

No Place at the Table

Discussion Guide for *A Place at the Table*

How is it possible that people in this country continue to go hungry, despite our abundance of food?

A Place at the Table, a new eye-opening documentary, answers that question through the lives of Americans across the country for whom putting food on the table is a daily struggle. Their stories reveal the depth of the hunger crisis in America, the factors that drive it, and the progress we have made in the past.

Bread for the World is a major alliance organization of the film, which is produced by Participant Media and distributed by Magnolia Pictures. Bread for the World's 2013 Offering of Letters coincides with the release of the film and is also called "A Place at the Table."

This reflection on *A Place at the Table* can be used by small discussion groups after the movie or as an hour-long Sunday adult education class at your church. Or you can use this as part of your daily meditation.

I. *A Place at the Table* and the Bible

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. (Isaiah 25:6)

Reminiscent of the Genesis description of God's intention in creation, Isaiah depicts a universal sharing of God's abundant provision. Isaiah's prophecy of God's intention for the world presents a glorious contrast to the state of the poor man Lazarus described by Jesus in the Gospels.

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. (Luke 16:19-21)

Jesus was a master storyteller. With two sentences, he paints an unforgettably graphic scene. Purple and fine linen, sumptuous feasting on the inside. Poverty, disease, and desperation outside.

Lazarus clearly has no place at the rich man's table. Not at the children's table; not even at the servants' table. In fact, his life is pretty much defined by his absence from the table.

We have little indication of why Dives, the rich man in the story, ends up in Hades. In the parable, Abraham reminds the thirsty Dives of his previous wealth. Abraham's words could be interpreted to mean that his enjoyment of the good things on earth disqualifies him from the good things after death. But the placement of the parable in the Gospels—immediately after the admonition that one cannot serve two masters (Luke 6:18)—may lead us to assume that Dives portrays the one who "serves wealth" and not God. It is safe to assume that "serving God," in Dives' case, would have meant ensuring that Lazarus had a place at the table.

The movie *A Place at the Table* depicts a world somewhere between these two biblical images. We do not see Lazarus, covered with sores and lying in desperate starvation. Nor do we see a shared table full of God's great bounty. We do see how people who are poor, sick, and struggling for employment fail to share fully in America's bountiful harvest. We do see efforts—both of Christian charity and public programs—to share some of that bounty with those in need. And we hear a call from secular and faith leaders that, like Dives, we can do more.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever been in a situation in which you felt that you didn't have a place at the table? Have you seen that kind of exclusion in the lives of friends or family members?
2. How would you describe God's expectation of how the bounty of creation should be shared? Considering God's judgment of Dives, what do you think God expects of us?



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Bread for the World is a collective Christian voice urging our nation's leaders to end hunger at home and abroad.

II. Who is Hungry? Why?

A Place at the Table introduces us to the stories of three Americans who struggle with hunger and poor nutrition.

- Rosie, an imaginative fifth-grader, tries to distract her mind from hunger pangs as she learns and grows in rural Colorado.
- Barbie, a young Philadelphia mother, fights to make ends meet and break the cycle of poverty.
- Tremonica, a sunny Mississippi second-grader, struggles with health problems caused by the poor nutritional value of the food that her mother can afford.

Each of these people lives in a household that struggles to feed its family well. We watch them make wise decisions—and questionable ones. We also see the roadblocks that frustrate their best intentions.

Discussion Questions

1. What most impressed you about the people whose stories are highlighted in the movie? What most surprised you about their situations?
2. Where did they find help? What factors worked against them?
3. What would it take to ensure a place at the table for them?

III. The Church's Role

A Place at the Table highlights the efforts of Pastor Bob Wilson and Plateau Valley Assembly of God Church to feed hungry people in Collbran, Colo.

Pastor Wilson says: “The Church should always be in the community. And I believe we are doing exactly what Jesus would have us do. And it’s exactly what he is doing in the world today. Jesus was involved in those around him. Jesus fed 5,000. We fed 5,000 here in the not too distant past.”

Most of the 35,000 food distribution and feeding programs in the United States are sponsored by communities of faith. Many of them date to the 1980s when government programs were cut back. Almost all report growing need over the past decade. Pastor Bob describes the growth of his food ministry—from 10 to 15 boxes of food ten years ago to “four pallets twice a week,” currently.

This story is repeated in churches large and small across the country. Despite all of this effort, however, private contributions account for only 5 percent of the food that goes to poor and hungry people in the United States. Ninety-five percent is provided by government programs. That means that a 10 percent cut to government programs would require churches and private charities to triple their efforts over the next decade.

Discussion Questions

1. What food ministries does your church support?
2. What has been your church’s experience with growing need?
3. Some say that feeding people is the church’s responsibility. Others say that the church has had to step in because government funded programs have been cut back. What do you think?

IV. Our National Commitment

In Matthew 25, Jesus says that nations will be judged by how they respond to the hunger of “the least of these”—those with whom Jesus identifies. *A Place at the Table* raises many questions about our nation’s commitment to ending hunger. It tells us that when we have really tried to reduce hunger we have been successful. But it also points out many areas in which our national policies and priorities work against ensuring a place at the table for all Americans.

As a group, reflect on what anti-hunger experts say in the movie. How would you describe our national commitment to ending hunger?

- Actor **Jeff Bridges**, speaking of hungry children in America:

It’s just appalling. You know if another country was doing this to our kids we would be at war. It’s just insane and it doesn’t have to be that way.

- **Dr. Mariana Chilton**, Associate Professor at Drexel University’s School of Public Health, reacting to Congress funding Child Nutrition Program enhancements by taking funds from SNAP (food stamps):

You can’t push a tiny bit of mashed potatoes from one side of the plate to the other and say, okay, now we have fed you.

- **Rev. David Beckmann**, president of Bread for the World, calling for greater government efforts to address hunger:

With all of that expansion of private feeding, all that effort, especially by the faith communities, we have not reduced hunger.

Discussion Question

1. What would it take to get America to really try again to end hunger?

V. Closing Prayer

Most generous God, you have created this world and plentifully provided for all our needs. We know it must sadden you to see that some people have no place at your bountiful table. We pray that you will help all find the nutritious food they need to strengthen their bodies. Help us to find ways to serve you through serving them. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Additional Resources

- The Bread for the World website offers additional resources for **A Place at the Table: Bread for the World’s Offering of Letters** (www.bread.org/go/ol).
- A Christian study guide is available online for the 2013 **Hunger Report: Within Reach** (www.hungerreport.org). This six-session study guide provides a broad overview of what we Christians should do to end hunger.
- Rev. David Beckmann’s book *Exodus from Hunger* explains how God has been moving throughout history to end hunger and poverty (www.exodusfromhunger.org). Beckmann is president of Bread for the World.
- A companion book to the film, also titled *A Place at the Table*, is available for purchase online (www.takepart.com/table).