



THE SURPRISING POWER OF BIBLICAL HOSPITALITY

INTRODUCTION

Hospitality is a key biblical principle that plays a crucial role in the entirety of the scriptures and early church traditions. And yet, today the word *hospitality* feels flimsy at best, inciting visions of cruise ship entertainment and Instagram-worthy dinner parties. While the hospitality industry is generally understood to be a gross exploitation of a rich tradition, the origins of hospitality in a biblical context are less understood. When we unearth the dimensions of hospitality that God intended us to incorporate into our daily lives, we can then press into the difficult and rewarding work of engaging every relationship with a spirit of hospitality, reflecting the gospel in the process.

THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION: STRANGERS WELCOMING STRANGERS

Our translation of the biblical word “hospitable” comes from the Greek *philoxenos* (φιλόξενος). “Philos” refers to a brotherly love and “xenos” refers to the stranger. With just those two components we have the beginnings of the biblical framework for hospitality: brotherly love for strangers. All throughout the book of Exodus God reminds the people of Israel that they were once strangers apart from God and Sojourners in the land of Egypt--and that his act of delivering his people and bringing them into covenant relationship with himself should be mirrored by the Israelites when they also come into contact with strangers (which in this context meant all non-Israelites). Exodus 23:9 says it so well: “...You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.” You see right away this beautiful picture of God reminding the Israelites of the way he graciously delivered them so that they can be compelled by that grace to show that very same grace to strangers in their midst.

Even at a time when God was teaching the Israelites to live lives set apart from the rest of the world, Exodus is chalked full of examples of God’s love for *all* people, and his desire to see everyone reconciled to himself (see Ex. 12:43-49 and 22:21-23:9). We sometimes assume that the earliest chapters of the Bible mainly depict a God unhappy with humanity, bringing down wrath and lightning bolts to snap his people into shape (as opposed to Jesus who is thought to widen the road to salvation and ushers in our modern Christian views and ethics on how we should treat one another). But a closer reading through the lens of hospitality gives profound implications for what biblical hospitality looks like straight from the God whose image we bear, right from the first page.

3 DIMENSIONS OF LIVING WITH A SPIRIT OF HOSPITALITY

In the book [Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition](#), Christine Pohl outlines three dimensions of biblical hospitality that are incredibly helpful when it comes to actively living with a spirit of hospitality. Though Pohl uses modern examples and the New Testament text to show why hospitality is vital to the Christian life, the precedent for these three dimensions can be found in the very first descriptions we have of God in the book of Genesis.

- 1. Recognition and respect** - In Genesis 1 we have this beautiful narrative of the Spirit of God creating order out of chaos on earth: God brings about light and land, the separation of day and night, seasons, and living creatures. Finally, God brings out of the earth his first image bearers and then gives them a beautiful poetic blessing and mandate (see Gen. 1:28-31). Humans had yet to do one single act and they’d been given inherent dignity, recognition, respect, identity, and empowerment from God to live as the image-bearers they had been made to be. Because we receive respect and recognition from God, we are tasked with pouring out the same on others--both in action and in reminding them of the inherent dignity they, too, have from God.
- 2. The meeting of physical needs** - In Genesis 1:28-31 God tells Adam and Eve that he has blessed them with every plant yielding seed and every tree with seed in its fruit for food. Again, without having worked to earn God’s favor, humanity is blessed with abundance and the full meeting of every physical need. Even after the fall, the Bible is chalked full of scripture reminding us that God has (and will continue to) provide for us everything we need (also see Lk. 12:24). Because we are the benefactors of such generosity from God, we have the honor, responsibility, and freedom to extend this same generosity to our brothers and sisters who are lacking in physical provisions.
- 3. Rest for the sojourner** - Later in the second chapter of Genesis, God introduces the concept of rest. This is not a rest due to exhaustion, but one that reflects the joy of achievement. God considers a day of Sabbath rest so important that he mandates it as part of the ten commandments. Though Jesus came to fulfill the law, the concept of Sabbath rest still plays itself out for us as a practice of drawing rest from the Lord and taking time to graciously reflect on all of God’s fulfilled promises in our lives. As followers of Jesus, with a peace that surpasses understanding, part of our call to hospitality is to offer rest--including helping those over-burdened with work, offering shelter when it’s safe to do so (or guiding those seeking shelter towards the right resources), and, most importantly, by sharing the very source of our rest: the gospel of Jesus Christ. The story of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well in Luke 4 is an incredible example of the rest he have in Christ and how we are called to share that rest.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION FOR CHURCH LEADERS

Read. Read scripture (especially the gospels) through a lens of biblical hospitality. Often we get stuck reading scripture with a solely personal motivation (“what does this mean for me?”). Recognizing where God displays the three dimensions of hospitality in scripture is a crucial first step toward reviving biblical hospitality as a part of our worship and becoming active participants in giving away the hospitality God has bestowed on us.

Pray. Prayer is a necessary practice for tuning our hearts to the Lord. Pray that God might reveal who in your life needs to be reminded of their value and inherent dignity. Pray that God would lead you towards relationships with people who have practical needs that you could help meet. Pray that God would give you boldness in sharing the gospel as your personal source of peace and rest to others. Pray that God would grow in you a deep gratitude that spills out into radical generosity.

Live it out. Biblical hospitality is hard and it costs us our time, our comfort, and our resources--but this is the call of Jesus! Loving Jesus and loving our neighbors are non-negotiables for Christian discipleship. Our city is in crisis: we have a lack of affordable housing, a staggering amount of people live on the streets without shelter, our foster care system is in desperate need of guardians, and the list goes on. We have to make active hospitality a priority. Are you serving in the city with your family? With your community group? Is your community group a place where people different than you would feel safe, welcome and heard? Do you consider yourself to have a light hold on your possessions? Are you willing to sacrifice elements of your private life for others, even when it's inconvenient? Do you know the people in your community group well enough to identify when someone needs practical or financial assistance? Do you believe that we, as a church, have something tangible to offer this world? When we, as a church, begin to prioritize biblical hospitality we WILL see Jesus move in miraculous ways! Both in our city and in our own hearts.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The Hospitality that Makes the Church Stand Out article by Trevin Wax - In this short article, Wax encourages us to embrace a hospitality that encourages renewal in the people we extend it to. [<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/hospitality-makes-church-stand/>]

Why Hospitality Beats Entertaining article by Jen Wilkin - Wilkin walks us through the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) differences between a spirit seeking to offer genuine hospitality and one offering mere entertainment. [<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-hospitality-beats-entertaining/>]

Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition book by Christine D. Pohl - A combination of biblical and historical research paired with contemporary examples on what biblical hospitality is and how we can make the practice a part of our daily lives.

Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers book by Elizabeth Newman – Part of a series on the Christian practice of everyday life, Newman presents a theological consideration of why hospitality is an essential part of our daily worship to God.