

BIG TRUTH LITTLE BOOKS®

WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT HOSPITALITY

Cliff McManis

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What the Bible Says About Hospitality

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CONTENTS

<i>Series Preface</i>	<i>xi</i>
Introduction	1
1 What is Biblical Hospitality?	5
2 Hospitality in the Old Testament	19
3 Jesus and Hospitality	39
4 Hospitality in the Balance	61
5 Living Out the Ministry of Hospitality	77
6 A Testimony on Hospitality	87

SERIES PREFACE

Our mission with the *BIG TRUTH little books*[®] series is to provide edifying, accessible literature for Christian readers from all walks of life. We understand that it is often difficult to find time to read good books. But we also understand that reading is a valuable means of spiritual growth. The answer? Get some really big truth into some little books. These books may be small, but each is full of Scripture, theological reflection, and pastoral insight. Our hope is that Christians young and old will benefit from these books as they grow in their knowledge of Christ through His Word.

Cliff McManis, General Editor
Derek Brown, Series Editor

INTRODUCTION

“Love ye...the stranger...” (Deut 10:19, KJV)

When you hear the word “hospitality” what is the first thing that comes to mind? Do you think of Oprah, the most high-profile philanthropist of our day? Or maybe Martha Stewart, the popular and inveterate specialist on all things “entertaining”? Many think of the Catholic nun, Mother Theresa, the incomparable modern model of one who cared for others selflessly and constantly. Or, maybe your thoughts raced in some other direction.

“Hospitality,” or the idea of welcoming a stranger into the community by meeting practical needs like food and shelter, has been a common practice by many social groups all over the world since ancient times. The Bible, however, elevates this practice with higher spiritual and theological nuances, with greater implications regarding the roles of the host and the guest by virtue of God’s role as the ultimate Host throughout history, and Christ’s role as both Host and Guest during the course of His earthly ministry. So biblical hospitality is

distinctly set apart and completely unique compared to all other forms and definitions of hospitality. The goal of this little book is to show why that is the case.

Christians are commanded to practice hospitality. Scripture clearly exhorts believers to be “practicing hospitality” (Rom 12:13). But the sad fact is that biblical hospitality is a long lost and forgotten reality in many quarters of the church. Many saints don’t practice hospitality. Some professing Christians are not even aware that hospitality is a basic Christian virtue that God expects from all believers. Others think hospitality is optional. A good number think it is primarily or only the task of the professional clergy. Worst of all are the countless Christians who have a faulty understanding of what hospitality is according to the Bible. Many have bought in a worldly and secular counterfeit instead. Hence the need for this little book.

Christians need a fresh reminder from Scripture about the true meaning of biblical hospitality. God has empowered believers with the Holy Spirit to work out their salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12); Christ has saved us to carry out good works toward others (Eph 2:10); believers are obligated to stimulate one another to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24). Regularly practicing the ministry of hospitality is fundamental to what it means to work out our salvation, to do good works, and to stimulate one another toward love and good deeds.

Introduction

In the future at the final judgment, Christ will judge us based on our works (Rom 2:6-7; 1 Cor 3:13). How we dealt with the divine imperative of “practicing hospitality” will be part of that eternal assessment of our stewardship. For those who were faithful with the holy charge to be hospitable there will be blessing, honor, and reward (Rom 2:7; 1 Cor 3:14). For those who neglected or spurned the call to be hospitable, there will be loss (1 Cor 3:15).

Being hospitable in a biblical manner gives glory to God, exalts Christ, shows dependence on the Spirit, edifies the Church, blesses those in need, and is a tremendous witness to a lost and watching world. In pursuit of these admirable goals we begin with chapter one to establish a biblical definition of hospitality.

WHAT IS BIBLICAL HOSPITALITY?

Wrong Views

Many people have crazy notions about what constitutes hospitality. Even Christians have surprisingly odd ideas about it. I remember one church-goer who routinely chided me about the elders of the church not fulfilling their mandate to be hospitable. This person would say unabashedly, “First Timothy three, verse two says elders need to be hospitable. But the elders aren’t inviting me to their house for dinner!” This church-goer was serious. Ironically, this impassioned enforcer of New Testament imperatives was not inviting church elders over for dinner either. For this discontented saint, hospitality was a one-way street. As we talked about what hospitality actually means in the Bible, he was adamant that it meant inviting church people over to your house and providing a meal...and it should begin

with the elders setting the example. But the simple reality is that hospitality does not mean having your friends over for dinner. That is a misguided and truncated view of what the Bible actually teaches on the matter.

Other Christians have told me that hospitality means going down to the food shelter regularly and handing out cold-cut sandwiches to the poor and homeless. Others propose it is giving a dollar to the guy at the freeway intersection with the cardboard sign, “WILL WORK FOR FOOD.” Some Christians restrict hospitality to doing good for unbelievers only. But none of the foregoing actually reflect a complete picture of what the Bible says.

Another popular understanding among Christians is that hospitality is simply having people in your home. That is not a definition of hospitality, but it may be an application of hospitality. If you have a few people in your home for a weekly Bible study, that is not necessarily hospitality—that is a Bible study. If you have friends over for prayer and singing worship songs, that is not hospitality—that is fellowship. If you have several buddies over for the Super Bowl and snacks, that is not hospitality—that’s a Super Bowl party.

Another popular but mistaken view of hospitality taught by Christians is the notion that hospitality is one of the spiritual gifts given by the Spirit to certain believers, making a few more suited to employ hospitality than others. This is not true. Hospitality is a

What is Biblical Hospitality?

mandate God has given to the whole Church collectively and to every Christian individually. If you are a Christian and you are averse to practicing hospitality, it doesn't mean you don't have the gift; rather, it may mean that you are ignorant, have a bad attitude toward this obligation, or simply are holding onto a sinful attitude. All Christians are susceptible here. With regard to spiritual gifts, it is true that there are spiritual gifts (Eph 4:7), and the Spirit does sovereignly distribute the gifts (1 Cor 12:11) to every Christian (12:7). And no Christian has all the gifts (12:29). But hospitality is not a gift; rather, it is a universal ethic, practice, virtue, and obligation. Just as love, prayer, evangelism, discernment, the "one-anothers" and all the other imperatives of the New Testament that are not specialized gifts, but rather commands given by God, so hospitality is a command for all.

In addition to pop Christian renditions of "hospitality" are widespread secular notions. *The English Oxford Dictionary* is typical, which defines "hospitality" as follows: "The friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers. Relating to or denoting the business of entertaining clients, conference delegates, or other official visitors." The emphasis in this secular definition is on entertainment.

It's from this kind of definition that the chasm grows even wider, distancing the modern understanding of "hospitality" from a biblical notion. Today many universities offer degrees in "hospitality management"

which focus on hotel and restaurant management. For example, the Ivy League school, Cornell University in New York, is considered by many to have the best hospitality major in the country. But with this kind of “hospitality” we are far adrift from the biblical mandate of what God meant when He obligated the saints to live hospitable lives.

It is understandable why there is much confusion among Christians over the word “hospitality.” The Old Testament was written in Hebrew over 2,500 years ago and the New Testament was written in Greek 2,000 years ago. Yet, our English word “hospitality” is of recent origin finding its derivation from Old French and Medieval Latin.¹ As a result, as is so often the case, much gets lost in translation.

One English dictionary defines hospitality as “friendly treatment of guests.” This definition is based on the Latin root which is *hospes* - meaning “guest.” This Latin root is the basis of related words like host, hostel, hotel, hospice, hospital (originally meaning “guest house” then over time morphing into “care of the sick”).² But all these words have a slightly different nuance than the fully-orbed biblical concept. In your modern English Bible, you will find the word “hospitality” only three or four times (cf. NASB, ESV) and the word “hospitable” two times in the New Testament. You won’t find the words “hospitable” or “hospitality” at all in your English Old Testament!

Hospitality Means “Stranger-Love”

Why so few references of the word “hospitality” in the Bible? It is because the literal biblical expression for the concept at hand is “stranger-love” not “hospitality.” The Bible commands believers to “love strangers.” The actual biblical word is picturesque and beautifully descriptive. When I hear the word “hospitable” I think of a big, cold, white hospital building made out of cement and cinder blocks, painted white. When I hear the word “stranger-love” I imagine Christ showing care and concern to an ostracized Samaritan woman alone at a water well. So, with respect to the imperative to be hospitable, the Bible does not call us to be “nice to our friends,” but rather to “love strangers.” There’s a big difference. Scripture is clear and consistent from Genesis through the end of the New Testament in defining hospitality and illustrating it in action. To clear the air on the matter we’ll begin by defining hospitality in its biblical context. Then in later chapters we’ll consider some representative examples in Scripture.

First Peter 4:9 says, “Be hospitable to one another without complaint.” In the Greek text here the verb “be” is understood and the word for “hospitable” is the compound word *philoxenoi*. Hiebert offers an excellent definition of this New Testament word, *philoxenoi*: “it describes one who has an affectionate concern for strangers that expresses itself in offering them food and shelter.”³ “Philo” is from the verb *phileo* meaning “love.” *Xenos* means “stranger.” The fear of strangers,

“Xenophobia,” is the opposite of “stranger-love.” We could translate the verse above in 1 Peter 4:9 as, “Exhibit stranger-love toward one another.” *Phileo* is one of two common words in the New Testament for “love.” The word *Philadelphia*, “brotherly love,” comes from *phileo* plus *adelphos* which means “brother.”

The other common verb in the New Testament for “love” is *agapao* or *agape* the noun. *Phileo* is used about 25 times in the New Testament and *agapao* occurs over 140 times. They are both translated in English as “love,” so they are indistinguishable in your average Bible. They are different words, so they do have a nuance of difference in meaning, although they also have some overlap as well. *Agapao* is said to be thoughtful (or volitional) love whereas *phileo* is affection. On occasion the two words seem interchangeable. The immediate context always determines their meaning with each occurrence.

Many have said that *agapao* is God’s love—a divine and heavenly love—whereas *phileo* is a finite human love. That is simply false. Jesus said in John 5:20 that “the Father loves the Son.” The word for “love” here is *philei*, from *phileo*. *Phileo* is used to speak of God’s love. But John 3:35 says, “The Father loves the Son” and in this instance the verb for “love” is *agapao* which also speaks of God’s amazing love. Two exact statements in our English Bibles about the Father’s love for Christ, both using two different Greek verbs in the original text. This is a good reminder that believers need to

What is Biblical Hospitality?

beware of shallow word studies and need to remain diligent and discerning, like whenever they might hear a simplistic and overly-dramatic preacher say, “Now people, *agape* is God’s unique, supernatural, heavenly love and *phileo* is earthly, human love!”

