

# Hospitality

[Third is a series of messages on the theme "Living in the Kingdom: Values that Matter"]

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Leviticus 19:33-34, Romans 12:13, Hebrews 13:1-2

Lev 19:33 "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him.

Lev 19:34 The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

Ro 12:13 Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

Heb 13:1 Keep on loving each other as brothers.

Heb 13:2 Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. [NIV]

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"Practice hospitality," says Paul. Here is yet another value that matters or should matter to the people of God who seek to model life in his kingdom. Hospitality is part of the Lord's call to love one another.

We are to love our brothers and sisters in Christ in lots of ways, but perhaps it begins in the simple act of offering hospitality. We are to welcome the stranger in our midst, and we are to welcome one another in Christ's name.

In biblical times, hospitality was a sacred obligation. God, in fact, commanded his people to welcome the stranger, the foreigner, in their midst, for after all, they were once sojourners in a strange land, and they were treated with special regard by the Lord himself.

So when we read in Genesis that three visitors came to Abraham one day as he was sitting at the door of his tent, he immediately offered refreshment and ran to his wife Sara, telling her to put out the fine china and linen and make a feast. And Abraham went to his herd and picked out a choice, tender calf for the meal. In that day, strangers who came to your door were treated like royalty. Nothing but the best would do.

William Barclay, a New Testament scholar, goes so far as to say that without hospitality the early church could not have existed. Traveling missionaries who spread the good news of the gospel had to stay somewhere and as there were no Holiday Inns or Best Westerns at the time, the only place where they could find lodging was in the homes of their fellow Christians. There were a few inns along well-traveled roads, but these were incredibly filthy and dens of immorality. So many a nameless person in the early church made Christian missionary work possible by opening the doors of their house and home.

Not just missionaries needed hospitality. The local church needed it as well. Since there were no church buildings, the church had to depend on the hospitality of its members who would offer their houses for worship and fellowship.

The health and the vitality of the Christian church today is still dependent upon our ability to practice hospitality. The quality of our love for one another will show in the way we treat the strangers and the visitors in our midst. And it will show in the way we treat one another.

Let's think for a moment about the way we treat our visitors and the newer members of our fellowship. Do they find a warm and friendly welcome here? Are we a hospitable church, a welcoming place? Many visitors tell me so, but we can always do better. The words of Hebrews serve always to remind us: *"Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."* I love those words. I think of Abraham. It turns out that the three people who came to Abraham's tent door proved to be not only angels, but the Lord himself. Because he welcomed them, he was blessed.

There is a story of a pastor who had just arrived at an ancient Coptic monastery out in the desert, nearly a day's journey from Cairo, Egypt. The pastor was astonished at his welcome. The monks treated him as if he were the one important guest they had been awaiting since the place was established in the twelfth century. They served a fine meal, showed him to a comfortable room, and brought him a bouquet of flowers. He was then greeted by the abbot of the monastery, Father Jeremiah.

*"Thank you so much!"* said the pastor. *"You sure know how to treat visitors."*

Father Jeremiah replied, *"We always treat guests as if they were angels, just to be safe."*

In welcoming the stranger, should we not welcome them as the Lord himself? Did he not say, *"As you do unto the least of these, my brethren, you do it unto me?"* May it be said of our church: *"I was a stranger and you invited me in."*

Not that we should necessarily smother our newcomers with kindness and make a scene over them. Everyone, however, likes to be at least noticed and warmly received and treated with respect. Here is gentle reminder: Perhaps we could all be on the lookout for new faces and make more of an effort to greet them and perhaps to get to know them. You never know, but you just might be blessed by that new acquaintance or that chance meeting. Every person carries within himself or herself a whole world of experience. As we open ourselves to new people and to the gifts they would give, we learn and grow. Our own world expands. God has a way of blessing us through the people we meet. So you and I need to be open to new folks; it begins with a simple act of hospitality-- a warm smile, a friendly greeting, a firm handshake...

We are not only to show hospitality to visitors to the church. We must also continue to extend hospitality to one another. In so doing, we deepen our relationships and strengthen our care for one another. And the way we do that is to eat together more. Shared meals are very important.

Few of us need be told that a meal is a sign of hospitality and friendship. Any child knows that when you share your candy bar with the new kid on the block, it is an act which produces instant friendship. There is something about eating with someone which draws you closer to that person.

So one place for us to begin growing friendships and to deepen our love for one another is around one another's tables. Let me encourage you to have more people over – people you don't know or don't know well. The more you do, the more friends you'll have.

Hospitality, however, is more than being friendly to new people and having more dinner parties. What's most important is that we develop the quality of being hospitable. Henri Nouwen has written about the importance of "making our lives available" to others. That's being hospitable. It's has to do with being "making ourselves available to others: open and gracious, approachable – not self-consumed. It's about

treating every person we meet – no matter who they are or where they come from - with profound reverence, as if they are the most important person in the world to you at that moment. Jesus modeled that quality perfectly. He made himself available to others. Though he had no place to lay his head – though he had no place to call home – and though he had few opportunities to host dinner parties – he was perfectly and profoundly hospitable, showing regard for all manner of humanity, giving time and attention and love even to those whom society deemed unworthy of it.

Dear friends, this very moment Jesus inviting us to a dinner party, of which he happens to be the host. He is extending hospitality to us to join him in this fabulous meal, though in many ways, we are undeserving of it. This meal is far better than any ordinary, earthly meal. If you check the menu, it doesn't appear to be much: small chunks of bread and tiny cups of juice. But in reality it is a veritable feast of love and spiritual nourishment. All we need bring is our faith and our gratitude.

So let us come, and let us partake of the Lord's hospitality. Let us feast on his love.