

## Christian Community is Marked By Hospitality

A Sermon on Hebrew 13:1-2, 1 Peter 4:8-9

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Over the next four Sundays I'll be doing a mini-series on four marks of Christian community. That is because Pastor Steven asked me to preach a mini-series in preparation for the launch of our small group ministry which will happen in September.

I want to make it clear right up front, that while this mini-series will be something of an explanation and a rationale for that ministry, this series will, Lord willing, be more than that. It will also, I hope, be a broad portrait of four essential aspects of Christian community, which are not limited to small groups, but may be realized in many ways.

I think it's important to state this upfront, lest some of you should write this series off as irrelevant, reductionistic, or, even, legalistic. I want to begin this series by acknowledging that there are many legitimate ways to realize and apply these four aspects of Christian community. I admit that it's entirely possible for all four of these to be present without a small group ministry. By no means do I intend for the subtext of this series to be "*Faith Pres, you've been missing these 4 essentials for all these years, and now I'm here with all the answers.*" On the contrary, as we go consider these four marks of Christian community, I think that many of you will be reminded of dozens of ways that our church already embodies these.

But, at the same time, I hope that all of us would also be willing to admit that there are almost always ways that we can grow and improve. As Paul put it in Philippians 3, the Christian ethic is one of constantly "pressing on toward the goal" and "striving forward to what lies ahead." My hope is that this mini-series, and more importantly, the small group ministry itself, will be another series of steps forward in that lifelong journey towards mature Christlikeness, both individually and collectively.

The first mark of Christian community that we will consider in this mini-series is hospitality. As we read over these passages, consider the fact that hospitality is not only modeled throughout the Bible, but is a command for all Christians, and an official requirement for overseers.

This is the Word of the Lord...

Please keep your Bibles in front of you and may the Lord enable us to understand, believe, and obey His word.

As these, and many other Biblical texts, make clear, Christian community is marked by hospitality.

What is Biblical hospitality? It's important to begin with this question because all of us naturally start with many different definitions, assumptions, and experiences which influence how we interpret the Biblical call to hospitality. While some of those differences are healthy and good, if we aren't careful to be Biblical in our definition of hospitality, we can easily fall into the trap that Pastor Nathaniel warned us against last week: confusing our own idiosyncrasies or cultural trappings with God's commands. (*Remember the tiny organ in the mountains of Peru*).

Perhaps when you hear the word hospitality, some of you think of an antiquated practice that no longer has much relevance for the modern world. Perhaps in your mind, the ancient world was mostly a dangerous, uncivilized, vast wilderness that made hospitality a matter of basic survival, but which modern technologies and cultural progress have mostly overcome. While ancient man was frequently on the run from dinosaurs, natural disasters, barbarians, and highway robbers, most of us, most of the time, don't run at all, unless it's on a treadmill or a sports field, or maybe to get to the front of the line at an amusement park. After all, you point out, the ancient world had no trains, cars, buses, or planes, no cell phones or GPS systems, no supermarkets or fast food restaurants, no Air B-and-B's or hotels, and no triple AAA service to call when your camel got a lame foot. If we have all of these and more, is hospitality still important?

While it's true that physical protection is an important aspect of Biblical hospitality (*think, for example, of how Lot protected the two angels from the perverse men of Sodom*), the main problem with this view of hospitality is that it is reductionistic. First, it is reductionistic in that it assumes that physical danger to our bodily life is the primary reason we need the protection of hospitality. But, as Christians, we know that physical dangers are, or at least should be, the least of our worries. Far more significant are the myriad spiritual dangers that threaten our faith, our character, and our souls. From these endless and wearisome dangers, we need the spiritual protection of godly hospitality, which is to be found in God's house and people. Think about the fact that the very word "sanctuary" not only means a "place of refuge and protection" but also "a holy place of worship." Worship with God's people ought to be a time and place of spiritual rest, refreshment, peace, and protection. Members of Faith Pres, are you doing your part to ensure that this church is a place of spiritual protection and refreshment for one another, for new members, for guests and visitors?

