

The Practice of Hospitality



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Hebrews 13:1-2

¹Let love of the brethren continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it."

The writer of Hebrews teaches us that the practice of hospitality is the duty of all Christians. In verse 2 we read, *²"Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. . ."* Here the writer of Hebrews tells us in very plain language that we must not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. This then, by the instruction of our Lord, becomes our duty as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. Hospitality must not be thought of as something optional that some very wealthy people do in order to show off their wealth to their very wealthy friends. Rather it is a duty that is incumbent upon all believers to practice.

In addition to being a practice which all Christians ought to embrace, it is also a requirement for those who aspire to serve the Church as elders/shepherds (pastors and laymen). The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Timothy 3:2 *"An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable. . ."*

Elders or overseers must be hospitable as a mark of true Christian piety and maturity, as they seek to lead the Church in fruitful gospel ministry. This then is our duty as Christians in general and as elders in particular! But as the writer of Hebrews points out, it is a duty which is very easily neglected. This, I take, is the reason for this exhortation. We are exhorted not to neglect this practice (literally, *"Do not forget"*) precisely because we are prone to do just that! We are prone to neglect to do our duty, to forget about those who are strangers as we go about our daily lives. We can become so occupied with our own lives that there is not enough time to practice hospitality toward those outside of our families. For this very reason the instruction is given, *"Do*

not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. . .” This must not be forgotten. It is a practical manifestation of the love of God to the world. Acts of love between believers and those shown to unbelievers testify to the truth of the Gospel. 1 John 4:20-21 states, ²⁰*“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar;; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. ²¹And this is the commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.”*

In reality, what is the practice of hospitality is a manifestation of Christian love toward strangers. Note that in verse 1 we are told ¹*“Let love of the brethren continue.”* Then in verse 2 we are told ²*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. . .”* These believers were doing a good job of loving one another. This they had not forgotten! This they had not neglected! But there is one thing that they were neglecting. They should continue to love each other and then they should begin to practice this love toward those outside the church as well. The Greek word that is used here is *philaxenia*. It is a compound word made up of the word *phileo-to love*, and the word *xenia-stranger*. So literally, this word that is translated *show hospitality* in verse 1 is literally *the love of strangers*. It could be literally translated, *“Do not forget to show the love for strangers to strangers.”*

Throughout the history of the church this duty has been practiced in various ways. Sometimes believers would invite strangers or neighbors into their houses to visit with them. They would then be able to see the life of a believing family and believers would have an opportunity to share the Gospel of Christ.

The practice of hospitality is a powerful mark of genuine Christian Faith. Jesus said in John 13:35 *“By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”* When we open our homes to strangers we bring them into this love-filled atmosphere to breathe the very air of this Gospel-love as it transforms our lives! Of course, this assumes that we are loving one another and that our lives are being transformed.

Of course, again, we are not talking about *entertaining*. We are talking about hospitality which was often an act of kindness to those in need.

In fact, in Old Testament times there were no hotels or guest houses of any sort. In the desert nomads depended upon the hospitality of others as they traveled from one place to another. It was supported by the thought that the host himself might one day be a stranger in need.

Genesis 18:1-8 tells us that Abraham himself opened his home to three strangers who were traveling in the land and one of them was most likely the *“Son of God.”*

During the times of the early church there were few hotels and again people found refuge through the practice of hospitality. All throughout the earthly ministry of Jesus, people opened their homes to him. The same is true of the ministry of the Apostle Paul. He could not check into the *Holiday Inn*

Express. Philip Schaff tells us in his work on the *History of the Church* (Volume II, pages 374-377) about the practice of the early church: “A traveling Christian, of whatever language or country, with a letter of recommendation from his bishop, was everywhere **hospitably received** as a long known friend.”

Every congregation was a charitable society, and in its public worship took regular collections for its needy members. The offerings at the communion and love-feasts, first held on the evening, afterwards on the morning of the Lord’s Day, were considered a part of worship. To these were added numberless private charities, given in secret, which eternity alone will reveal. The church at Rome had under its care a great multitude of widows, orphans, blind, lame, and sick, whom the deacon Laurentius, in the Decian persecution, showed to the heathen prefect, as the most precious treasure of the church.”

“During the persecution under Gallus (252) when the pestilence raged in Carthage, and the heathens threw out their dead and sick upon the streets, ran away from them for fear of contagion, and curse the Christians as the supposed authors of the plague, Cyprian assembled his congregation, and exhorted them to love their enemies; whereupon all went to work; the rich with their money, the poor with their hands, and rested not, till the dead were buried, the sick cared for, and the city saved from desolation.”