It is true that most of the time in the New Testament *agapao* refers to good, pure and godly love, but on occasion it refers to ungodly or carnal love. For example, Jesus said wicked people “love” (*agaposin*) each other (Luke 6:32); the evil Pharisees “love” (*agapate*) the front seats in the synagogues (Luke 11:43) and they “loved” (*eigapeisan*) the praise of men (John 12:43); sinners “loved” (*eigapeisan*) the darkness (John 3:19); Paul said all people “love” (*agapan*) themselves (Eph 5:28); Demas the traitor “loved” (*agapeisas*) the present world more than he loved Paul (2 Tim 4:10); and unbelievers “love” this evil world (1 John 2:15). These are examples showing that *agapao* is not reserved for expressing only God’s divine love, nor is it a superior word to *phileo* to express love. Each word has its meaning determined by the immediate context in each instance it occurs.

“Stranger-Love” in the New Testament

“Stranger-love,” or *philoxenia*, is used five times in the New Testament: three times as a command to all Christians and twice as a requirement for elders.

What the Bible Says About Hospitality

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor, not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, **practicing hospitality** (*philoxenian*)” (Rom 12:10-13).

“Let love of the brethren continue. Do not neglect to **show hospitality to strangers** (*philoxenios*), for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body” (Heb 13:1-3).

“Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sins. **Be hospitable** (*philoxenoi*) to one another without complaint” (1 Pet 4:8-9).

“An overseer, then must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, **hospitable** (*philoxenon*), able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money” (1 Tim 3:2-3).

What is Biblical Hospitality?

“For the overseer must be above reproach as God’s steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but **hospitable** (*philoxenon*), loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled” (Titus 1:7-8).

Practical Observations

Giving some summary observations about how “hospitality” is used in the context of each of the five New Testament passages will help flesh out a complete and practical definition from a biblical perspective. First to note is that being hospitable is a command for all Christians, not just an option. Hey, Christian—stop, pause, and evaluate. When was the last time you practiced “stranger-love”? And how often do you do it? Is it a pattern of your Christian life or a rare occurrence? Or is it non-existent?

Second, in the first three passages mentioned above, the command to be hospitable immediately follows the command to love—specifically “devoted” love, “continual” love, and “fervent” love. The point is clear—if a Christian claims to have the love of Christ, then it will be readily apparent in the way they treat strangers on a regular basis. Spirit-filled, obedient believers will be “devoted” to loving strangers “continually” and “fervently.”

Third, the act of hospitality is defined by other commands surrounding it in each passage. Romans 12

says that hospitality won't happen without deliberate "diligence" on the part of believers and it can only happen when you "give preference" to others. People who give preference to themselves, their own convenience, needs, and agenda will not be good at hospitality. Being self-centered is the antithesis to stranger-love. Being preoccupied with self comes naturally to us as sinners and is the American way. However, it undermines this biblical obligation. First Peter says to be hospitable "without complaint." This means helping strangers with food and shelter may inconvenience you, take you out of your routine, drain some of your funds, free time or groceries; invade your personal space; it may get your dishes, your couch or carpet a little dirty—lots of things the average person can "complain" about. If you are a "whiner" then you will have a hard time living out biblical hospitality.

Fourth, the command to love strangers is in the context of living in the Body of Christ. Hebrews 13 is explicit—"Hey, Christian, be hospitable because you yourself are in the Body of Christ." All three passages above are commands given to Christians with respect to how they should treat other believers. Hebrews 13 says plainly to "love the brethren" by being hospitable. The "brethren" is a reference to believers. Romans 12 and 1 Peter 4 say hospitality should be toward "one another"—the one another commands are in reference to fellow Christians. The command to be hospitable is first to be employed and practiced among the needy

What is Biblical Hospitality?

strangers in the church. This is important to understand because many think the word “stranger” means “unbeliever,” but it does not. “Stranger” can mean a believer you don’t know. This is exactly what Paul meant when he gave this command to all Christians in Galatians: “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (6:10).

Fifth, hospitality is a requirement for elders as stated by 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. In other words, loving strangers is a qualification for being a shepherd. There are over twenty qualifications that should typify the life of a church leader, and welcoming strangers is one of them. In the New Testament an elder is the same thing as a shepherd, pastor, bishop, overseer and presbyter—the words are interchangeable. This does not mean that the elders have to be treating the church members to meals in their homes all the time as the church-goer insisted earlier. That is not biblical “stranger-love.” Church members are not “strangers” to local pastors and elders.

As a matter of fact, some church members are a little too familiar with the pastor. The requirement for stranger-love on the part of an elder means that church leaders will have welcoming attitudes toward strangers who frequent their church, especially visiting, unknown believers. And such welcoming attitudes will be backed up with commensurate actions. Why do elders have to be especially faithful to the command of hospitality?

One main reason is because an elder is a shepherd. Pastors must love all the people and be partial to no one. Faithful pastors don't have an option to like some people and not like others. Sadly, some congregants are not held to the same standard—they can pick and choose who they will like, associate with and welcome. This is not the case for the elder, who is an under-shepherd of the Chief-Shepherd, Jesus Christ (1 Pet 5:1-5). Jesus was hospitable to all (including strangers) and partial to none. An elder who does not love people, including strangers, should not be an elder. Sadly, some pastors and churches have had a myopic and exclusionary attitude where they treat foreigners with disinterest, or even contempt.

Wrapping It Up

The goal of this chapter was to simply define biblical hospitality. First it was necessary to expose and dispel the common wrong views. Then define the actual word and concept as found in Scripture; that word is “stranger-love,” from the compound Greek word, *philoxenoi*. *Phileo* refers to the love of personal affection and *xenos* means stranger, a person you don't know. We also noted that “strangers” are not unbelievers but fellow believers, as emphasized in the New Testament, who we have not met and who have practical needs.

And since they are members of the Body of Christ, they are fellow spiritual family members, precious children of God, who we need to tend to in light of our

What is Biblical Hospitality?

relationship with Christ. We also learned that practicing stranger-love is the obligation of every Christian. It is even a special requirement or qualification for elders. Biblical hospitality is showing fervent, welcoming love and affection for fellow believers who are strangers in our midst and have special needs of food, shelter and care by virtue of their transient status.

With the above biblical definition established, let's go on to the next chapter to see Old Testament examples of hospitality among God's people. For it is the Old Testament practice of this special love that set the precedent for the New Testament commands that were entrusted to the Church.

2

HOSPITALITY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Moses

New Testament hospitality is a carry-over from Old Testament hospitality. One Bible Dictionary says it best:

In ancient Israel, hospitality was not merely a question of good manners, but a moral institution which grew out of the harsh desert and nomadic existence led by the people of Israel. The biblical customs of welcoming the weary traveler and of receiving the stranger in one's midst was the matrix out of which hospitality and all its tributary aspects developed into a highly esteemed virtue in Jewish tradition. Biblical law specifically sanctified hospitality toward the 'stranger' who was to be made particularly welcome 'for you were strangers

in a strange land' (Lev. 19:34; cf. Ex. 12:49).
Foreign travelers...could count on the
custom of hospitality.¹

The command to love strangers flows from the nature of God as revealed from the beginning of Scripture. God has many traits as revealed in Scripture (Exod 34:6-7). One of those traits is love: "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Before his death, Moses reminded the Israelites about their God YHWH, that "Indeed, He loves the people" (Deut 33:3). Humans were made in God's image from the beginning (Gen 1:26-27) and that means God created humans with similar traits that He has, but on a finite, creaturely level. One of those capacities that God gave to humans was the capacity to love. God is a Person; only persons can love. And people have that ability as image-bearers of the Creator. This reality is the basis for God's expectation of believers to love strangers. Because God is love, so we can and must love.

At the end of Jesus' ministry, some Pharisees tried get Him to contradict Himself by asking, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" (Matt 22:36). Jesus replied that the two greatest commands included loving God and loving your fellow man. This was not new information. The command to love your neighbor was from the Law of Moses given by God in 1440 BC (Lev 19:18). One's neighbor was any person

you came across who was made in God's image. That included strangers.

Jesus reminds us that God's Law is not antithetical to love. As a matter of fact, the theology for stranger-love is codified in the Law of Moses. One key example is from Deuteronomy 10:17-20, when YHWH spoke to Moses in 1400 BC just before the Jews entered the Promised Land. It reads as follows:

¹⁷For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. ¹⁸He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and **shows His love for the alien** by giving him food and clothing. ¹⁹**So show your love for the alien**, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. ²⁰You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him, and you shall swear by His name.

A few key principles on stranger-love flow from this passage. First, in verse 17, Moses reminds the people here that God does not show partiality. Partiality is to show favoritism—to treat one person or group favorably over another for illegitimate reasons, or to treat one group unjustly based on superficial categories. God does not do that. All people are made in His image; therefore, all people are sacred. God does not love one gender more than another, nor adults more than

children, nor one social class over another, nor one race over another.

Exemplifying stranger-love begins with this trait of not showing partiality. What is one main reason people are not welcoming to strangers? Because they are partial. Showing favoritism toward our friends comes naturally. We easily gravitate to the familiar and welcome the ones we like while we shy away from the unfamiliar and different. This is why cliques exist in every sizeable social or corporate entity. As bacteria is to our skin, so are cliques to human social life. Having cliques in your church or community is not unique—it's the norm. On occasion, to combat this perennial and ubiquitous conduct of the crowd, well-meaning but naïve micro-managing social engineers in our midst try to squash or disperse the cliques during our various social gatherings through coerced methods. By hoping to force intermingling, they issue threats for not accepting others, and condescendingly look down their nose at a group of teenagers having innocent fun together in the corner. But cliques and partiality cannot be banished from the human heart through external means or contrived manipulation. Partiality can only be held in check by a work of God on the heart as His Spirit awakens us to the true meaning of being other-oriented.

Second, in verse eighteen Moses gives examples of God's impartial love that crosses all barriers, for He loves the unlovable, the down-and-outers that most people typically don't have time for: the orphans, the

widows, and the aliens. What do the orphans, widows, and aliens have in common? They have special needs; they need help; they are dependent; their good and their survival is contingent upon the help and intervention of others...and worst of all, they can't give you much in return. Most people just don't want to be bothered or inconvenienced by those prospects.

Moses says God has a special love for “the alien.” The NIV Bible translates “alien” here as “foreigner.” The King James Bible translates “alien” as “stranger,” which is most fitting word, tying in well with the New Testament verses we saw in the last chapter. God is commanding the Israelites that they are obligated to love strangers—they are to give care and affection to people they do not know. They are to employ “stranger-love” or “hospitality.” And God gives the reason why His people should love the alien: because God loves the alien! God continues to show His love to strangers by giving them “food and clothing.” What does it take to show hospitality to strangers? It takes God-like character, from a negative as well as a positive perspective. The negative is to not be partial. The positive is to be loving as God is loving.

