

“Christian Hospitality”
Hebrews 13:1-6
November 8, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

We’re looking today at our core value of being a welcoming community. The Bible often refers to this by use of the word “hospitality.” It is surprising to many that the command to show hospitality should receive such emphasis in the Bible. In the words of Henri Nouwen, for most of us hospitality conjures up images of “tea parties, bland conversation, and a general atmosphere of coziness.” It is clear from the prominence given to hospitality in the Bible that such an anemic definition is very different from what the Bible means. The importance of this duty of hospitality can be seen right off the bat here in our passage. Chapter 13 of Hebrews starts the practical ethical section of the book, and after the general command to continue in brotherly love, the first specific command given is this one about showing hospitality.

Why is hospitality so important? To help answer that question, let me ask you to imagine that you are a new student in a new high school. It’s your first day of school, and there is one fear that dominates your mind and heart. Where will you sit at lunchtime? More specifically, who will you sit with? It is the one time in the school schedule when things are relatively unstructured, and that makes it possible for some very bad things to happen. You might unwittingly sit in a seat and be told by a fellow student that you can’t sit there because it is saved for someone else. That will feel like rejection. So you decide to sit in a remote corner, hoping that someone nice will either sit beside you or invite you to sit with them. You fear that you will be all alone the entire time. As your stomach is churning in anxiety about this, you meet a really nice classmate before school and discover that you have the same lunch hour. Then she speaks words that bring joy to your heart, “Do you want to sit with me at lunch?” There is great power in welcoming others into our lives, especially if they would be outsiders without our welcome. And this is so important because it touches on the heart of the gospel. Jesus came in order to give a sacrificial welcome to those who are outsiders. Hospitality means to include the “least” in the central parts of our lives, just as God has included us in the heart of the kingdom and even within the fellowship of the Trinity. Let’s explore this more deeply through this second verse of Hebrews 13.

I. The Command to Show Hospitality

What does it mean to show hospitality? The word itself means literally “love of strangers.” Even today, to be a stranger is to be in a vulnerable place. When you are new to a place, you don’t have the relational network that is such an

important part of dealing with the challenges of normal life. If you are a stranger in a foreign country, it's even worse. Such things as a language barrier or suspicions people naturally have about those who are different increase a stranger's vulnerability. In biblical times things were even worse for the stranger, especially for Christians. In larger communities, there were inns where people could, for a fee, stay the night. But they were notoriously evil places where Christians wouldn't stay. So it was the common practice for travelling Christians to seek out the home of another Christian for an overnight stay, and usually the guest would be a stranger to the host. For the host, then, the practice of hospitality involved both risk and expense. There was a risk because you didn't know the person staying with you, and there was an expense because it was expected that you would feed your guest at your own expense.

Our situation is a little different. The majority of people who travel today have good hotels to stay in and usually the financial ability to pay for such stays. So is this an obsolete command that we can ignore? Not at all. The object of our hospitality may not be poor, vulnerable travelers, but there are still vulnerable outsiders who need to be welcomed. Who are those people today? I can think of several categories. The term "strangers" in the Bible often referred to foreigners, and there are certainly the foreign born in our communities. Some are here to study and others to work, but all need the warmth of welcome provided through hospitality. There are also the lonely. There is a relational poverty today that is at epidemic levels in our culture. People are literally dying of loneliness. It may be the elderly, the socially awkward, or sometimes just those who have isolated themselves for a variety of reasons.

So the command to show hospitality means to welcome into our lives those who feel themselves to be outsiders. What exactly do we do to welcome them? There are, of course, many different ways of doing this. We can notice someone new to our church and speak to them and introduce them to others. We can take note of those who are standing or sitting by themselves at a social gathering, and include them in our group. But the central feature of hospitality in the Bible is the shared meal. When verse 2 says that in the practice of hospitality, **"some have entertained angels unawares,"** it is referring to the time in the Old Testament when Abraham and Sarah hosted three visitors who turned out to be angels, one of whom was actually the Lord himself. What they did on that occasion was to serve a meal to their visitors. In the majority of the cases of hospitality in the Bible, a shared meal is the main activity. To be given a seat at the table is a powerfully Christian gesture of welcome. It speaks of our equal status before the Lord, regardless of one's social and economic standing. This is the reason Paul was so severe with the Corinthians about their practices of eating together. Their celebration of the Lord's Supper was accompanied by a feast where they would eat together as a church. But the

rich were neglecting the poor, bringing great feasts for themselves while letting the poor members of the congregation go hungry. Paul even says that God has stepped in to judge them for this practice, telling them, **“that is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died”** (1 Cor. 11:30).

The practice of hospitality through a shared meal in the home is a powerful way to welcome others. Doing so in the home is particularly significant. To be a welcoming church will require more of us than being friendly to all who attend our church. We must take care not to institutionalize hospitality. It is a type of hospitality when we invite people to church events. But it is a far more powerful kind of hospitality to invite people into our homes. There were no church buildings at the time these words in Hebrews were written, so all hospitality took place in homes. One of the reasons home-based hospitality is so powerful today is simply that it is so rare for people to have others into their homes. But when we do so, we are acting like our God, who welcomes us into his heavenly home for a shared meal, the heavenly feast.

II. The Tendency with Hospitality

The writer warns against one of our tendencies regarding hospitality when he tells his readers not to neglect it. The tendency wasn't to renounce it, because they all agreed about its importance, but simply to neglect it. We neglect things when we acknowledge their importance and agree to do them, but then never quite get around to doing them. I know I need to clean the outside of the tall windows in our house, but just neglect doing so.