*“After Constantine, when the masses of the people flocked into the church, charity assumed an institutional form, and built hospitals and house of refuge for the **strangers**(xenodochia/xenodochium), the poor, the sick, the aged, the orphans. [Such institutions were unknown among the heathen]. They appear first in the East, but soon afterwards also in the west. Fabiola founded a hospital in Rome, Pammachius one in the Portus Romanus, Paulinus one in Nola. At the time of Gregory there were several hospitals in Rome; he mentions also hospitals in Naples, Sicily, and Sardinia.” Vol. IV, Pages 356-357.*

*“The organized congregational charity of the ante-Nicene age provided for all the immediate wants. When the state professed Christianity, there sprang up permanent charitable institutions for the poor, the sick, **strangers**, widows, orphans, and helpless old men. The first clear proof of such institutions we find in the age of Julian the Apostate, who tried to check the progress of Christianity and to revive paganism by directing the high priest of Galatia, Arsacius, to establish in every town a Xenodochium to be supported by the state and also by private contributions; for, he said, it was a shame that the heathen should be left without support from their own, while ‘among the Jews no beggar can be found, and the godless Galileans’ (that is, the Christians) ‘nourish not only their own, but even our poor.’” (Vol. II, Pages 376-377)*

So you see that in these varied ways, the Church was practicing the Christian duty of hospitality and was demonstrating the love of God to the world. The Church as a body of Christ in this world must practice hospitality toward those who are in need outside the Church. But believers must practice it individually as well. Pastors and elders must show the church how to practice it.

What are some practical ways in which we can begin to practice hospitality? We can begin by opening our homes to one another! We can begin as verse 1 instructs us: ¹“Let love of the brethren continue.” You can begin to practice hospitality among the membership and visitors of the local church. You could then begin to think about reaching out to others, neighbors, co-

workers, acquaintances, that there might be open doors for the Gospel as we open our homes and share our lives with others. Perhaps you could open your home and invite friends and neighbors to learn about Jesus. Again, this is not *entertaining*, showing off your goods, trying to impress your neighbors, etc. This is for the purpose of ministering and manifesting the love of Jesus to others.

There is great benefit and blessing for the whole body of Christ if we are all committed to the practice of hospitality, both inside and outside of the church.

What are some possible motivations for beginning to make the practice of hospitality a part of your Christian experience? What could possibly motivate you to do this? I mean, after all, there are risks involved! It could be dangerous! You may be familiar with the famous novel by Victor Hugo, *Les Miserables*. In this novel Jean Valjean, a thief who had just been released from prison, is taken into a priest's home for the night. During the night Jean Valjean wakes up and steals the silver and then tries to escape the town. If you practice hospitality, people may mess up your stuff! They may see your dirty rug. They may sit on your lumpy sofa. They may scope out your silver and china. *"This is just too risky, too inconvenient, too much exposure, too much trouble!"*

What could push you and me out of our comfort zones? What could get you to make yourself vulnerable? I would like to suggest to you several motivations for practicing hospitality!

First, according to Verse 2b you might actually be showing hospitality to an angel, *²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it."*

You could be entertaining an angel and not know it! Now here is a great mystery. This text tells us that it is possible to show hospitality to an angel and not know it. Who knows, the person to whom you open your home may be more than meets the eye?

Of course, whether you show hospitality to an angel or not is not important. What is important is that we obey the instructions of our Heavenly Father! And He says to us, *²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it."* If we are obedient and practice hospitality we will establish a context, an atmosphere of love that will support the Gospel proclamation! Remember that Jesus said in John 13:35 *"By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*

If doing it for angels does motivate you then what about doing it for Jesus? In Matthew 25:31-40 Jesus says, *³¹"But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. ³²"And 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; ³³and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. ³⁴"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. 35'For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was a **stranger**, and you invited Me in; 36'naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.' 37"Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You drink? 38'And when did we see You a **stranger**, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 39'And when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' 40"And 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.'*

Jesus teaches us in this passage that when we show hospitality to a stranger in need we are showing it to Jesus Himself! (vss 35, 38-40) Now here is an even greater motivation for the practice of hospitality! When you practice hospitality toward strangers, you are practicing it to our Lord!

But here is the greatest motivation. It is the motivation of the Gospel of Jesus Himself! Do you not see yourself as a poor stranger and alien who has no place to go in this world? Do you not see your spiritual bankruptcy apart from the riches of Jesus? The Apostle Paul puts it this way in Ephesians 2:11-13 *11"Therefore remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands – 12remember 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. 13But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."*

You were a stranger and Jesus took you in! Jesus practices hospitality, the love of strangers toward us! He has shown us His eternal kindness and took us into His house! Can we not as a response to His love, show the same love to others?

Victor Hugo in *Les Miserables* captures the spirit of hospitality when he describes the encounter of Jean Valjean with the priest:

"Monsieur Cure," said the man, "you are good; you don't despise me. You take me into your house; you light your candles for me, and I haven't hid from you where I come from, and how miserable I am."

The bishop, who was sitting near him, touched his hand gently and said: "You need not tell me who you are. This is not my house; it is the house of Christ. It does not ask any comer whether he has a name, but whether he has an affliction. You are suffering; you are hungry and thirsty; be welcome. And do not thank me; do not tell me that I take you into my house. This is the home of no man, except him who needs an asylum. I tell you, who are a traveler, that you are more at home here than I; whatever is here is yours. What need have I to know your name? Besides, before you told me, I knew it." The man opened his eyes in astonishment:

"Really? You knew my name?"

"Yes," answered the bishop, "your name is my brother." (Les Miserables, pages 65-66)