Third, God concludes in verse twenty by telling His people how loving strangers is even possible. It does not come from our own strength, desire, methods or nature. It is possible when we “fear the LORD your God.” To fear God is to love God, submit to Him, make Him the priority. To fear God is to obey Him and be willing to

be used by Him. To fear God is to acknowledge His holiness, sovereignty, and greatness while seeing our own sin, unworthiness and inadequacy. To fear God is to intimately know God. For us today that means believing in Jesus Christ His Son. Only when we know Christ, can we then have the alien, supernatural power from God to love others more than we love ourselves. God has to change us from the inside out in our very nature before we are able to resist partiality and act in love toward the unfamiliar. Our natural inclination is to love and serve ourselves. So, living out a life of being hospitable begins with the solid foundation of having a right relationship with our Creator through Jesus Christ the Savior.

The Foundation

The quintessential expression of this kind of love for strangers is illustrated in the Old Testament from the life of Abraham who was born around 600 years before Moses. The New Testament showcases Abraham's encounter with three strangers as the premier model of stranger-love that Christians should mimic: "Let love of the brethren continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb 13:1-2). The author of Hebrews is reminding us that Abraham showed hospitality to three complete strangers, who looked to Abraham like ordinary men passing through

town. However, it was later revealed that they were more than men.

Let's look at the details and context of this story found in Genesis 18. Abram was born and raised a pagan idol-worshipper in Mesopotamia, 500 miles east of Canaan, for the first seventy-five years of his life (Gen 12:4; Josh 24:2). While a complete stranger and foreigner to YHWH, God called and saved Abram and blessed him in many ways. God promised to bless Abram by making him a great nation and giving his descendants the Promised Land (in Canaan, Num 13:2). also blessing all the nations of the world through Abram by bringing the Messiah through his lineage. God ratified these promises by changing Abram's name to Abraham, by making an unconditional covenant with Abraham (Gen 15), and by ratifying the covenant with a sign—circumcision (Gen 17). To begin the fulfillment of these promises, Abraham's wife Sarah needed to have a son, but she was barren her whole life (Gen 16:1). Abraham waited for twenty-four years until God finally took initiative by allowing Sarah, a barren old woman, to become pregnant...at the age of ninety! God purposed to announce this amazing news to Abraham one year in advance by coming down from heaven and making a personal visit to Abraham, who was now ninety-nine years old. This is where Genesis 18 begins and the great scene of Abraham's hospitality is described as follows:

What the Bible Says About Hospitality

Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre, while he was sitting at the tent door in the heat of the day. When he lifted up his eyes and looked, behold, three men were standing opposite him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them and bowed himself to the earth, and said, “My Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, please do not pass Your servant by. Please let a little water be brought and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree; and I will bring a piece of bread, that you may refresh yourselves; after that you may go on, since you have visited your servant.” And they said, “So do, as you have said.” So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah, and said, “Quickly, prepare three measures of fine flour, knead it and make bread cakes.” Abraham also ran to the herd, and took a tender and choice calf and gave it to the servant, and he hurried to prepare it. He took curds and milk and the calf which he had prepared, and placed it before them; and he was standing by them under the tree as they ate.

Before highlighting the details of the hospitality scene, a few big picture observations are in order regarding chapter 18. First, verses one through eight serve as a

prelude to the main point of the chapter, which is that YHWH has come to Abraham in physical form to announce the good news that his eighty-nine year old barren wife, Sarah, will give birth to the promised seed in one year's time, at the age of ninety! Second, Abraham's hospitable, welcoming, generous spirit toward three complete strangers in this chapter is in complete contrast to the way the citizens of Sodom treated the same strangers as depicted in Genesis 19. The Bible shows through contrast that the moral state of people is often indicated by their treatment of strangers. As such, Abraham's character proves stellar. Third, at this point in his life at age ninety-nine, God had made Abraham "very rich" (13:2). He owned flocks and herds, silver and gold, servants and maids, camels and donkeys (24:35). He had his own militia who served under his command (14:14-15). He was highly respected and feared by regional leaders and kings (12:20; 14:17). In light of Abraham's elevated status and high stature, his lowly servant's attitude and actions toward the unknown strangers in Genesis 18 become even more impressive.

At the time, Abraham was living as a nomad in Hebron, eighteen miles south of Jerusalem and twenty-five miles west of the Dead Sea. He was sitting at the door of his tent in "the heat of the day" (the time of the main meal), when he looked up and saw "three men" standing right in front of him. He did not see them approaching—they just appeared as if out of nowhere,

unnoticed. Instead of taking a defensive posture out of fear or paranoia from being caught off-guard by the three uninvited guests, Abraham's reaction was quite unexpected. He immediately ran up to them and bowed down to the earth, a universal sign of elaborate greeting, humility, welcome, and even deference. He did not call for his bodyguard or servants to protect him by screening the unknown visitors. He did not call for his personal militia of 400 warriors to frisk and vet the intruders. Unlike the Apostle Peter, he did not pull out his sword and start wailing away at their heads in desperation. Keep in mind, at this point Abraham has no idea who exactly the strangers are, and yet he will offer himself as their "servant" (v. 3).

Next, Abraham speaks to one of the three men and offers several gestures of practical kindness: he calls him "Lord" (Heb. *adonai*) out of respect; he pleads with the visitors to stay; he offers to wash their feet; he offers them shade from the hot sun under his terebinth trees; he offers bread for food and rest for their weary bodies. Even though Abraham is legitimately a "Master" and "Lord" over others, he assumes the role of servant here. The three strange men agreed to Abraham's invitation of welcome.

What happens next is also extraordinary. The text says Abraham "hurried" to follow through on all the promises he just made to his guests. We do not know what Abraham was doing just prior to their arrival as far as his agenda for the evening, whether it was a planned

meal with his large household, or a date night with Sarah, or plotting out travel plans for the next day, or hammering out details of a peace treaty with a nearby village chieftain. It did not matter. Abraham put everything on hold on the spot in deference to his newly arrived guests. From his perspective, hands-on, personalized service and hospitality to them was paramount. He does not complain about being too busy or that their intrusion was inconvenient. He employs the heart of a servant and puts their needs before his own. And as we see from the text, he expects his wife Sarah, the queen of the home, to have the same spontaneous deferential spirit...despite her evening plans and lack of forewarning. And to Sarah's credit, she accommodates the unforeseen request.

Sarah was receptive as she quickly began to bake cakes for the visiting strangers while Abraham chose a calf to be slaughtered and cooked. When the fresh meat was cooked to perfection, Abraham acted like the waiter and took the meat, some curds and milk and presented it to the three guests, as they were waiting under the shady trees of Mamre. Out of courtesy for his guests, he stood by them the whole time while they ate their meal, ready to tend to their needs. All in all, Abraham's exemplary act of hospitality must have consumed just a few hours that day in view of all the preparations that he and Sarah provided. A few hours of selfless love toward some strangers became a model of godly hospitality for the ages.

Hebrews 13 commends Abraham for his gracious hospitality on this occasion. The Hebrews author also notes that Abraham did not know at first that the “three men” he chose to welcome were more than men—they were angels! Two of the angels were in the form of human men (Gen 19:1), and one of the angels was the LORD Himself in bodily form, a theophany—possibly the pre-incarnate Christ (18:1, 17)!

God calls Christians to be as hospitable as Abraham was to these three strangers. What are the practical takeaways to be aware of as we seek to love strangers after the pattern of the great patriarch? First, Abraham loved God and he was a friend of God (James 2:23). We cannot love others, especially strangers, in a real and deep way in our own strength. We can love only because God first loved us (1 John 4:19). God called Abram when he was seventy-five and saved him shortly thereafter (Gen 15:6). Abraham had the capacity to love strangers because God loved him and in return, he loved God. Christians have that same supernatural capacity. Scripture says that as a result of salvation, the love of God has been shed abroad in our hearts (Rom 5:5). There is no excuse for a believer to shun strangers or fail to love them.

Second, Abraham lived by faith (Heb 11:9). He trusted God for his needs. As he hurried to pick a calf for slaughter, he never gave a second thought as to what the meal would cost him or how much he would lose in the process. He did not stop to think if he would be

reimbursed. He did not think to himself, “Boy, I hope they appreciate this!” or, “I sure hope I get something in return from these three guys.” There were no conditions or inhibitions with his acts of kindness. He knew this world was not his home. He held on to this world’s goods with a loose grip. If we want to be hospitable to real strangers then it is going to take faith on our part. We will need to trust God beyond our own thinking, limits, and comfort zone. But living by faith is not an option—it is an imperative for all believers (Hab 2:4; 2 Cor 5:7).

Third, Abraham was prepared. Because he was prepared, Abraham could act immediately. Many people are not in a position to entertain guests without warning...for many reasons. A husband may want to help someone on the fly, but he may find resistance from family members or his wife. Not so with Abraham. He and Sarah were on the same page in this regard. They had cultivated a relationship that welcomed such unforeseen hospitality. Sarah respected her husband (1 Pet 3:6). Their living quarters were also prepared to accommodate a few guests at a moment’s notice. Sadly, many people can’t say the same—the ill state of their living quarters prohibits helping others as the needs arise. They are not prepared to fulfill this biblical mandate.

Fourth, Abraham had a proper view of himself. He was willing to be a servant. Just because he was a wealthy sheikh, the head of the home, influential, the

commander of an army, a patriarch, a prophet, and feared by nearby kings, he was not prevented from literally getting down on his knees in service to the needs of these three strangers. Remember, at this time Abraham was ninety-nine, a seasoned old man. But he does not use his age as an excuse to delegate all the work to his younger servants. That takes true humility and an awareness of one's true lowly status compared to God's greatness as Creator, Savior, and Judge. God has called us and commissioned us to love others through selfless service (John 13:14; Gal 5:13). Abraham obeyed and was blessed (Gen 24:1; 26:5).

Finally, Abraham's hospitality was thorough or comprehensive. He did not just offer a cup of water or a ten-minute respite for his visitors, or a Band-Aid on the fly. He provided a hearty, home-cooked full-course meal, extended rest in the shade out of the brutal midday sun, a foot washing, and hands-on service as their personal servant for the duration. It is this thorough, holistic, personalized approach to hospitality that makes Abraham's deed stand out in history as the exemplar to esteem and follow. It is also from this scenario that the idea of a meal or providing food would forever be attached conceptually as an inherent part of the definition of biblical hospitality. It is possible to be hospitable without an attendant meal or provision of food, but the Bible places major significance to the fellowship meal in hospitality contexts. The epitome of this idea is illustrated by Jesus several times in the

Gospels where He says many strangers will be invited to His fellowship meal in the future kingdom while the “sons of the kingdom” will be cast out (Matt 8:10-12; cf. 22:1-14).

