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# Grace Reflected: How Biblical is Hospitality?

## (Part 1)

### Various Texts

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#### Introduction

Let's begin tonight with a brief quiz. It's three questions, multiple choice or true and false, and about tonight's sermon topic, hospitality. I'll read the question and all the possible answers. I'll then ask you to raise your hand to indicate which answer you think is correct. Just to be sure that you're not pressured by your neighbors, go ahead and close your eyes for the quiz.

Question 1: How important of a subject is hospitality in the Scriptures?

- A. Very important
- B. Somewhat important
- C. Minimally important

Question 2: In today's culture, biblical hospitality *generally* means having people over for dinner.

- A. True
- B. False

Question 3: The primary motivation for practicing hospitality is what?

- A. Personal holiness
- B. Kindness to others
- C. Love to others
- D. Something else

As we move through this series, you'll receive the biblical answer to each one of those questions. So, now that you are thinking a bit about hospitality, let's consider the subject a little further. Did you know that there is a whole area of study called Hospitality Ethics (it is a branch of Applied Ethics)? You can take courses in it, get degrees that require knowledge of it, and even host your own website once you learn a little about it. But beware, the hospitality of universities and contemporary philosophers is not the same as the hospitality of the Bible. These days, hospitality takes the shape of an industry and is exchanged as a commodity. That is, we buy and sell hospitality. ***Take note, nothing could be further from the biblical idea of hospitality.***

Nevertheless, contemporary cultural ideas about hospitality may have subtly crept into our thinking as believers. Although we'll consider this at greater length two weeks from now, have you ever caught yourself making determinations about *who* to express hospitality to in terms of what they are able to give back? Certainly not money, but what about easy and fun company? Stimulating and interesting conversation? A return invitation to a good meal

in a nice home? Increase in status because everyone (or even just myself) will know we ate with such and such (with a pastor)? In some warped ways, hospitality is quietly and almost subconsciously transformed into a commodity... I give to get.

Before driving us too far down that road, it is *very important* to say as your pastor, and on behalf of the other pastors, we are continuously blessed, warmed, surprised, elated, and given to rejoicing over the continual stream of news we receive about back-door kindnesses regularly performed among you. I don't think anyone, except God, is fully aware of how hospitable and kind this body is. It is interesting that in 3 John, John says this:

*For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.*

As we'll see in a few minutes, one of the main ways John had seen these believers *walking in the truth* was their expression of kindness to strangers – that is, hospitality. It is a deep pleasure to be able to speak these words with John.

Let's pray.

## **Series Review**

Tonight we begin a three-part series on hospitality. This will be broken up by a special meeting for our body next Sunday evening as we join here with the Great Commission Bible Church for our worship service. We will have the blessing of hearing Pastor Delayno Robinson preach that evening. You'd be nuts to miss this time of worshipping with brothers and sisters from outside our body.

The last two Sunday evenings in February we will wrap up our series. This Sunday we ask the question, How Biblical is Hospitality? Two weeks from now we will consider whether or not Betty Crocker and Martha Stewart are our Best Models of Hospitality. And then on the last Sunday evening in February we will consider What Does Hospitality Look Like at the Chapel?.

## **Hospitality Defined: Kindness to the Needy**

Just to be sure we all start on the same page, I want to briefly define hospitality for you. I say briefly, because it is one of those concepts that is far more clear when it is *seen* versus when it is *explained*. So here it is: Hospitality is kindness to strangers or generosity to guests. We will enrich this definition as we move through the pages of Scripture.

## **Hospitality Pictured: Strangers, Sojourners, and Foreigners**

Some topics in the Bible tend to have a fairly low profile despite the frequency with which they appear on the pages of Scripture. This is a little like dust behind the refrigerator or around your computer cables – you never realize how much of it is there until one day you are forced to move your desk or reach behind your refrigerator and realize that you have

discovered where all of the dust in your home apparently originates. Hospitality is a bit like this, in that it is quite literally throughout the whole of Scripture with great frequency, but you don't really realize it until you start looking around.