The second reason that this view (*that hospitality is no longer relevant in our modern world*) is reductionistic is that it assumes that hospitality is merely about protection. The truth is that Biblical hospitality is bigger than that; it also includes welcoming, nurturing, communing with, and blessing guests as well. Think, for example, of the hospitality that David showed to Mephibosheth in 2 Samuel 9 after becoming king. Not only did David physically protect Mephibosheth by sparing his life, despite Mephibosheth being a descendant of his rival (*Saul*), David also invited him to dine at his table like a son. And this invitation was not primarily about meeting Mephibosheth's physical needs for food since David had already given him land and servants. The invitation to dine at his table was primarily an expression of kindness and friendship for the sake of Jonathon, Mephibosheth's father.

Another mistaken view of hospitality that we easily might fall into is what I'll call the Martha Stewart model of hospitality. The idea here is that hospitality is about making your home the most beautiful, lavish, stylish, and/or personalized space possible. In this view hospitality means spending inordinate amounts of money on your house, keeping an immaculate house, growing a lush garden or having the perfect lawn, serving elaborate or novel meals, always bringing out the fine china, and generally trying to make every moment and space picture-perfect for that next social media post.

While there is certainly nothing wrong with keeping your house clean and tidy, or keeping a beautiful garden, or eating nice meals, or splurging on your guests, the problem with this view of hospitality is that easily becomes more about impressing your guests, than blessing them. The focus shifts from serving others to solidifying your own status, reputation, or comfort.

If we start to think that hospitality is something that only the rich, the organized, the talented, and the stylish can do, then we can be sure that we have fallen prey to a worldly misunderstanding of hospitality. After all, even the widow of Zarephath (*1 Kings 17*) hosted Elijah with only a handful of flour and a little oil. After all, Abraham was a model of hospitality (*Genesis 18*), though he dwelt in tents, and though lived on land that he did not own.

Are you willing to show simple, perhaps even unimpressive, hospitality?

Still another layer of potentially misleading associations that is helpful to sort through is the hospitality industry, which one source defined as “a broad category of fields within the service industry that includes lodging, food and beverage services, event planning, theme parks, travel agency, tourism, hotels, restaurants, nightclubs, and bars.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hospitality\\_industry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hospitality_industry)

The idea here is that hospitality is a business which is centered on entertainment. In this view, hospitality is not about hosts personally forming or reinforcing a bond of communion with their guests, but about making sure that their guests have fun. Whether that means pigging out on a Caribbean cruise, screaming your way through Disneyland or Six Flags, or watching the Blue Man Group inside of a hotel that is shaped and decorated like an Egyptian pyramid, the emphasis here is on the fastest service, the best food, the most exotic locations, the coolest atmosphere, and the most comfortable or exciting experience, depending on your preference.

My point here is not to condemn all forms of entertainment, or to criticize the hospitality industry, but rather to highlight some of misconceptions that it might suggest to us as we think about a definition of Biblical hospitality. First, it might suggest to us that Biblical hospitality can be impersonal. Although there is certainly a huge range within the hospitality industry, many of the services it offers emphasize privacy and minimize personal interaction. For example, several months ago a family member sent me a video of a visit to a café where the barista was a robot, literally. The entire experience of the café was impersonal: request a drink over a screen, watch a robotic arm make the drink, pay through a screen etc.

Regardless of your opinions about that as a business model, it is a helpful contrast with the Biblical concept of hospitality, which is eminently personal. Biblical hospitality means welcoming a stranger into your space and forming or reinforcing a bond of friendship.

This is reinforced by a knowledge of the Greek words translated here as “hospitality” and “hospitable.” Look again at those four New Testament passages. All four of these Greek words come from the same compound word “xeno-philia,” which literally means “stranger-loving.” Hospitality is literally, the “love of strangers.”

The story of Zaccheus hosting Jesus (*Luke 19*) also illustrates the personal, welcoming, and transformative nature of Biblical hospitality. Zaccheus was not simply a robot providing travel-worn Jesus with food, drink, and rest at the unbeatable price of 119\$ per night! Their interaction was anything but cold, impersonal, or transactional. On the contrary, it was a moment of divine visitation. In that moment of hospitality, not only did Zaccheus serve Jesus, but, more importantly, Jesus served Zaccheus by knowing, confronting, forgiving, restoring, and communing with him. Zaccheus would never be the same.