Rebekah

Another classic Old Testament example of biblical stranger-love comes from the life of Rebekah, Abraham’s daughter-in-law. At the end of Abraham’s life, when he was around 140 years of age, he commissioned his most trusted servant to find a wife for his son Isaac (Gen 24:1-3). Isaac was close to forty years old. He did not want Isaac marrying a local Canaanite, so Abraham sent his servant 450 miles north to a town called Nahor in northwest Mesopotamia (modern Turkey). There, Abraham believed a wife from his own relatives could be found. Abraham believed God would providentially guide his servant in the whole process (24:7). The servant took off on the long, arduous journey accompanied by some attendants along with ten camels. Upon finally reaching his destination, the servant gave his camels a rest and had them kneel down near a well. It was evening time and they all needed water. Abraham’s servant was a man of faith and so as a complete stranger, hundreds of miles from home, in need of food, water and lodging, the servant prayed and asked God for help and guidance.

As he was still praying God answered his prayer. A young woman approached the well with a jar on her

shoulder and went down to the spring of water to fill her jar. At that moment, Abraham's servant ran up to her and said, "Please let me drink a little water from your jar" (v. 17). Keep in mind, Abraham's servant was an out-of-towner, unfamiliar, and a complete stranger to Rebekah. All this makes her response to him remarkable. Instead of shying away, startled, from the stranger's request from fear, uncertainty, or self-protection, she responded with this:

¹⁸ She said, "Drink, my lord"; and she quickly lowered her jar to her hand, and gave him a drink. ¹⁹ Now when she had finished giving him a drink, she said, "I will draw also for your camels until they have finished drinking." ²⁰ So she quickly emptied her jar into the trough, and ran back to the well to draw, and she drew for all his camels. ²¹ Meanwhile, the man was gazing at her in silence, to know whether the LORD had made his journey successful or not (24:18-21).

Watering camels is hard work because they are large animals and they drink a lot. Rebekah fed ten of them on the spot. When the camels finished drinking, Rebekah then revealed who her family was and extended further hospitality blessings to the stranger as she told him, "We have both plenty of straw and feed, and room to lodge in" (v. 25). Spontaneously, she

invited the stranger and his attendants to lodge at her home and she also promised to feed all of his camels.

Rebekah was an exemplary kind, courteous, and hospitable woman. Gracious hospitality probably ran in the family, for her brother Laban was equally hospitable when he met Abraham's servant for the first time. After hearing the initial report from Rebekah about the visiting entourage, Laban found Abraham's servant at the well and said, "Come in, blessed of the LORD! Why do you stand outside since I have prepared the house, and a place for the camels?" (v. 31). The servant complied, took him up on the offer and entered Laban's house, whereupon Laban, "unloaded the camels, and he gave straw and feed to the camels, and water to wash his feet and the feet of the men who were with him" (v. 32). The historical account closes telling how, in God's providence, Rebekah would return with Abraham's servant to Beersheba to marry Isaac. Rebekah then gave birth to Esau and Jacob, and Jacob would have twelve sons, forming the promised nation of Israel.

The hospitality extended by Rebekah and her brother Laban has many parallels to Abraham's hospitality to the three men. They lavished uninhibited concern, care, and comfort upon complete strangers. That is biblical hospitality.

The Old Testament Pattern

Many more examples of pious hospitality are illustrated in the Old Testament. Reuel the priest of Midian, also

known as Jethro (Exod 3:1), welcomed Moses into his home for bread and lodging, when Moses was a complete stranger to him and a fugitive at that (2:20-21). The Canaanite woman Rahab, a citizen of Jericho who lived about 1400 BC, graciously invited two unknown Israelite spies into her home, providing protection and showing these strangers “kindness” (Josh 2:12). The two Israelite foreigners told her of YHWH and His great works. Her heart was convicted, she became a believer (2:11), and God rewarded her for her kind hospitality shown toward these two aliens (Josh 6:17; Heb 11:3; Jam 2:25).

Fast forward 300 years to the days of Samson the judge. Samson’s father was Manoah, a Danite living thirteen miles southwest of Jerusalem. The book of Judges describes how Manoah and his wife extended a courteous gesture of hospitality to a complete stranger saying, “Please let us detain you so that we may prepare a young goat for you” (13:15). King David (1,000-960 BC) was no stranger to hospitality. He was received as a stranger by many for years when he was fleeing from Saul and Absalom (1 Sam 21-22). He returned the grace by being hospitable to needy strangers like Chimham (2 Sam 19:38) and the lame man, Mephibosheth (2 Sam 9).

The virtuous woman of Proverbs 31 (possibly Solomon’s mother, cf. 31:1) is known for many godly traits and attitudes. One that stands out is hospitality, for “She extends her hand to the poor, and she stretches out her hands to the needy.” The godly woman is

hospitable by way of attitude and habit. The fact that this woman “stretches out” means that she is deliberate, proactive and even aggressive at meeting the needs of those around her, specifically the “poor” and the “needy,” which in Old Testament times was often “strangers” who were passing through.

The most unique form of stranger-love required by God in the Old Testament was the law regarding the cities of refuge. “It was also the duty of the elders of the cities of refuge to succor, as well as to protect, the unwitting killer who sought refuge in their cities until the death of the high priest (Num 35:9-34).”²² There were six cities of refuge: Kedesh, Shechem, Hebron, Bezer, Ramoth and Golan (Josh 20:7-8). Many more examples could be put forth, but these sufficiently make the case for God’s imperative of hospitality made plain in the Old Testament.

3

JESUS AND HOSPITALITY

The New Testament world of Jesus, the apostles, and the Church practiced a generic and universal form of hospitality—almost a compulsory and rudimentary expectation of helping sojourners, travelers, strangers and aliens as they came passing through one’s town. This custom was a result of nomadic life that typified the Old Testament world, as the Near East had much desert and wilderness terrain. Bedouins were common and sedentary life was rare. Green pastures for animal life and sustenance were seasonal and migratory. Abraham was an alien on the move (Heb 11:8-9). Isaac was a traveler (Gen 26:1). Jacob was a sojourner (Gen 28-29). Jacob’s sons were nomads (Gen 31:17-21). They were all practitioners and beneficiaries of stranger-love. As a result, God codified this common-grace practice of welcoming pilgrims and strangers into the Mosaic Law, hallowing it as a universal ethic. As such,

welcoming strangers from abroad was the common practice and expectation of the Jews in Israel during the days of Jesus and the apostles. Ironically the Gospels reveal an inconsistency about hospitality with respect to Jesus. On the one hand, Jesus was frequently denied the hospitality He deserved, yet He Himself was the Master at practicing and preaching the ideals of hospitality. This chapter highlights that dissonance.

Born in a Manger

The first example of hospitality we meet in the Gospels is actually a negative one, and the greatest miscarriage or negligence of hospitality the world has ever known. That is how Jesus, the Savior of the World, was ignored and even rejected as a visiting stranger. This is true spiritually as well as practically. Spiritually speaking, the Gospel of John opens up immediately identifying Jesus as God in the flesh, who came to earth motivated by love to save sinners, beginning with the divine visit to His own people and nation, Israel. But instead of opening their hearts and homes to Him, they spurned Him. John recounts in hindsight, “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (1:11). This verse teaches that Jesus came down from heaven to be the Savior of Israel and the world, but particularly the Jewish leadership, did not welcome Him. They were not hospitable. John says Israel “did not receive” Him. The Greek word for “receive” is *paralambano*, the common New Testament word that

can mean “to welcome.” The essence of being hospitable is to have a welcoming spirit toward another. On the whole, Jesus was not welcomed when He came 2,000 years ago.

John says Jesus came to “His own,” so there was a sense in which He was not a stranger. He was not a stranger in that He was a fellow Jew. Also, He was the One predicted in the Old Testament Jewish Scriptures, so they should have been expecting His arrival and should have been able to identify Him (Matt 2:1-6). And generically He should not have been a stranger for He was the Creator of all things—including them! (John 1:1, 3, 10).

But in a real sense Jesus was indeed a stranger to many. He was a stranger to Jerusalem Jews because He was raised for thirty years in Nazareth of Galilee. The Jerusalem Jewish leadership looked down their noses at those outside the Jerusalem enclave. Even after two-plus years of public ministry, the multitudes who followed Him and benefitted from His miracles were continually debating His identity. He was strange and foreign to them because they did not know who His earthly father was (John 6:42); they did not know where He was trained or why He taught so differently than other rabbis (Matt 7:28). Many asked Him, rudely, point-blank in public, while He was teaching, “Who are you?” (John 8:25; cf. John 4:29; 5:12; 9:36; 12:34; Matt 21:10; 26:63). Conspiracy theories about Him were flourishing among the Jews. At the end of His public

ministry some Jews were speculating that He was John the Baptist risen from the dead. Others conjectured that He was Elijah the prophet or Jeremiah reincarnated. And still others promulgated the intriguing myth that He was a great Old Testament prophet risen from the dead (Matt 16:14; Luke 9:19). Worse still, the Jewish leadership labeled Him a bastard child (John 8:41), a genetically polluted Samaritan (John 8:48), demon-possessed (John 8:52), a false teacher (John 7:47-48) and a blasphemer worthy of death (Matt 26:65-66).

In addition to being rejected as a stranger on the spiritual level, Jesus and His family were rejected at the time of His birth. Ironically, YHWH, the God of the Jews, was the one who originally made the law for compulsory hospitality to be shown by Jews toward visitors who pass their way in time of need (Lev 19:10). But when the greatest Jew in the history of the world came visiting (in utero) to a fellow Jewish town with His poor family (Luke 2:24; cf. Lev 12:6-8), He along with His humble Jewish family were categorically not-welcomed by fellow Jews. They did not benefit from the law of hospitality that should have been their safety net.

The Gospel of Luke describes the historical context of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem:

Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. ²This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor

of Syria. ³ And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. ⁴ Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, ⁵ in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. ⁶ While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn (2:1-7).

