

# A Meal Says More Than You Think

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A couple years ago, I was asked to do a three minute devotion on hospitality. That sounded like a good project. I knew that hospitality is mentioned several times in the New Testament, and it was a subject to which I had never given much thought. Yet I was grateful that other folks at church on the "hospitality committee" stir the lemonade and put out the cookies every Sunday. Perhaps I could put some theology behind the lemonade and cookies.



The English dictionary defines hospitality as "the friendly treatment of guests or strangers; an act or show of welcome." That's not too far from how the New Testament Greek word (*philo-xenia*) breaks down—love of strangers.[1] Lemonade and cookies invite strangers to stay. A snack communicates to newcomers, "You are welcome here!" Great, this was going to be an easy devotion.

## BEGINNING WITH A WORD SEARCH

Still, I wanted to know if the Bible says anything further about hospitality. The easiest way to begin was to pullout the concordance and look up New Testament occurrences for the word "hospitality" or "hospitable." Doing this, I only found seven uses of the word in our English Bibles. But what I found sent me beyond a word search; indeed, it sent me well beyond lemonade and cookies.

I began with [Romans 12:13](#): "Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality." This command is fairly straightforward. [Christians](#) are commanded to show hospitality to one another. Commentators like to point out that staying in inns in the ancient Near East was not always desirable. So traveling Christians like Paul were dependent on the hospitality of churches.

What struck me even more, however, was the argument of Romans 12 leading up to this command. In verses 1 and 2, Paul commands Christians to present our bodies as living sacrifices. The following verses that explain how this is actually done. Verses 3 to 8 describe how Christians live distinctly from the world within the context of the church community. Every Christian must use his or her individual gifts to serve the body. Verse 9 onward provides a list of attributes that should mark what makes every individual Christian life distinct: genuine love, brotherly affection, fervency in spirit, patience, prayerful, and, eventually, showing hospitality. Apparently, hospitality is a basic of the [Christian faith](#). It is part of how we present our bodies as spiritual sacrifices.

I then turned to [1 Timothy 3:1-3](#) (or [Titus 1:8](#)), where Paul instructs Timothy on what must characterize elders, or pastors, in the church. Verse 2 says an elder must be hospitable. Next, he says an elder must be able to teach. That's interesting. Teaching comes after hospitality. What

does that say about the importance of hospitality? It says it's pretty important. If you are an elder in a church, or you aspire to be an elder, do you also aspire to being hospitable? Your hospitality should be exemplary for the entire congregation.

By flipping a couple of pages to [1 Timothy 5:3-10](#), I could see that hospitality is not only required of elders, it is required of the older women in a church who are called to set an example for younger women.

Finally, I turned to [1 Peter 4:7-11](#), where Peter utters these startling words, "The end of all things is near." It's a statement that begs the question, "If the end is coming, what are we to do?" Peter's answer is straight forward: "Above all, love each other deeply." Then he says to do this in two ways: First, everyone should "show hospitality to one another without grumbling." Second, everyone should "use whatever gift he has received to serve others." We do these things, moreover, "so that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (esv).

Once more, the flow of the argument is worth meditating on. If someone were to say to me, "The world is ending very soon. What are you going to do?" I'm not confident that the first words out of my mouth would be, "Offer hospitality." By the same token, if someone said to me, "How will God glorify himself through Christ?" I am not sure that "the hospitality of God's people" would make my list.

So here I was, tasked with giving a three minute devotion on hospitality, but finding myself overwhelmed not by the number of times the word is used, but by the contexts in which it is located: Romans 12 and the basics of the Christian life; 1 Timothy and a necessary attribute of church leaders, male and female; 1 Peter 4 and how to prepare for the end times. Amazing. My word search prompted me to ask, why is hospitality so important in Scripture? To answer that, I had to dig a little deeper. More than a word search, I needed a biblical theology of hospitality.[2]

## OLD TESTAMENT

In the Old Testament, hospitality is closely connected with a recognition of God's lordship and covenant loyalty. In Genesis 18, Abraham entertains three guests, one of whom is the Lord. And the Lord promises Abraham a son. So hospitality is often associated with promise and blessing.

In [Genesis 19](#), Lot protects his two guests from the townsmen who surround the house and make threats. Here, hospitality is associated with protection. Similarly, Rahab offers protection and lodging to Israelite spies in Joshua 2, demonstrating her loyalty to Israel's God. Abigail provides hospitality to David and his men in 1 Samuel 25. The widow of Zerephath provides hospitality for Elijah when facing starvation herself in 1 Kings 17, prompting God to provide for her.