Hospitality is easy to neglect for several reasons. Families have busy schedules, and if hospitality in the home is going to happen, it must be planned ahead of time. Oftentimes, it is easier just not to get around to making those plans. Another obstacle to hospitality is an expectation on the part of the host that our homes need to meet a certain cultural standard before we can open it to visitors. That reflects more of a worldly value than it does biblical values. The perfectly appointed “Southern Living” home is not required for this ministry. The first home Wendy and I had was 750 square feet in size. We kept the dining room table folded up in one corner, and when we had a full table, one person had to sit on the stairs going up to the second floor. No one minded. It was never about luxurious dining, but about coming together to enjoy God and one another through a little taste of the heavenly banquet.

Two of the biggest reasons hospitality is neglected are addressed in the context of our passage. The writer talks in a general way about honoring marriage. Conflicted marriages are going to have a hard time in the practice of hospitality for the simple reason that there has to be some unity in the marriage for hospitality to happen. Husbands and wives not on the same page

relationally or in their commitment to the Lord will have difficulty with hospitality. I think the other side of this is also true. Marriages are strengthened when a husband and wife come together to plan and execute their hospitality.

Another obstacle to hospitality is the unwillingness to bear the financial cost of doing so. Without question, it costs some money to host others in your home. That may be one reason the author warns his readers in verse 5 to keep their lives free from the love of money and to trust in God's provision instead.

III. The Motivation for Hospitality

Notice the intriguing reason given for this command: **“for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”** It's clearly a reference to Abraham and Sarah's hosting of their three visitors. They came in the appearance of regular men, but turned out to be angels, messengers from God bringing gifts from God. They brought a promise of a son for Abraham and Isaac. Then two of them left to go to Lot in Sodom, bringing to him and his family deliverance from the judgment that was about to come upon Sodom. It is interesting that almost every example of hospitality in the Old Testament includes a blessing upon the host. Do you remember the story of Elijah going to the home of a widow during the great drought in Israel? When Elijah asked her for some bread, she replied that she was about to use the last of her oil and flour for herself and her son to eat what she thought would be their last meal. Elijah told her to go ahead and use those ingredients to bake the bread, and to give him the first serving, the customary treatment of guests. As she did so, Elijah gave her a promise that her flour and oil would be miraculously resupplied, and she wouldn't run out until the drought ended. We see the same with Elijah's successor, the prophet Elisha, who was hosted by the Shunammite woman, who built a small room for Elisha to stay in. He repaid her with the birth of her only son, even though her husband was old. We see the same with the harlot Rahab, who hosted the spies in Jericho and was saved from destruction. We see the opposite with those who refused to offer hospitality, men like Nabal, who refused to provide for David and his men and fell over dead.

So when our text says that some have entertained angels unawares, he means that more is going on with hospitality than we know. I don't know if he means to suggest that we might unwittingly host actual angels, though such a thing is not without precedent. I think it more likely that he means that the ones receiving the hospitality become agents of God's blessing in the lives of those hosting them. In other words, God promises reward for those exercising this role. While it would be wrong of us to think that our hospitality earns rewards, it would also be wrong not to believe that God promises reward. I have seen this reward in my own family. Wendy and I have hosted literally

thousands of people in our home over the years. It's almost never easy. Some people think that we do that because it's our chosen hobby. That is not the case. It always comes at a cost. But I can say that the rewards have been greater by far than any cost we have borne.

Let me tell you about just one such reward. As we hosted gatherings in our home when our children were young, we discovered that all of our children began looking forward to people coming over. If we went longer than two weeks without guests, they would start to ask when we were going to have someone over. Our guests ended up being God's angels giving two gifts to our children. First, a love of hospitality was borne in their hearts, a practice that all three of them pursue vigorously even today. Second, all three of our children avoided the tragedy that happens with too many pastor's kids, the tragedy of growing up to hate the church. Quite the contrary, they thought of themselves as privileged, because they were able to have all these people come into their home. As a result, all three love the church today, are actively involved in serving their churches, and can't imagine life without such involvement. So believing that God brings gifts to us through our exercise of hospitality gives it the character of joyful expectation to see what gifts God is going to bring.

There is one more motivation for hospitality that is even better than the previous one. We can see it by taking a step back and looking at the place of hospitality in the broad sweep of the Bible. From the beginning, God's people have had the identity of being strangers. Abraham was called to a land not his own. Israel spent four hundred years in Egypt, some of it in cruel bondage. Even when Israel came into their own land under the leadership of Moses and Joshua, God reminded the people that the land belonged to the Lord and that **"you are strangers and sojourners with me"** (Lev. 25:23). In the New Testament, we are called **"sojourners and exiles"** (1 Peter 2:11). We know what it is to be a stranger and foreigner needing welcome. And we have been welcomed by the greatest insider of all, by God himself. Jesus became an exile that we might be welcomed into his kingdom and even into the fellowship of the Trinity itself. We get to attend the heavenly banquet, sharing a meal with the Lord as our host forever.

CONCLUSION:

Is there some step God is calling you to take to begin following Jesus in welcoming the outsider? If you're married, perhaps you simply need to have a discussion with your spouse about this and seek to develop some unity and begin making plans. Perhaps a budget of both time and money will be needed. Maybe there's a need just to get to know your neighbors. Remember that God asks us to welcome others even as we have been welcomed.