As Jesus was about to be born of Mary, she was living in Nazareth of Galilee with Joseph, seventy miles north of Bethlehem. All of Israel at the time was under the domination of the Roman Empire and its emperor, Caesar Augustus (63 BC-AD 14). Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, had issued a mandate that all citizens enroll in a census in their home towns. Joseph was from Bethlehem, so he took his pregnant wife on the long, arduous journey to Bethlehem. While in Bethlehem, Jesus was born of Mary. At birth, baby Jesus was placed “in a manger.” The Greek word for “manger,” *phatne*, simply refers to an animal feeding trough. It does not necessarily mean Jesus was born in a stable. It is possible the manger was in a cave where

animals were kept. The Bible is not specific on the matter. The Bible is clear, though, that Mary, Joseph, and Jesus were placed among a bunch of animals at the time the Savior was born. Luke says, “there was no room for them in the inn.” The word for “inn” does not refer to a hotel. It is a generic term referring to a general lodging place or guest room, and in this case could have been nothing more than a makeshift shelter thrown together to accommodate the overwhelming influx of visitors from abroad who came to the town for the mandatory census. This means that no one in the city of Bethlehem took Mary and Joseph into their house as she was about to give birth while they were temporarily in town for the census. They were strangers, fellow Jews, passing through, in need of some caring love and accommodations. The Son of God was about to enter the world in fulfillment of countless Hebrew prophecies (i.e., Micah 5:2; Isa 7:14; 9:6). If anyone deserved unreserved welcoming hospitality, it was Jesus the Messiah and His family. But such was not the case.

Today in our culture we celebrate births and announce them from the rooftops...and on the Internet, for all to know. The God-Man was virtually ignored when He was born in obscurity. Such a beginning for Jesus’ earthly life was only fitting for His life-long role as the Suffering Servant who would be acquainted with grief and rejection (Isa 53). One commentator states it poignantly:

No angels appeared, as they later would to the shepherds. No heavenly trumpets rang. No voice from heaven announced the birth of the Son of God. Alone except for her young husband, far from her family and friends, in the most primitive conditions, a young girl gave birth. Thus did the second person of the Trinity step from eternity into time and space....Mary was forced to give birth in the only place available—the place where the travelers’ animals were kept. When Jesus came into the world, He was born in the most comfortless conditions—a smelly, filthy, chilly, shelter, surrounded by noisy animals. It was a fitting entrance for the “Son of Man [who had] nowhere to lay His head” (Luke 9:58).¹

After Jesus’ birth, the vassal pseudo-king of the Jews, Herod the Great, tried to murder baby Jesus out of jealousy and fear (Matt 2:3, 13). Warned by an angel, Joseph fled to Egypt with his family as an enraged and deranged Herod slaughtered all the male children two years and under in Bethlehem and its surrounding regions (2:16). Herod, the “king of the Jews,” should have welcomed the greatest King of the Jews, the Messiah, with open arms, reverence and rejoicing. But instead the visiting family of the Savior was literally run out of the country for a time (Matt 2:19-21). In the end,

the only ones to welcome Jesus and His family at the time of His birth were nameless shepherds from the fields (Luke 2:8), a Jewish prophet named Simeon (Luke 2:25), Anna, the aged prophetess (2:36), and strange Gentile sojourners from the east, known as the magi (Matt 2:1-2).

The Suffering Servant

Fast forward thirty years and the Scriptures reveal that Jesus fared no better in receiving hospitality from others. For the most part He was neglected, ignored, or deprived when it came to material possessions and practical comforts. He noted this plight when He declared publicly about Himself, “The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Matt 8:20). Once Jesus left the home of Mary and began His public ministry, He was homeless. Jesus was a homeless person—that is what this verse means, and that is a provocative reality. For three-plus years Jesus had an itinerant ministry. He was always traveling and on the move. He would have benefitted from Old Testament hospitality from fellow Israelites. He restricted His ministry to the Jews and their cities and towns, as He preached the good news, taught the masses, healed the sick and loved sinners. All the while, He never had a home to call His own. He depended on the Father to provide for Him (Matt 6:8) and at times a few hospitable Israelites actually welcomed Him into their homes as a stranger in need

(Luke 8:1-3). But much of the time Jesus had no place to live. Ironically, Jesus promised to build grand, heavenly mansions for His followers (John 14:2-3) while at the same time He had no earthly home of His own. Even more ironic is the fact that Jesus is the Creator (John 1:3) and sovereign one who actually owns everything on earth (1 Cor 10:26), alongside the Father (John 17:5), and yet during His ministry He had nothing. One Bible teacher aptly describes the implications of Jesus' homelessness:

In His humiliation He did not even have the basic comforts of life. Jesus had no place of His own—no house or property, not even a tent. After the dispute about Jesus' healing of the blind man, "everyone went to his home," John tells us: "But Jesus went to the Mount of Olives" (John 7:53-8:1). Whereas others went home to spend the night, Jesus spent it alone under the stars, in prayer with His Father. We are told of His often spending time in the home of Peter in Capernaum and of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany, but we are never told of His spending even an hour in His own house, because He had none.²

It was noted earlier that John said Jesus came to His own, and His own received Him not. This lack of a welcoming spirit existed even among Jesus' blood

relatives. Jesus had several siblings or half-brothers and half-sisters, for Mary gave birth to several children after Jesus. Jesus was Mary's first-born (Luke 2:78). Jesus' younger siblings were the brothers, James, Joseph, Jude, Simon and some sisters (Matt 13:55-56). Jesus left home and began public ministry when He was thirty (Luke 3:23). After Jesus began His ministry, demanding that all follow Him, His own siblings refused to welcome Him. They were anything but hospitable. At one point, His brothers overtly questioned His motives, and mocked Him, and taunted Him (John 7:3-5). The lack of hospitality shown to Jesus during His life and ministry 2,000 years ago was broad and deep. Fortunately, God's grace would change the hearts of His brothers, James and Jude, and they would follow Jesus as the Savior after His resurrection (1 Cor 15:7; Jude 1).

Contrary to the lack of hospitality Jesus was shown, He Himself was the master and model of showing hospitality to others. From the biblical definition and pattern already established, it is clear that at the heart of hospitality is the love of strangers, which entails loving people in general, greeting unfamiliar ones with arms wide open, attending to the practical needs of others, and aggressively meeting those needs selflessly and sacrificially if necessary...like a sincere, warm greeting of shalom, foot-washing, providing a meal or a bed for rest and more. Jesus was characterized by all of these attributes.

Jesus and Hospitality

Jesus exuded a true love for people in general, and strangers in particular. Jesus had no rivals in this regard. He was incarnate love. Jesus truly welcomed sinners. Not only did He welcome them, He pursued them! His whole ministry was given to loving, welcoming, serving, and caring for strangers—people He did not know. Jesus loved the multitudes (Matt 9:36), as He wept for them (Matt 23:37) and prayed for them (Luke 23:34) and even gave His life for them (John 3:16).

Jesus' truly welcoming spirit is seen in His willingness to touch a leper. Lepers were outcasts and despised by the people. The one thing you should never do is go near a leper, let alone touch one. On one occasion, while ministering by the Sea of Galilee, Jesus did the unthinkable and touched a man full of leprosy (Luke 5:13). The man was instantly healed. On another occasion as He was passing through Samaria, Jesus came across ten leprous men who were complete strangers (Luke 17:11 ff.). They may have been part of an isolated leper colony—literally strangers to everyone in town. When they heard Jesus was close by, traveling through their village, they cried out, "Have mercy on us!" Jesus did and He healed them. Jesus loved strangers. Even unclean, ostracized, defiled, dirty, deplorable, outcast strangers like lepers. True hospitality—the act of welcoming those in need, especially strangers—flows from a heart of love and compassion for people. Jesus was the Master.

Another unparalleled act of welcoming hospitality on the part of Jesus was when He was invited to Simon the Pharisee's house for a meal (Luke 7:36-50). This may be the only time a Pharisee invited Jesus into his home. Simon seemed to have an open home and was a practitioner of the common grace of hospitality rooted in the Old Testament ethic. For that, Simon was to be commended. As such, Jesus was not the only guest in Simon's home that day. As Jesus and Simon were reclining on the floor for the meal, suddenly a woman appeared behind them with a jar of precious perfume. She was weeping and began wetting Jesus' feet with her tears, anointing His feet with the perfume and wiping His feet with her hair. By her appearance it was obvious she was a "sinner" from the city, probably an immoral woman. When Simon saw her he was startled, disgusted, and perturbed that Jesus let her touch His feet.

Jesus knew Simon's judgmental, unloving, unwelcoming thoughts and began to expose his inhospitable heart with a short parable and a direct rebuke. Luke recounts the details of the exchange:

⁴⁴ Turning toward the woman, He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. ⁴⁵ You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. ⁴⁶ You did not

anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. ⁴⁷ For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.” ⁴⁸ Then He said to her, “Your sins have been forgiven.” ⁴⁹ Those who were reclining *at the table* with Him began to say to themselves, “Who is this *man* who even forgives sins?” ⁵⁰ And He said to the woman, “Your faith has saved you; go in peace.”

In this stunning exchange, Jesus rebukes Simon the Pharisee for his lack of hospitality in three ways. At the same time Jesus commends the strange, unnamed sinful woman for being a paragon of virtue in showing hospitality towards the Savior in a home that was not even hers. First, Jesus embarrasses Simon, the host, by pointing out that he did not offer to wash Jesus’ feet as Jesus entered his home as the special guest—a common practice and basic protocol in the day. Foot washing was expected, basic hospitality in biblical times (Gen 18:4; 19:2; 24:32; 43:24; Judges 19:21; John 12:3; 13:5; 1 Tim 5:10). This was a clear sign that Simon was not welcoming to Jesus. Jesus then points out that the woman lavishly and reverently washed Jesus’ feet...not with lukewarm water and a rag, but with her fresh tears of devotion and her hair! Second, Simon did not greet Jesus with the kiss of peace, another common, expected

sign of warm, welcoming hospitality (Gen 29:13; Acts 20:37; Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20). It's as though Simon did not care about Jesus at all but instead had a hidden agenda. The sinful woman, on the other hand, kissed Jesus' feet nonstop from the time she entered the house—an act of sincere devotion and even worship. Third, Jesus put in stark relief Simon's lack of hospitality by noting that Simon did not anoint Jesus whereas the woman anointed Jesus' feet with valuable perfume.

This woman was a complete stranger and yet she gave Jesus the most personalized, loving, deliberate, uninhibited loving acts of hospitality imaginable. Her actions revealed her heart—she had a heart overflowing with love toward Christ. Simon's actions revealed his heart—he had a self-serving agenda and a judgmental attitude, and was void of all hospitality as a result.