Of course not every act of Christian hospitality will have the same depth of significance and impact as this story in Luke 19, but every act of true Christian hospitality is an opening up of our lives to strangers and new-comers. As one pastor put it, hospitality is a “sharing of lives,<sup>2</sup>” similar

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Brians, “A Theology of Hospitality”

to Paul's sentiment in 1 Thessalonians 2:8 where he says that "we were ready not only to share with you the gospel of God, but also our own selves."<sup>3</sup>

This, by the way, is one of the reasons why the home is usually the ideal realm for hospitality, and one of the reasons why we intentionally designed our small groups around meetings in people's homes rather than utilizing church classrooms or coffee shops. Now, I certainly do not think that hospitality can only happen in a house. While hospitality necessarily means inviting someone into your space, that space isn't limited to a house. It could also be your church, your workplace, your school, your state, or, kids, your treehouse. I think that our church's ESL ministry is a wonderful example of hospitality that happens outside of our homes.

But, for most of us most of the time, no space is as personal or as conducive to this kind of sharing of lives as our houses. Homes usually (*hopefully*) provide a relaxing atmosphere for others, and they almost always provide an atmosphere of intimacy. For better or for worse, our homes reveal a significant part of who we are to each other, and, no, I'm not just talking about wealth. I'm talking about your walls lined with photos of trips and relatives, your kids' toys or pets refusing to be contained by your well-intentioned efforts, the many mementos of your life history, and, my personal favorite, the books on your shelf.

It is an intimate thing to invite someone into your house, and I can certainly understand why you would hesitate. I often do myself. But, for most of us most of the time, it is at least part of the call to be hospitable.

Christian, to whom are you opening up your life?

Secondly, our experience as consumers of the hospitality industry might dupe us into thinking Biblical hospitality is convenient. The hospitality industry specializes in making travel, eating, and entertainment fast, easy, and convenient for us as consumers. With just a few clicks food can be whipped up, a trip can be planned, a room can be reserved, and all kinds of entertainment can be summoned.

But Biblical hospitality is sacrificial. On a literal level, hosts were expected to feed their guests by slaughtering their own animals. Think, for example, of the parable of the wedding feast which Jesus tells in Matthew 22:1-14. In verse 4, the hosts sends out invitations through his servants saying, "Again he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, "See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.'" On a less literal level, Biblical hospitality is sacrificial in the sense that hosts are expected to refresh their guests at their own expense. Think, for example, of the story

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<sup>3</sup> Kudos to Brandon Clemens and Dustin Willis for helping me see the relevance of 1 Thess 2 for Biblical Hospitality.

of the sinful woman at the end of Luke 7. Jesus goes to eat with a Pharisee who is a bad host. He does not greet Jesus with a kiss, wash his feet, or anoint him with oil. Ironically, a sinful, rejected woman proves to be the better host at that dinner party when she unexpectedly washes Jesus' feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them, and anoints them with an alabaster flash of ointment.

Are you willing to sacrifice some of your resources to welcome, refresh, and protect others in the name of Jesus?

And, thirdly, the hospitality industry might leave us with the misconception that Biblical hospitality is primarily about entertainment. We might fear welcoming strangers and newcomers into our spaces because we think we are just too boring, too old, in too poor health, or are just too tired to put on a good party. But while the Bible does sometimes associate parties and hospitality (*think of the Wedding at Cana in John 2*), the heart of Biblical hospitality isn't entertainment, but inviting strangers into fellowship. Think, for example, of the hospitality that Cornelius showed to Peter and his companions in Acts 10, which we recently had several sermons on in our evening services. Remember that it was the very act of eating with Gentiles which sparked the controversy with the circumcision party back in Jerusalem in Acts 11. Biblically, hospitality is one of the primary ways that a bond of fellowship is formed.

Who are you sharing your table with? Who are you inviting to feast at the Lord's table by faith in Christ?

Well, we've spent a fair amount of time considering what Biblical hospitality is not. Now let's take a stab at a working definition of what Biblical hospitality is. The Bible doesn't so much define hospitality as repeatedly illustrate it in poetry, narrative, and parable. Nevertheless, I think we could safely distill its essential elements with the following definition: Biblical hospitality is welcoming strangers and newcomers into our spaces so that we can refresh, protect, commune with, and send them out again with blessing.

If we had more time, we could exegete dozens of Biblical passages (*besides the ones I've already mentioned*) to fill out this definition. We could examine Psalm 42 and consider the psalmist's longing to go God's house where he would be protected from enemies, refreshed by God's presence, and joyful in the worship of God's people. Psalm 84 could show us the blessing that is to be found in God's house, where one day is better than 1,000 elsewhere. We could reflect on Jesus' description of our final salvation in John 14 as bringing us to His Father's house, where there are many rooms, and where He goes to prepare a place for us, and we could consider how He is the way to that heavenly home. We could consider how the Lord required the entire nation of Israel to show the hospitality of justice and kindness to sojourners in passages like Leviticus 19:34.