Again and again, acts of hospitality or inhospitality reveal the good or evil of a person or a community (Gen. 19, Judg. 19, 1 Sam. 25). Incidentally, the same is true in the New Testament. Hospitality is a characteristic of those who live as God intends. Think about which parable of Jesus' uses hospitality to indicate who fulfills the command to love and who does not: the parable of the good Samaritan.

But hospitality has a larger place in the Old Testament than just these individual examples....

Consider Abraham of Ur called out of the homeland of his fathers in order to travel to a foreign land that God has promised (Gen. 12:1-3).

Consider Joseph sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt.

Consider the Israelites, who become so numerous the Egyptians treated these "foreigners" as slaves.

Consider Moses leading these strangers, these aliens, through the wilderness for forty years, forced to live on God's miraculous provision of quail and manna.

Consider Judah's exile in Babylon.

Consider Daniel opening the windows of his room toward Jerusalem as he prayed, a holy man in a strange land.

In short, Israel's identity was continually formed and reformed through the experience of being a stranger and a sojourner, stuck in a temporary place, never quite at home, vulnerable to others, and always having to live according to God's provision. Does this sound familiar? Like the Christian life perhaps? I'll discuss this more in a moment. But again and again, God demonstrated he would provide everything the nation needed to survive. So Israel's status as sojourners and aliens functioned as both a reminder of their ultimate dependence on God and therefore as a basis for their gratitude, obedience, and hope in him.

Their experience of being foreigners was also essential in helping them understand the needs of strangers in their midst. They received the hospitality of God, which in turn taught them to turn and offer that same hospitality to others. Hence, Israel was the only ancient Near Eastern country with laws protecting the stranger and alien (Ex. 23:9, Deut. 10:19). Judges were commanded to deal impartially between aliens and Israelites (Dt. 1:16, 24:17). Cities of refuge were open to aliens and native-borns alike (Num. 35:15; Josh. 20:9). Sojourners were often classed with widows, orphans, and the poor as deserving the community's provision and just treatment (Ex. 22:21-24, Dt. 24:17-18).

In these laws, we see something of God's own heart. We might ask ourselves whether our hearts are like God's. Do we have compassion for the outsider and alien, for the new and unadjusted?

## NEW TESTAMENT

When we move to the New Testament, the importance of hospitality becomes even more prominent, and we see it in at least five specific areas.

### The Incarnation

First, the idea of Christian hospitality is inextricably linked to the doctrine of the incarnation. God himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, became a guest or stranger in the world. When God

became man in Christ, he entered humanity as an alien or a stranger. He then lived his life in such a way that he was always dependent on the hospitality of others. Jesus experienced the vulnerability and rejection of a stranger.

Luke 2:7: "They wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for him in the inn."

Luke 9:58: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

As he and his disciples traveled through Judea and Samaria, they were dependent on the hospitality of others (Matt. 10:11ff; Luke 10:5ff). (So too with the apostles: cf. Acts 10:6, 18, 32, 48; 16:15, 34; 17:7; 18:2f, etc.)

### Love for Christ

On a related note, practicing hospitality, especially toward Christians, is one way a Christian shows love to Christ himself. Consider Matthew 25:31-46, where Jesus explicitly identifies himself as "stranger" (xenos). Jesus divides the sheep from the goats, and he says to the sheep, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger, and you welcomed me... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." But to the goats, he says the opposite. Hospitality toward fellow saints, even "the least of these my brothers," is a demonstration of love toward him. Those who welcome fellow saints and meet their needs when they are in distress have welcomed and ministered to Christ himself.

### God's Grace in Salvation

Third, the idea of Christian hospitality is inextricably linked to God's grace in salvation. Consider Jesus' own practice of welcoming the lost and eating with people who ordinarily would have been excluded from fellowship. Not only that, Jesus' teaching on hospitality is distinctive in its emphasis on welcoming those who have nothing to give in return.

Luke 14:12-14: "He said also to the man who had invited him, 'When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.'"

Rather than inviting those who can repay, Jesus said we should invite the poor, the needy, and those generally unable to repay us. After all, God is gracious to welcome miserable beggars to the feast in his kingdom. The prophet Isaiah describes the work of the suffering servant in chapter 53, and then he extends an invitation in chapter 55 to everyone who wishes to enjoy the fruits of the suffering servant's work: "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (Is. 55:1).

By practicing hospitality, especially among non-Christians, we demonstrate the very character of the God who has invited deeply-indebted sinners to the eternal feast of salvation. In that sense, we provide a living picture of the gospel. No, it is not the gospel. It is a small picture that both points toward, and draws the heart of the recipient toward, the gospel of God's un-repayable work of salvation for us in Christ. Hospitality communicates, and entices non-Christians and weaker Christians toward the gospel! And doing this should be understood as a basic of the Christian life.