Tonight, we want to begin our time together by simply surveying the whole of Scripture for instances of and commands to, hospitality. I want to start in this way because I think it is important for us to develop a biblical sense of proportion when it comes to hospitality. If the Bible speaks to something frequently, then chances are, we should take note of it. For example, it is *more important* to understand who Abraham was and what he represented than it is to understand who, exactly, the Nephilim were. Abraham is mentioned with great frequency, but the Nephilim only twice<sup>1</sup>. But I first must convince you that hospitality is such a subject, appearing consistently across the whole of Scripture.

### Examples and Instances

If we begin with a simple count, there are no less than 20 specific instances in the Old Testament where hospitality is specifically displayed. There are another nine in the New Testament. And these are just "instances," not including commands that speak to hospitality. Let's look at a few examples. In Genesis 18 we have the well-known account of Abraham entertaining three guests who inform him that Sarah will become pregnant.

*Genesis 18: He lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing in front of him...Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree, while I bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh yourselves...*

In Genesis 19 we see Lot not only taking in the Lord's messengers to give them refreshment and rest, but we see him protecting them from the desirous mobs of Sodom.

*Genesis 19: My Lords, please turn aside to your servant's house and spend the night and wash your feet...And he made them a feast and baked unleavened bread, and they ate.*

Considered by some to be the oldest book in the Old Testament, we can hear Job defend his righteousness before God by pointing to his own expressions of hospitality.

*Job 31 ...if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or the needy with out covering, if his body has not blessed me, and if he was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep... if the men of my tent have not said, 'Who is there, that has not been filled with his meat?' (the sojourner has not lodged in the street; I have opened my doors to the traveler)...*

Perhaps a less known example is the hospitality of the Shunammite woman to Elisha, who out of her wealth provided food and lodging for Elisha.

*2 Kings 4: One day Elisha went on to Shunem, where a wealthy woman lived, who urged him to eat some food...let us make a small room on the roof with walls and put there for him a bed a table, a chair, and a lamp, so that whenever he comes to us, he can go in there.*

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 6:4; Numbers 13:33

In the New Testament we see many examples as well. Martha's first encounter with Christ was secondary to her expression of hospitality.

*Luke 10: Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house...*

Paul and Silas after baptizing Lydia were invited into her home.

*Acts 16: And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.*

## **Calls and Commands**

So this helps us to see some of what hospitality looks like when it is displayed, little vignettes, if you will. But we can learn much more about hospitality if we consider those passages which are not necessarily recording real-life expressions of hospitality, but rather commanding, calling for, or giving instruction as to how hospitality is to be carried out.

Let's consider first the Law that was given to Israel by God, as it has much to say about hospitality. And, keep in mind that although Christ has completely fulfilled and met the requirements of the Law, one of the clear purposes of the Law was to reflect the holy character of God. So in considering the Law, we learn something about God himself. In Leviticus we learn that the poor, strangers, and sojourners were to systematically benefit from the hospitality of God's people.

*Leviticus 19:9-10, 33-34: When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field right up to its edge, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And you shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard. You shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner... When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself...*

In Deuteronomy, we learn more about this pattern of hospitality that was to be embedded in the Jewish culture:

*Deuteronomy 14, 24, 10: At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled... When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow...*

These and many other passages in the Old Testament highlight the importance of the practice of hospitality for the Jewish nation. But the call for kindness to strangers extends into the New Testament as well. The reasons for this will become abundantly

clear, I believe, when we consider the motivation for hospitality in just a moment. Here are several New Testament calls to hospitality.

*Romans 12:13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.*

*1 Peter 4:8-10 Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace.*

*Hebrews 13:1-3 Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you are also in the body.*

## Observations

We've made a very brief survey of hospitality in the Old and New Testaments. Let's pause for a moment before moving on and make several observations. First, hospitality always involves a giving and a receiving party. Although this sounds ridiculously simple, it is important to note. As most of you know, I work regularly with college students in hospital settings. Part of their learning experience is to learn to talk with patients in a manner that is helpful. Often I'll send them into a room to talk with a patient and they will find the patient lying in their bed somewhat reluctant to talk. They will return to me stating that the patient will not talk. So I'll ask, "What did you try?" I'll get the blank stare and eventually, "Well, what do you mean?" Usually I'll restate the question and the student will say something like, "Well, I walked in their room, they were in their beds, and facing the wall, so I came back out." They are operating under the self-imposed notion that this constitutes "trying" to have a conversation with the patient. In the same way, many of us like to think of ourselves as very hospitable, yet there is no evidence that we really are. There are no strangers, sojourners, foreigners, poor, widows, or orphans in our lives. We have a notion of ourselves as being hospitable, but when it comes down to it, we could not name another individual to whom we have actually shown hospitality in the past six months.