Teaching on Hospitality

In addition to Jesus' acts of hospitality toward others, there is His teaching on hospitality. The story, or parable, of the Good Samaritan is the quintessential example. This parable may be one of the most well-known, time-tested, universally recognized stories ever told. Countless buildings, hospitals, churches, groups, organizations (secular and religious), masterful works of art, pieces of literature and para-church ministries have been named after it and inspired by it for 2,000 years. Being a “Good Samaritan” is a standard catchword to describe one who is a model of virtue. Amazingly, this

parable that Jesus originated is only six verses long in the Bible. Jesus spoke the parable in response to a self-righteous Jewish scribe:

But wishing to justify himself, he said to Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied and said, "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on *them*; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.' Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers' *hands*?" And he said, "The one who showed mercy toward him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do the same."

The first Great Commandment in the Bible is to love God (Deut 6:5) and the second, which flows from it and enables it, is to love your neighbor (Rom 13:9). Biblical hospitality is loving your neighbor who has a pressing practical need by sacrificially meeting that need, even if that neighbor is a stranger. All these key ingredients are present in the passage above. Jesus begins by affirming that everything begins with a true, complete love of God (vv. 28-29). Then, if you love God you have the capacity and obligation to love your neighbor. Jesus takes the mandate to love even further by showing that loving your neighbor is not limited to those you know or those you like. Loving your neighbor also means loving people you don't know and maybe even strangers you are not inclined to like. This is revolutionary and defies human logic, human tradition, human religion, and human preferences. It is a divine, supernatural capacity to love.

The lasting power in the Good Samaritan story centers around the Samaritan's attitude toward the injured stranger he saw laying half-dead on the road. When the Samaritan saw him the Bible says he "felt compassion" (v. 33) toward the helpless, injured man. "Compassion" here is the verbal form of the Greek word *splanchna*, a noun that literally refers to the intestines or the bowels or the inner parts of the stomach. It came to represent that pain in the gut which resulted from strong emotional turmoil during trials of life. It is similar to our modern-day expression, "heart-

broken.” The Samaritan had a true emotional, heart-felt sympathy of anguish for the bleeding stranger—and this sympathy prompted mercy and action. The injured man was Jewish, coming down from Jerusalem. The Samaritan was a half-breed, a half-Jew, an impure Jew, with a polluted mongrel ethnicity. Traditionally, full-blooded Judean Jews despised Samaritans, and the respectable Jew would have no dealings with them whatsoever, as Samaritans were considered “unclean.” (John 4:9).

The Samaritan’s heart-felt compassion and act of mercy is in stark contrast to the Jewish priest and the Jewish Levite who passed by their fellow dying Jew, as they looked at him with indifference—a cold heart and zero compassion. The priest and the Levite were clerics—men of the cloth, men who were supposed to represent God and serve the people. Not only that, the injured man was a Jewish pilgrim, and it was the Jewish pilgrims who gave alms at the Temple that provided for the sustenance of the priests and the Levites who were supposed to be serving and representing the lay Jewish people, like this man who lay dying in need of their help. Jesus’ point is obvious: the priest and Levite performed religion, but they did not truly love God from the heart, and as a result they had no love for their fellow man. The Samaritan was different. His heart was different, therefore his attitude and actions were different. He showed the dying stranger the fullness of mercy and hospitality, or stranger-love, as he did not “pass by” but

came up to him, poured oil on his injuries, bandaged his wounds, put him on his animal and transported him to an inn to receive care. The Samaritan then paid all the lodging fees accrued at the inn. The Samaritan's schedule was no doubt interrupted and changed by this whole event and he spent much of his own money to care for this man. Jesus commended this kind of overflowing generous, spontaneous hospitality and called on all His listeners that day to "Go and do the same" (vs. 37).

Another important teaching on hospitality by Jesus is from His Olivet Discourse that He gave at the end of His ministry in Matthew 25. Here Jesus taught that we are going to someday be judged, and one component of that judgment is going to be hospitality. How did we as believers and the Church practice or not practice hospitality? Jesus is going to use that in judgment towards us, whether it's through rewards or removal of rewards.

Matthew 25:31-40 is a very well-known passage that is often quoted out of context, so it can be confusing. In this passage there are applications specifically regarding hospitality and how we treat strangers. The context is about Judgment Day, and it is important to look closely at what Jesus says. He's judging the goats and the sheep, or believers and unbelievers. Verses 31-40 read,

But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; **I was a stranger, and you invited Me in**; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me." Then the righteous will answer Him, "Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?" The King will answer and say to them, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me."

The priority of hospitality is highlighted by Jesus here in verse 35. Illustrated here is a welcoming, accommodating, blessing, serving, loving spirit towards strangers and those who are in need. Biblical hospitality is extending the love of Christ to strangers, all who bear the image of God. And it is a universal expectation because Jesus addresses this warning to “all the nations” in verse 32. We were once strangers who have been welcomed into Christ’s family. We should be motivated to welcome strangers in turn. We will be judged by Jesus regarding our hospitality and how we treat others.

The hospitality modeled and taught by Jesus 2,000 years ago has ongoing practical benefits for us today because Jesus still continues His ministry of hospitality toward sinners like me and you. Jesus is still loving strangers today. That is the truth of Ephesians 2. According to this passage, Jesus showed us (those who are now Christians) hospitality in a spiritual way. Most of the people in my church and network are not Jewish. I myself am a Gentile. I wasn’t a part of the Old Testament community by lineage, and I wasn’t part of the special people of God like Israel was since God’s covenant with Abraham. Yet, Jesus Christ loved me and welcomed me as a stranger, spiritually speaking, even though I was not Jewish. That is Paul’s point in Ephesians 2:11-13 which reads as follows:

Therefore remember that formerly you, the
Gentiles in the flesh, who are called

Jesus and Hospitality

“Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” which is performed in the flesh by human hands—remember that **you were** at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and **strangers** to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

Not only does Jesus loves sinners, but according to verse twelve above He loves strangers.

He goes on in verses 14-16:

For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity.

We are blessed recipients of God’s reconciliation, even though we were strangers. That’s the grace of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the very model of

What the Bible Says About Hospitality

how we should practice hospitality. A parallel truth to the reality that God and Jesus reach out to strangers with love is Jesus' parable in Luke 14:16-24, which teaches the same truth highlighted by Paul in Ephesians 2.

4

HOSPITALITY IN THE BALANCE

More Blessed to Give

Just like every other command from God in Scripture, commands to be hospitable have a context, parameters, and balance. There are some scriptural exceptions, or cautions, to the rule. The Bible delineates those exceptions clearly so there is no ambiguity. In this chapter we will survey those exceptions in light of their context and parameters to ensure balance in this area.

Practicing hospitality is actually a blessing. After all, Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than receive” (Acts 20:35), and being hospitable toward strangers in need is a real act of giving. My wife and I have come to realize this truth after serving in ministry together as a married couple the past three decades.

Early on in our marriage, right after I graduated from seminary, I worked at a church in children’s

ministry part-time while I taught the Bible full-time at a large Christian school in Los Angeles. I had six classes per day with thirty-five kids in each class, consisting of both seventh graders and seniors. That's 210 teenagers every day! It was exciting, exhausting, challenging and memorable. One year in particular, I remember having a quiet and withdrawn female student in my senior Bible class who did not speak much but had an interest in learning the Bible. She seemed to be somewhat of a loner as she was not hanging with the athletes or the academic geeks or the popular crowd. She was soft-spoken and courteous. I developed a bit of a rapport with her as "Mr. McManis," the Bible teacher. I was able to get her to talk more than she normally did with others.

As the last day of the school year was approaching I found out unintentionally that she did not have a dad and she was not getting along with her mom. Her mom actually despised her because this student was a Christian. She was eighteen. It turns out that her mom had just kicked her out of the house and would not let her come back home. As a result, she had no place to stay. That day when I got home I shared the news with my wife and asked her, "Can we house this girl for a while? She has nowhere to go." My wife did not know this girl from Adam...or Eve...but said, "Absolutely!" We took her into our tiny, cramped apartment the next day. She happily slept on the floor in the living room for two weeks until she found a long-term solution. She was

very thankful and appreciated immensely the care my wife gave her during that time: home-cooked meals, someone to talk to and get advice from. She said she was truly blessed.

Lesson Learned

In hindsight, my wife and I have fond memories of that incident. We saw a need, took a step of faith—well aware of the Bible’s teaching on hospitality and on how to treat those in need—and welcomed the girl in. Thirty years later we see that God would use that occasion to establish a pattern and an ongoing ministry that my wife and I have practiced ever since. After the student left we took in an autistic Christian man for three months to help him get back on his feet...in that same cramped, one-bedroom apartment. Thirty years later, he is living a fully independent life in another state, faithfully involved in a good local church.

We also had a Christian man stay in our home on occasion (the same small apartment). We would periodically see him on the highways of California, sitting on the side of the road, reading a Bible, with a hefty back pack and a sign that said, “Jesus Saves.” He called himself a missionary to the highways of America, had a powerful testimony, and was committed to a local church. He had shared the gospel with at least one person in all forty-eight continental states. He called himself “Brother Lee” and he never asked or begged from us the whole time we knew him. We initiated

contact with him simply by asking, “Do you need a ride?” Then a ten-year friendship ensued, and he told us of the ongoing work he was doing to help a fledgling church in Mexico.

The above three scenarios all happened before we had kids. Once the children started coming, (we have four), the hospitality continued. When we finally began renting a house that had a few rooms, we began opening up our home to people in need of a more long-term basis. For instance, we housed a teenage girl we knew from a previous church in Texas that we had served in before moving to California. She was a neighbor who had a troubled and broken home. We befriended her, brought her to church and youth group, told her the gospel and loved her. Shortly after we moved to California, she called us out of desperation as her life and family were falling apart. We flew her out to our home and took her in for several months. We had four children at this time. They had great attitudes as well and welcomed her into their home, treating her like a big sister.

Not long after she moved out, we took in a high school senior from our church when his dad got a job in another state and the teen needed to finish high school. He stayed with us for six weeks. On another occasion, a young nineteen-year-old man with no family had been visiting our church for several months. He needed some stability in his life. So again, I came home and asked my wife, “Can this young man stay with us?”

She said, “Well, I don’t know him, but if you think we should, then let’s do it.” He moved in the next week. Eventually he secured a full-time job, became self-sufficient and moved out on his own.

When that young man moved out, we took in a college student from Indonesia who needed a place to stay. A friend from church asked us if we could accommodate her. We did not know her—she was a stranger. But, she had recently started attending our church. We interviewed her, then my wife and I prayed and talked it over, and welcomed her in. She lived with us almost two years. She helped take care of the kids in return for living with us. She became part of the family in a way. She finished school, graduated, moved out, married a Christian man and now has her own family. It was a blessed experience for all of us. Our four kids have fond memories of her.