Or we could consider the generous, forgiving hospitality of Pharaoh and Joseph towards Jacob and his other sons in Genesis 45-47.

But since our time is limited, I want to illustrate this working definition with just one salient example: the hospitality which the Lord shows to us each Lord's day in worship.

Take a look at the five major headings in your bulletin and consider the hospitality which the Lord extends to us each Lord's Day as we gather in His house. First, the Lord Calls Us, that is He invites us into His presence. Just as you wouldn't show up uninvited at the White House, or Buckingham palace, expecting to have an audience with the President or the King, so we must be invited and welcomed into God's presence. Each week we hear a different version of that call. This week we heard the Lord speak in Isaiah about how He will bring foreigners to His holy mountain and make them joyful in His house of prayer. People of God, we are those Gentile strangers who have been brought near by the blood of Christ!

Secondly, the Lord Cleanses us. Just as Jesus, like any good host of the Ancient Near East, washed the feet of his disciples during the Last Supper (John 13), so He washes us each week before we dine with Him in the Lord's Supper. Each week we are reminded by different Scriptures that we are washed of our sins through faith in Christ, but never is the action clearer than when we have a baptism, which always happens under this second heading. That is because baptism, to use the language of shorter Catechism 92, "represents, seals, and applies" the forgiveness of sins.

What could be more refreshing than to be washed of our guilt and shame, to be cleansed of the world's pollution, and to be reminded that we have been raised to new life in Christ? Amen!

Thirdly, the Lord Converses With Us. Biblical hospitality is more than just the transactional provision of a meal, a shower, and a bed to refresh a guest; it's also a means of connecting with a guest and deepening the relationship. And so the Lord speaks to us through His word and through the sermon. And we respond with singing, offertories, creeds, prayers, and responsive readings. His speech instructs, encourages, warns, protects, guides, and reassures us. It helps us on our journey just as a good host would encourage and give guidance to a traveler on a long journey from home.

Fourthly, the Lord Communes with us. If you were to do a survey of the Bible's many narratives and parables of hospitality, you'd find that eating a meal together is usually at the heart of it. I already alluded to the Biblical significance of our table fellows when I mentioned the story of Cornelius' hospitality to Peter which resulted in the objections of the circumcision party in Acts 10 and 11. But consider as well that one of the Pharisees' chief complaints against Jesus was that "he eats with tax collectors and sinners."

In the Lord's Supper, we eat a meal with the Lord. Jesus hosts us at His table. He provides His own body and blood for the feast. He feeds us with the bread of life and the drink of eternal life (*John 6:35, 53-43*). And so, as Larger Catechism 168 puts it we have our "union and communion with him confirmed."

Fifthly, the Lord Commissions Us. As a good host sends a traveler on his way with blessing (*think of how often greetings and blessings are tied together in the Bible*), so the Lord sends us back out into the world with His benediction.

There are many reasons why Christians ought to show hospitality: because people are lonely; because it can be an effective avenue for evangelism in a post-Christian society<sup>4</sup>; because the early church modeled it for us in Acts 2; because Peter commanded us to show it to other Christians here in 1 Peter 4:9; because you never know when you might be hosting angels (Heb 13:2); because it is a way of loving your neighbor (story of the Good Samaritan) and more.

But the greatest reason why we ought to show hospitality is because the Lord has already hosted us. He has welcomed us into His family with the effectual call of His Spirit, refreshed us with the waters of baptism, protected us with the instruction of His word, communed with us in the body and blood of Jesus, and sent us back into the world with His blessing.

Of course hosting a small group in your home is not the only way to be hospitable. But your pastors and elders sincerely think and hope that it might be, for some of you, one simple and powerful way to welcome, refresh, protect, commune with, and bless one another, as we gather in each other's homes to eat, discuss sermons, pray for each other, and share our burdens and lives.

We have a most hospitable God; therefore we ought to be a hospitable people. Amen?

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<sup>4</sup> This, in a nutshell, is the main thesis of Rosaria Butterfield's excellent book, [\*The Gospel Comes with a Housekey\*](#).

## Works Consulted

Brians, Mark. A Theology of Hospitality. Video series on the Theopolis App.

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