Secondly, biblical hospitality always includes a transfer between "haves" and "have-nots." That is, the giver supplies the need of the receiver. There is a one-way exchange. During ancient biblical times the traveler (sojourner, stranger, and foreigner) had no hotel to stop at. There were no restaurants or rest areas. They were dependent upon the hospitality of the occupants of the land through which they travelled. The poor needed fed and clothed, the fatherless and the widow needed provided for and protected. Although having friends over for dinner on a Sunday afternoon is a very good thing to do, in most cases we probably should not think of this as hospitality in biblical terms. Hospitality requires that I give of my resources to meet the real needs of another.

Thirdly, hospitality, by its very nature, will stretch us out of our normal routines. Abraham had no ahead notice as to the arrival of the angels – and this was evident as Sarah scrambled to prepare a meal when Abraham came flying into the tent saying, "Quick, three bags [seah] of fine flour! Knead it, and make cakes." Farmers were called to *leave*

food in the field. Village dwellers were called to take in strangers passing through. And the church body is called to meet the needs of the saints. In my life, this single aspect of hospitality alone is probably the most challenging. During the two weeks preceding this sermon, I have had more unexpected “interruptions” requiring the extension of hospitality in our home than I really cared to respond to. My little sister took great pleasure in reminding me, as I complained, that God was simply teaching me before I taught you.

## Hospitality Grounded: The Lord, The Law, and Love

Hopefully, I’m beginning to convince you that hospitality can be found in the whole of Scripture. Given that many of these instances are commands, what motivations does Scripture give us for obedience? While there are many reasons cited in the Scripture, we are going to consider three which seem to be predominant.

### The Lord and the Law

In the Old Testament we first see in the Law this simple explanation: Leave some extra in the field for the poor and the sojourner *I am the Lord your God (Leviticus 19:9-10)*. The rationale here is simple. I am God and I have spoken. You are to obey. Our holy and sovereign Creator has every right to command. This conjures up memories in my mind of my own father responding to my sometimes disrespectful questioning of his commands, “Why?” I would say. And he would respond, “Because I am your father, that’s why.” Now I was too smart to say this out loud, but in my mind I’d sometimes be saying, “So?” That response is the clear sign of a fool Proverbs tells us. My Dad’s requests were rarely baseless, he had reasons and they were for my good and his honor. There were times and situations where his command, simply because of *who* he was, should have been sufficient. He owed me no explanation. Similarly, God’s simple command to hospitality is enough to drive home the necessity of our obedience. But we are not left there. God, just as a wise father will do, makes clear that the call to hospitality is not simply a capricious order that he one day dreamed up. As with all of God’s commands, it is an extension of his character and his holiness. But before we go there – let’s go forward to the New Testament and see why hospitality is called for there.

### Love

In the New Testament we see the church body in general called to hospitality, as we noted in Romans 12, Hebrews 13, and 1 Peter 4 earlier. Hear it again in John’s third epistle to the elder Gaius. John is drawing attention to the people in Gaius’ church who cared well for the brothers who had recently passed through in the course of their missionary work.

*1 John 3: Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church.*

In each of these four passages, the clear context for hospitality is love. Hospitality is always closely connected to brotherly love as an expression of kindness. Hear the

words that immediately precede several of these calls to hospitality: Seek to show, do not neglect to show, show. In fact, the words in Romans, “seek to show” are translated in other place in Romans to mean “pursue” or even “persecute.” In other words, there is intensity to this command that should not be overlooked. The New Testament idea of hospitality is an overt, intentional, and targeted act of love.