### The Unity of the Saints

Fourth, hospitality can reveal the unity of those who belong to the kingdom of God, specifically in the context of shared meals. For instance, the disciples on the road to Emmaus recognized Jesus for who he was when Jesus assumed the role of host and broke bread. The clearest example of this, however, occurs in John's epistles. On the one hand, John commends Gaius for taking in "these brothers, strangers [xenos] as they are" (3 John 5). On the other hand, he commands a church to refuse hospitality to false teachers (2 John 10; cf. 1 Cor. 5:11).

I don't know that we can say that the incident Paul recounts in Galatians 2, where he opposes Peter "to his face" for refusing to eat with the uncircumcised group, pertains to hospitality, as such. Yet Peter's temporary unwillingness to share a meal with the Gentiles was the outward picture of a deep problem. Peter was implicitly adding circumcision to faith as the means of justification, dividing the body. Again, the refusal to share a meal pictured this. Applying this to the question of hospitality, then, it's worth asking whether there is any Christian—in your church or not—with whom you would not eat? If so, are you sure you understand the unity that Christians share in the gospel? It's not difficult to understand why Paul intends for elders in the church and older women to be marked by hospitality.

I have heard some Christians propose that hospitality can only be given to outsiders or strangers, that is, those who are literally from outside a local church's fellowship. Some go further and say that it can only be given to non-Christians. I don't see the New Testament drawing either of these lines.<sup>[2]</sup> In fact, I tend to agree with those who say the preponderance of occurrences of hospitality in the New Testament occurs toward other Christians.<sup>[3]</sup> And at least one passage strongly suggests it can occur between one church member and another (1 Peter 4:9). Ultimately, however, I think that drawing these sorts of lines misses the point. The kingdom emphases of the New Testament writers seem largely to fall on the wonders of post-Pentecost, new covenant realities, where Jews would eat with Gentiles, Greeks with barbarians, owners with slaves, poor with rich, and so on. That's why the picture of the early church gathering and sharing with one another "as any had need" is so striking (Acts 2:45). That's why the apostles took very seriously the trouble that arose over a distribution of food between the Grecian Jews and the Hebraic Jews (Acts 6:1). That's why Paul could urge Philemon to take Onesimus the slave back as a "beloved brother" (Philem. 16). The various class, racial, economic, ethnic, and gender categories human beings use to separate themselves from one another—the lines which make human beings "strange" to one another—were erased by the person and work of Jesus Christ, as given expression in the inaugurated reversal of Babel at Pentecost. The giving of hospitality between Christians, whether members of the same church or not, present one

opportunity to paint the picture of the unity Christians have in the gospel. At the same time, the gracious picture of salvation Christians present by giving hospitality to non-Christians.

### The Church's Alien Status

Fifth, just as the incarnate Christ was a stranger, and just as the Old Testament Israelites were continually displaced from their lands, hospitality reminds those who are joined to Christ that we too are strangers and aliens. Peter writes his first letter "To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1:1). Living by faith in the care of our fellow saints helps us from becoming too tied to this world and its goods. Living by the grace and hospitality of others reminds us that everything we have is a gift from above, which is why Peter's command for Christians to show hospitality to one another ties together with a reminder that the end of all things is near.

So let's return to my original quandary: Why is hospitality (1) a virtue Paul says is central to Christianity, (2) a qualification for elders of the church and older women, and (3) a practice to be cultivated as the end approaches?

Answer: With hospitality, we proclaim to the world the incarnation of Christ, God's grace in salvation, the unity of the church, and a Christian's participation in the life of Christ. And to Christ himself we say, "I love you, because you have identified yourself with the least of these brothers." We must preach the words of Christ's gospel, otherwise we draw attention and glory only to ourselves. But we must also preach with our lives so that those both inside and outside the church see that the power of God for salvation begins today, as Christ's people begin to image him from one degree of glory to the next.

1. BDAG defines philoxenia has "hospitality," which surely includes care for strangers, but is not restricted to strangers.
2. Tremendously helpful is the entry on "Hospitality" by C. D. Pohl in *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (IVP), ed. T. Brian Rosner et al (561-63). Much of my comments in the OT and NT follow the storyline Pohl lays out. Also helpful is Gustav Stahlin's entry for *xenos* in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 5, ed. Gerhard Kittel et al (1-36).
3. Stahlin, TDNT, 21.

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