A few years later, a single, divorced man with three teenagers and serious health and financial challenges began attending our church. I finally was able to sit down with him and hear his testimony. It was clear he was a believer who had been through many trying situations and was now at rock-bottom in life. He was living in his car. So once again I found myself going home to my wife, explaining this guy’s situation, and asking her, “Can this man live with us until he can get his life together?” And once again, my wife, who did not know this man from Adam, said, “If you think we should, then invite him over.” So we did. He lived with

us for a while, complied by the house rules, was respectful of the family, never asked for anything, and eventually moved out on his own. I could recount at least five others we took into our home over the years, all with different needs and hurdles to overcome, who found refuge, solace, and stability by living with us which helped them transition into independence.

I personally give much credit to my wife and my four kids who maintained tremendously hospitable attitudes toward all these strangers over the years. They always seemed to have a stranger living in their house, eating their Cheerios, using their washing machine, sneaking in their back garage door into the downstairs bedroom. They often wondered, “That person finally moved out...that room is now vacant! Now who is dad going to bring home from work to live with us?” My four children, who are all about college age now, literally don’t know what it is like to not have a stranger, or non-family member, living in their house.

In addition to the many random people from churches, and off the street, that we invited into our home, there are the countless visiting pastors, missionaries, and church guests from all over the world we were able to entertain when they needed a place to lodge—thirty years of fond memories, spending quality time with dear saints, many of whom were complete strangers. We thank God for the mandate and ministry of biblical hospitality. Jesus is right—it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Seven Cautions

Now I want to transition to the caution—hospitality does entail discretion, wisdom, and prayer. You can't take every person into your home who claims to have a need. This imperative can't be approached willy-nilly out of guilt, compulsion, lack of planning or ignorance. The Bible is clear about that. God wants us to be hospitable, but He also wants us to be good stewards. He wants to protect us. In light of those truths, consider seven kinds of people that Scripture says to avoid and keep your distance from—which also means you don't extend biblical hospitality to them.

False Teachers

The first group of people to avoid and stay aloof from is false teachers. These are people who profess to love God, say they help people, frequently quote the Bible and invoke the name of Jesus, but in fact are phonies. The Bible calls them spiritual imposters and says they are dangerous. They don't deserve any hospitality from true Christians. John the Apostle puts it this way in his second epistle:

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ *as* coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward. Anyone who goes too far and

does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, **do not receive him into your house**, and do not give him a greeting; for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.

The Bible says categorically in verse ten “do not receive him into your house.” This literally means, “Do not be hospitable to false teachers! Do not welcome them.” To some this sounds mean or not nice. But God knows this is actually a loving thing to do as it protects others from the poison of destructive spirituality and from deceivers with ill motives.

Immoral Professing Christians

The next group to stay away from is immoral people who claim to be Christians. We all have sin living in us and we all sin (Rom 7:14-24; 1 John 1:1, 10), but there is a different category of people who say they are believers while at the same time they nurture, protect and justify their sin. Sometimes they even flaunt their sin and have no regard for the holiness of God or the purity of the Church. Avoid such people. More than that, call them out and expose them. The apostle Paul put it this way in 1 Corinthians 5:

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I *did* not at all *mean* with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—**not even to eat with such a one.**

The Bible says categorically, “not even to eat with such a one.” This means, do not entertain them, do not be hospitable, do not welcome them; rather, isolate them. This is holy separation and blessed subtraction. To embrace and welcome such an immoral person would be to endorse that person and their wicked lifestyle that is contrary to being a disciple of Jesus. True believers don’t willfully embrace and flaunt immoral living as a lifestyle. John says, “No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God’s seed abides in him” (1 John 3:9).

Those in Church Discipline

The third group of people God’s Word says not to welcome with hospitality is those under church discipline who are in step three or four—those living under corporate, public censure. Typically, such a person is a professing Christian, has refused numerous times to repent of sin and has been exposed by the local

church. While they are unrepentant in steps three or four, other believers should not be welcoming them into fellowship nor should they be hospitable. Rather, the saints should be warning those remaining in sin and calling them to repentance. And if the person under discipline runs from the accountability of their home church to another church without repenting to hide from their sin, the new church should not welcome the recalcitrant spiritual fugitive. The new church needs to honor the discipline process of the home church in question. In such an instance, the new church is not to be a city of refuge for the rebel.

Sluggards

The fourth category of people the Bible says to not welcome with hospitable care is the sluggard. Paul calls such a person “the idle brother.” This person is the able-bodied person who loiters around churches, lingering among the saints for the sole purpose of begging from others, feigning hardships, loaded with illegitimate excuses as to why they can’t work. The Bible says to love and help the poor (Gal 2:10), but these “idle” people are the fake poor; lazy manipulators; bold, expectant sloths; presumptuous takers who prey on the good-hearted, kind and sympathetic givers. Scripture says not to aid and abet their self-centered behavior:

Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly

life and not according to the tradition which you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example, because we did not act in an undisciplined manner among you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with labor and hardship we *kept* working night and day so that we would not be a burden to any of you; not because we do not have the right *to this*, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you, so that you would follow our example. For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to work in quiet fashion and eat their own bread.

This is tough love. Verse six says, “keep away from” them. Verse ten says, “If they don’t work—then they don’t eat.”

Factional People

The fifth group of people Scripture commands us to avoid, thus depriving them of hospitality, are factional people. Titus 3:10 commands us to “reject a factional man.” A factional person is one who is divisive,

argumentative, contentious, and known for causing cliques, factions, and schisms in the church—even after a couple resounding warnings from church leaders. Paul says further that such a person in the church is actually “foolish,” (3:9) even “perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned” (3:11). Proverbs says, “Leave the presence of a fool” (14:7) and “Do not associate with a...hot-tempered man” (22:24).

Mockers

The sixth group of people the Bible says to avoid are mockers, or those who overtly scorn the gospel. Jesus was incarnate love, but at the same time He was not welcoming to everyone. There were people He avoided and hid from. These were people that He warned His own disciples to stay away from. The main people Jesus avoided were the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Many times He traveled in secret at feast time (John 7:10) for He knew they were trying to kill Him (7:19). These same Jewish leaders mocked Jesus publicly, calling Him a Samaritan, demonic, and a blasphemer. In return, He rejected them, saying, “where I am you cannot come” (John 8:34). Jesus told His disciples that if people reject their message then they were to shake the dust off of their feet and avoid them (Matt 10:14). He also told His followers to not cast their pearls before swine (Matt 7:6). Those who mock the gospel are to be shunned. Jesus further taught that if mockers die in their sin,

refusing to repent, then Jesus will not welcome them into heaven:

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS’” (Matt 7:21-23).

Dangerous People

The seventh group of people the Scripture says to watch out for and not welcome are dangerous people. In the Old Testament, God gave six cities of refuge that people could flee to in the event that they accidentally committed manslaughter (Num 35). A trial was held to verify that person’s guilt or innocence. If the person was not guilty then that stranger to the city was to be embraced and welcomed. If the fugitive was guilty of willful murder then that person was not welcomed to the city and instead was summarily executed (35:16-21). God has always warned His people about those who are dangerous. God gave law and government to protect the innocent from those who threaten our well-being

and even our lives. This is not just an Old Testament truth. First Timothy 1 says,

[the] law is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching (vv. 9-10).

Paul says in Romans 13 that God has given laws of government for the purpose of protecting innocent citizens from dangerous people. Authorities like the police and military are even given the power (“the sword,” 13:4) by God to execute capital punishment for capital offenses:

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same;

for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

The Bible is not naïve, and Christians should not be naïve either. This world is full of dangerous people and violent law-breakers. Such dangerous people should not be harbored, welcomed, protected or given sanctuary with disregard to just laws. God is the Great Law-giver and His laws need to be honored. Christians and the Church universal need to remember that the law is holy, just, and good (Rom 7:12). It should not be trumped or ignored in the name of misguided, undeserved mercy.

Giving is more blessed than receiving. Extending biblical hospitality in the name of Christ is a vital ministry and virtuous discipline. Yet it needs to be practiced with God's wisdom, leading and discretion to preserve safety for all and produce good stewardship. Thankfully, God's Word is the perfect, sufficient guide to help us strike the balance.

5

LIVING OUT THE MINISTRY OF HOSPITALITY

In this chapter let's consider some practical principles for implementing hospitality in our personal lives and in the local church.

It Begins With the Heart

True hospitality begins with the right heart and the right attitude. We've seen that hospitality means "stranger love." If we don't have a true love for people, then we will not be hospitable. If you are a Christian, then you have no excuse here. The Bible says that the love of God has been shed abroad in the heart of every true believer: "the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom 5:5). Remember, that "the love of God" is a unique kind of love—a love that unbelievers don't possess or have access to. It is a divine love enabling

you to be selfless, sacrificial, and giving toward others in a way that was not possible before you got saved. This supernatural love is at the disposal of every Christian. When a person is born again, God puts the Holy Spirit in the believer to indwell them. The indwelling Holy Spirit produces the fruits of the Spirit in the life of every Christian. The leading fruit of the Spirit is love (Gal 5:28). The act of showing hospitable love toward others is evidence of true salvation. First John 3 says,

We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer; and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him. We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.

Verse 17 above is a sober warning. If you call yourself a Christian but you are unwilling to help those in need when you have the resources to do so, then John says it is questionable whether you are even a child of God. Because God has put His supernatural love in the heart of every genuine believer, we should welcome the idea

of welcoming strangers in the name of Christ. Hospitality begins in the heart.

Ask God for Help

We all have weaknesses and blind spots (James 3:2). Those blind spots include selfishness, self-preservation, partiality, prejudice, or greed. All such sins can undermine the heart of hospitality. Being that we are all susceptible to these sins, we need to regularly go before God's throne of grace and mercy in prayer, and ask Him to search our hearts. Ask Him to expose any blind spots. Ask Him to use others around you that know you well to help expose your blind spots to ensure that you are not neglecting the biblical command to be hospitable to strangers (Prov 27:6). Remember David's prayer in Psalm 139, "Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me" (vv. 23-24). Ask God regularly to cultivate a hospitable attitude in yourself. Ask God to expose any residual selfishness or prejudice you may harbor that undermines fulfilling the mandate to be hospitable. God's Word says, "You do not have because you do not ask" (James 4:2). Jesus said, "Ask, and it will be given to you" (Matt 7:7). The Bible also says when we ask for anything according to His will then He will give it to us: "This is the confidence we have before Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us *in* whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we

have asked from Him” (1 John 5:14-15). We need to be very specific when we pray. If you regularly plead with God to give you a hospitable attitude then He will answer that prayer.