For some of us, there is a very relevant parallel that is just minutes away. At home, you have a room. This room has surround sound. It has a big screen HDTV. It has comfortable chairs and couches. It has carefully placed ottomans. The TV is already set to a certain channel. The nachos are already in their bowl. The drinks are in the refrigerator, the guacamole is prepared and waiting. The TIVO knows what to do. There is a level of attention and intensity that has gone into preparing for this moment. Think of hospitality as the Super Bowl of Christian love. It is an opportunity to intensely focus and express Christian love... but more on that two weeks from now as we look more closely at the New Testament call to hospitality.

We’ve considered several scriptural motivations for hospitality – but our work is not complete. We have yet to consider what I believe is the premier motivation for hospitality – from which all other motivations for this biblical practice flow. Let’s consider several more passages. Some of these we have not yet looked at tonight, and others, we’ve read, but we have not read in full. As you listen, see if you can begin to hear the pattern in the passages which explain *why* the believer should practice hospitality.

## Hospitality Reflected: Mirroring the Glory of Redeeming Grace

Here is the setting of our first passage – Moses has gone up to Mount Sinai to receive the law. He has received the Ten Commandments and now other laws for the nation of Israel are being given. With respect to sojourners (that is, travelers through Israel’s land, those with no means and no *inheritance*), God commands this:

*Exodus 23:9: You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. Deuteronomy 24: When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow... You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this.*

You know the story of what happened at the first Law-giving. Israel failed miserably by worshipping a golden calf while Moses and Aaron were on Mount Sinai. This led to the stone tablets being broken and the need for the Law to be given again. That is the setting for our second passage.

Moses comes down from the mountain a second time and he speaks *very important* words to the Israelites. He calls them to love and serve God with *all* that they are. He goes on to tell them that although he owns all of heaven, he has chosen Israel to *set his heart in love on*. Then Moses points the people toward the full meaning of circumcision – not a procedure intended for the body only, but ultimately for the heart! Then a stern warning, Israel

should not trifle with the awesome and mighty God. There is no other way to please him than obedience. Moses then gives an example of how Israel's conduct is to flow out of God's character and redeeming love, interestingly, he chooses to give this example:

*Deuteronomy 10:18-19: [God] He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him...*

We can move forward then to the institution of the giving of firstfruits and tithes to God. When the priest received the firstfruits from an individual and set it before the Lord, the individual was to say

*Deuteronomy 26: A wandering Armaen was my father. And he went down to Egypt and sojourned there... And the Egyptians treated us harshly and humiliated us... And the Lord brought us out of Egypt... And he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.*

Finally, hear the words of David, as he makes his last prayer before the people of Israel, as he dedicates the resources donated for the temple.

*But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you. For we are strangers before you and sojourners, as all our fathers were.*

Here is the clear message from the Old Testament texts: At the heart of the expression of biblical hospitality is the redeeming love of God. Just as God has shown free and lavish love toward us, bringing us up out of our sin, providing for us the bread of life and living water, washing our hearts, and placing us into the safety of the righteousness of Christ, we are to show redemptive love to others. We were strangers, unknown to the Father because we were children of the devil. We were foreigners, enemies of the Kingdom of God because we were enlisted in service of the Kingdom of Darkness. We were fatherless, with no protector or provider. We were the poor and the needy, with no inheritance or means. But God himself has shown kindness to us, even while we were yet strangers (and sinners)—deserving of no good from him and utterly unable to pay him.

This hospitality of God is brought into *full* view through Christ our Savior. We see it pictured as he “hosts” 5000 and feeds them bread and fish<sup>2</sup>. We see it again at the Passover supper where Christ gives the disciples bread and wine – then later body and blood – meeting their greatest need on the cross<sup>3</sup>. We see it finally in Revelation when God sets before us the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

Every time we express kindness to those in need, we incarnate the redemptive love of God, who showed kindness to us, a people in much need as we starved, wandered, and shivered in the cold blackness of our sin. In this sense, hospitality becomes a significant means by

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 6

<sup>3</sup> Mark 13



which we remind ourselves of our Redeemer. Why should we show hospitality? Because, we, unlike all other peoples in the world, have been shown hospitality by God himself. To deny hospitality, is to deny the grace of God in our own lives.

