the hedonistic, narcotic bliss of a hastily consumed can of Fancy Feast Mixed Grill. I started my devotions that morning as I have been doing for the past seventeen years and as Ken and Floy Smith modeled for me: praying that the Lord would open my eyes to see wondrous things in his Word.

That morning, after I read through five psalms and one proverb,

I began to pray. I typically intersperse prayer with Bible reading and note taking. In the morning, I pray in concentric circles. I start by praying for myself, that the Lord would increase my love for him, grow me in holiness, give me courage to proclaim Christ in word and deed as a living epistle, lead me to repent, and give me the humble mind and heart of Christ and the kind comfort of the Holy Spirit to make me a more faithful and loving wife and mother and friend. I then pray for my family, the church, my neighbors, my nation, foreign missionaries, and missions. I thank the Lord that he is risen, that he prays for me, and that he has sent people into my life, starting with the Smiths, to bring me to himself and to hold me safely close. I thank God for the covenant, of which I am a part. I keep my prayer notebook open, and I flip through the pages as I pray through the names.

That morning, my prayer time stopped at the concentric circle labeled “neighbor.” I was praying for my immediate neighbor, whose house I could see from my writing desk. I have always had a special affinity for front-door neighbors. Renee, Julie, Eddie, and now Hank. I love waking up and seeing the familiar van parked in the same spot, and as the sky yawns open, the house and people in it unveil their morning rituals (lights on, dogs out, paper retrieved, a wave of greeting, maybe a child running across the street to return a Tupperware or deliver a loose bouquet of red peonies). Loving your neighbors brings comfort and peace.

So there I was, praying for my neighbor. A typical morning. Except that the phone I had turned off, which was in the other room, continued to receive text messages alerting me that something was terribly, dreadfully wrong in the house across the street. The house of the man for whom I was praying.



Our house and Hank’s house share a dead end that stops where two acres of woods open up. When Hank’s moving van

first backed down his driveway in 2014, he was a self-described recluse. He worked in his yard digging ditches—arbitrary and perfectly round holes that delighted my children because of their cookie-cutter symmetry and the very cool black snakes Hank unearthed and shared with them. He played loud music. He occasionally received cell phone calls that got him seething mad and shouting obscenities. He owned a one-hundred-pound pit bull named Tank who ran the streets without collar or tags. Each neighbor can recall how we all saw our life flash before our eyes the first time we met Tank, bounding toward us at full throttle. Hank didn't cut his grass for three months, and by the time the city fined him for creating a meadow, no regular mower could tackle the cleanup.

Truth be told, Hank was not the neighbor we had prayerfully asked for when Eddie sold the house and moved her family to Wisconsin. But we trusted that Hank was the neighbor God had planned for us. Good neighboring is at the heart of the gospel we know. So when Hank moved in, we shared with him our contact information, introduced him to our dogs and kids, and waited for him to reciprocate.

Instead, he dismantled his front doorbell so that no one else could disturb him.

We prayed for Hank.

We gently rebuked other neighbors for being suspicious or unkind in their questions and concerns about his reclusiveness.

For a year, it was like living across the street from Boo Radley, the misunderstood and demonized character in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

And then one day Tank ran away and did not come home. One night turned into two, and two nights turned into a week. In the crisis of a lost dog—one who was also the closest companion of a lonely man—our bond was forged. We offered our help, and Hank received our open hand. We posted Tank's information on neighborhood listservs and enlisted other neighbors to come to Hank's aid. My ten-year-old daughter cried herself to sleep each night

as she prayed for Tank's return, and she told Mr. Hank about her prayers and God's faithfulness.

When Tank was finally found safe and sound, we became friends. We started to walk our dogs together. Soon, we were eating meals together, spending holidays at our table, and sharing life. We learned that Hank lived alone, had severe clinical depression, PTSD, ADHD, and social anxiety.

Hank loved the woods as much as the children and I do. As winter opened into spring, we kept tally of our nesting red-shouldered hawks, our calling American toads, our migrating and returning robins, blue jays, woodpeckers, towhees, and ambling box turtles. Hank helped us chop down our dead trees and stack our wood. In his garage he always had the knick-knack one might need: a small flashlight to attach to a reflector vest for a night run, a hook that could hold doggie bags to the leash.

Hank was uneven. His depression made him so. Sometimes he stayed secluded in his home for weeks on end. We'd text and offer to help but to no avail. The only sign of life was that his garbage can would appear at the curb on the appointed night.



As neighbors were texting my turned-off phone about danger at Hank's house, I was sitting at my desk, praying for Hank.

I was praying for Hank's salvation.

And then I noticed it: burly men ducking around the back of my house, wearing orange shirts marked DEA—Drug Enforcement Agency. Serene darkness exploded with the unnatural intrusion of police lights. Yellow tape appeared everywhere—"Crime Scene." I left my Bible open to Psalm 42 and ran to wake Kent and the children. I grabbed my phone and turned it on. The text messages bounced into life: "What's going on at Hank's house? I hear there is a meth lab across the street from you!"

What does the conservative, Bible-believing family who lives

across the street do in a crisis of this magnitude? How ought we to think about this? How ought we to live?

We could barrack ourselves in the house, remind ourselves and our children that “evil company perverts” (see 1 Cor. 15:33), and, like the good Pharisees that we are always poised to become, thank God that we are not like evil meth addicts.

We could surround our home in our own version of yellow crime-scene tape, giving the message that we are better than this, that we make good choices, that we would never fall into this mess.

We could surround ourselves with fear: What if the meth lab explodes and takes out my daughter’s bedroom (the room closest to the lab) with it?

We could berate ourselves with criticism: How could we have allowed this meth addict into our hearts and our home?

But that, of course, is not what Jesus calls us to do.

As neighbors filed into our front yard, which had become front-row seats for an unfolding drama of epic magnitude, I scrambled eggs, put on a big pot of coffee, set out Bibles, and invited them in. Who else but Bible-believing Christians can make redemptive sense of tragedy? Who can see hope in the promises of God when the real, lived circumstances look dire? Who else knows that the sin that will undo me is my own, not my neighbor’s, no matter how big my neighbor’s sin may appear?

And where else but a Christian home should neighbors go in times of unprecedented crisis? Where else is it safe to be vulnerable, scared, lost, hopeless?

How else could we teach our children how to apply faith to the facts of life, a process that cancels out neither reality as it begs Jesus for hope, help, redemptive purpose, and saving grace? If we were to close the shades and numb ourselves through media intake or go into remote monologues about how we always knew he was bad, or how we always make good choices, what legacy would that leave to our children? Here is the thing about soothing yourself with self-delusion: no one buys it but you.

Priceless

I had other things on my list of things to do that day but none more important than what I was doing. Gathering in distraught neighbors. Praying for my friend Hank.

Quickly and organically, our house became an all-day crisis station.

Neighbors—from children to the aged—who did not have to report to school or work stayed the day with us.

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