Get Discipled

Observe those around you who are hospitable and learn from them. Jesus was the Master teacher. He taught His disciples by precept but also by practice. He told them, “Follow Me” (Matt 4:19). He wanted them to learn by observation, and they did learn as they followed Him, walked in His shadow, and observed His methods. They watched Him pray (Luke 9:18). They watched Him preach and teach (Matt 7:28-29). They watched Him serve (John 13). They watched Him extend kindness (Luke 17:11 ff.). They watched Him rebuke (Matt 23). Consequently, in time and thanks to His modeling, they would do the same (Acts 1:8). This is discipleship. If you are not good at being hospitable then find a mentor and get discipled in that area. Think of people in your church who are exemplary at hospitality, then talk with them, ask them questions, shadow them as they love strangers.

Remember God Owns Everything

Treat everything you own as though it belonged to God...because it does: “The earth is the LORD’s, and all it contains” (Ps 24:1). The Bible says that every-thing we own was given to us by God as a gift. Paul asked, “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor

4:7). He meant that everything you possess and own was given to you by God as gift—your cash, your job, your car, your house, your food, your stocks, your cell phone—all of it. We are merely stewards of all that we have. When we truly come to realize that nothing ultimately belongs to us, then it will be much easier to share it with others. When was the last time you let someone use your car? The willingness to share, or give to others, is at the heart of hospitality. Paul teaches in Ephesians 4 that the reason Christians are to work hard and earn income is not only so they can pay their bills, but also so they can share with others in need (v. 28). If all you think about when you get your paycheck is padding your wallet, amassing your savings, stabilizing your security, accumulating more goods, or planning your vacation, and yet you don't give one thought as to how you can share your wealth with those in need, then you have an unbiblical view of money.

Be Deliberate

Be deliberate about welcoming guests to your church. Whether it is a Sunday school class, a Bible study in your home, the worship Service on Sunday, the prayer meeting mid-week or a special ministry off campus, always take the time to meet visitors, especially first-time visitors. Our church is not big nor well-known, but in our thirteen years of existence we have had first-time visitors almost every Sunday—believers, unbelievers, people new to the area, relatives just visiting family. We

purpose to greet all of them and welcome them. We have greeters on Sunday welcoming folks as they come in. We make sure our greeters love people, especially strangers, and that they are warm and friendly. We take seriously the commands in the epistles that say, “Greet one another” (Rom 16:16; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; 1 Pet 5:14). We have a time after every Sunday service where visitors can meet with one of our elders and get their questions answered, get counsel, or even a prayer. We try to follow up with all our visitors by thanking them for coming via email or a phone call. We invite all our Sunday guests to come to our fellowship meal after the service, which has proven to be an ideal setting to get to know visitors and strangers better. Our people routinely invite visitors to lunch after the service.

Leaders Take the Lead

To nurture a culture of hospitality in the local church it needs to start with the leadership: the elders and pastors. We saw earlier that hospitality was a qualification required of elders. When the church leaders are graciously, winsomely, regularly living out hospitality and exhibiting a welcoming attitude toward visitors and strangers at the church, then the saints will follow in like manner. There is nothing worse than visiting a church as a first-time visitor, and instead of a warm welcome, all you get are strange stares and the cold shoulder, as all the regular attenders pretend not to see you as they treat you like a ghost...or the plague.

Sadly, many of us have visited a church like that. In such instances one feels like a trespasser who snuck over the fence at the local moose lodge or some elite country club, having no right to be among the privileged members. The worst example for me was when I was interviewing at a large Bible church to be their next preacher. They told me they had over 100 resumes come in from around the country and that I was in the top five for consideration. I then decided to visit the church incognito as a visitor to check out the church. To my disappointment, not one person greeted me, said hello, or even noticed me the entire ninety minutes I was there. They even had a greeting time at the beginning of the service. Hundreds of folks who were there that day simply chose to say “Hi” and greet only people they knew. I left at the end of the service, walking by several folks, rubbing shoulders with a few along the way, but not one person noticed me. A couple weeks later I was told, “The position has been filled.” I was at peace.

That experience, and a few others I have had over the years at other churches, reminds me of James 2, the classic passage on corporate hospitality in the local church:

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with *an attitude of* personal favoritism. For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed

in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, “You sit here in a good place,” and you say to the poor man, “You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool,” have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world *to be* rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into court? Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called? If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, “YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF,” you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin *and* are convicted by the law as transgressors.

James says that if you show favoritism with visitors that is “evil” (v. 4) and “sin” (v. 9). Recently one of my seminary students shared with the class that he once attended a church that literally would not let people in the church if they were not dressed appropriately. Specifically, if the visitor of the day did not look “nice”

or up to formal snuff, but rather was kind of dingy, shabby or seedy, then they could not join the others in corporate worship. That is evil and sin. Thank God for the example of Jesus who welcomed the downcast, ostracized, despised and even sinners (Luke 5:29-32).

Of all the people in the world who should be welcoming to strangers, it should be Christians. And the most loving place in the community should be the local church. As we remember and regularly practice the biblical principles listed above, then these two expectations can become a reality. And as a result, God will be pleased, the love of Christ will be put on display, strangers will be ministered to, and believers will be blessed.

6

A TESTIMONY ON HOSPITALITY

In this book we showed that being hospitable is a command from God to every Christian. Hospitality means to love and welcome strangers who have practical needs. This practical love flows from a heart of supernatural love that results from believing the gospel and possessing the indwelling Spirit who lives in every Christian. The Bible models this ministry of practical love from cover to cover. Jesus was the Master at modeling hospitality. We were reminded that Jesus said, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

As with any biblical imperative, the goal is to implement and create godly habits of life—not just understand theoretical or theological truths. Our little church has been blessed by God with the gift of many saints who routinely practice biblical hospitality. The following is a testimony from one of our young couples

A Testimony on Hospitality

who make hospitality a priority in their walk with Christ. I trust you will find it edifying and motivating as you pursue the practice of stranger love in your own life:

We love having people come over to our place. Here's how God has brought us to our convictions regarding hospitality and how practicing hospitality looks for our family. We pray you will be encouraged.

My wife's desire for practicing hospitality in an intentional way started soon after she was saved. She noticed that her friends would comment on how "hospitable" she was. As she grew in her faith and learned that she should be using her resources for God's glory, she began to plan more occasions to have people over in her home. She enjoyed hosting even more knowing it was from God and for God. She remembers thinking fondly of how the early church would break bread daily in their homes (Acts 2:46). One example of hospitality that she'll never forget was the time she was in Arizona, alone in a new place. One evening, at the end of her first visit to a church small group, as she was leaving the host's home she was told, "we eat dinner every night at 6:30pm...so just come over whenever." She was blown away by this generous and kind invitation from someone she had just met. Other examples she has been encouraged by were friends who hosted church-wide events regularly, friends who opened their home every Sunday afternoon with

homemade popcorn, and friends who hosted travelers better than a 5-star hotel.

I have always enjoyed entertaining people as well, but it was after God saved me that He developed a desire to host as a means of edifying other believers and evangelizing the lost. During college my roommates and I enjoyed hosting Bible studies, prayer nights, and meals. I also benefited from many different church families who have opened their homes for meals, prayer, discipleship, and Bible studies. These experiences along with encouragement from my wife have helped me grow in practicing hospitality.

We have been recipients of much hospitality, first from God who welcomed us as sinners to Himself, and then from His people. Many godly examples have helped us grow in our convictions, individually and as a family. We are so thankful we can host together as a family now. Even though it has looked different in each season of life, whether we were single, married, or now with children, in a small home or big home, our desire has been the same: to be good stewards of the home and resources God has given us (Rom 11:36, Ps 24:1). We aim to be generous toward others and use what we have to bless others (1 Tim 6:17-19). Whether we are considering a new home or planning our current home's layout, we contemplate how it will accommodate large gatherings, visitors, or overnight guests.

With this mindset and God's blessing, we've had many opportunities to open our home, whether it was

A Testimony on Hospitality

our 1-bedroom apartment or 4-bedroom house. One of the ways we've been able to use our home is hosting church events. It's been a blessing, joy, and privilege to be a part of the various ministries in this way. To get involved initially, we reached out and sought opportunities. Then, as God provided, we discussed them together before committing.

Practicing hospitality does have its challenges because we are sinful. In our selfishness we often think wrongly. We complain that hosting is tiring, think it's inconvenient, get upset that the baby's nap is being interrupted, or wish that we could keep all our resources for ourselves. We can also be discontent and wish our home were bigger, smaller, or cleaner. We may be tempted into thinking that we are too busy with work or our own family's activities.

Thank the Lord that He gives us grace to overcome all these challenges! We actively fight off wrong thoughts and replace them with true ones through His Word. We often need to encourage one another to think rightly through God's Word. His Word reminds us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Mark 12:30-31), to be content with what we have (Phil 4:12), to consider others first (Phil 2:3), to remember that it is better to give than to receive (Acts 20:35), to serve by His strength and for His glory (1 Pet 4:11), to lay up treasures in heaven and not on earth (Matt 6:19-21), to not neglect meeting together (Heb 10:25), to love our

What the Bible Says About Hospitality

brothers with sincerity (Rom 12:9-10), to serve one another with zeal (Rom 12:11), to contribute to the needs of other believers (Rom 12:13), and to show hospitality (Rom 12:13).

We also need to pray for help to serve with a glad and generous heart. God is faithful and gives us strength, brings help from others, and gives us humility to be okay with serving simple meals and using paper plates and plastic utensils. Our place isn't always clean, and with young children, we sometimes need to get creative with cooking and ask our guests to be gracious with us.

God has not only helped us through these challenges but He's also blessed us immensely through each hosting opportunity. There is so much joy in seeing people meet new people, deepen relationships, serve and encourage each other, evangelize non-believers, and reconnect. In terms of ministry, opening our home is a way we can serve and love others. Practically, hosting enables us to have fellowship with others and it sometimes challenges our cooking skills! Our marriage has been blessed because when we host we practice and fine-tune our communication skills and it is also something fun that we can work on together. Our home is warmer, kept cleaner, and utilized fuller when we have people over, including strangers. It's wonderful to see so much ministry happening in our home!

All Christians should practice hospitality (Rom 12:13, 1 Pet 4:9, Heb 13:2). You can practice hospitality

A Testimony on Hospitality

regardless of the size or cleanliness of your home. Whether you host one person or 100, you are practicing hospitality. We should all ask God for opportunities to serve and minister to others with the homes and material things that we've been graciously given by the Creator and Giver of all things.

Opening our homes helps us edify the church body and evangelize the lost. It sets us apart from our society that glorifies individualism and shuns strangers. May Christians be lights in this dark world through opening our hearts and homes to people for God's glory.

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