“Show Hospitality,” Hebrews 13:1-6 (First Sunday After Epiphany, January 12, 2020)

Let brotherly love continue. **2**Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. **3**Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body. **4**Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. **5**Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.” **6**So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?”

PRAY

Today we begin a new sermon series I’m calling “framework for a Spirit-filled life.” In this series we’re going to look at three practices Christians need to master: hospitality, evangelism, and generosity. As we’ll see over the course of this series, there is a lot of overlap among these three subjects.

I want to be clear at the outset: the goal of the Christian life is not to be really good at hospitality, evangelism, and generosity. No, the goal of the Christian life is set out in Matthew 22, where Jesus says, “You shall love the Lord thy God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love is the goal of the Christian life. As 1 Timothy 1:5 says, “The aim [or goal] of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.”

Love is the goal, but I don’t think it’s super-helpful for me, as a pastor, to simply say, “Our job is to love people. Go do it.” We need context in order to obey that command, and hospitality, evangelism, and generosity all serve to provide that context. Or, put another way, they give us a framework in which we can live a Spirit-filled life.

Hospitality – what is it? First of all, it’s not entertainment. When you think of hospitality don’t think of a photo shoot in *Southern Living* magazine. There’s nothing wrong with putting out the silver and china and flower arrangement, but that kind of “hospitality” can easily become all about impressing people. Rather, in a Christian context hospitality means opening your home and your heart to others in order to love them and point them to Jesus.

In light of that definition, I hope to show us three things about hospitality from this text: *first, the recipients of hospitality.* *Second, the cost of hospitality.* *Third, the source of Christian hospitality.*

First, the recipients of hospitality. In other words, to whom do we open our homes and hearts? Our text gives us three groups of people.

*First, we are to open our homes to brothers.* Verse 1: “Let brotherly love continue.” In the church today, we tend to reserve the title “brother” for the pastor. In my previous two churches, everyone called me “Brother J.D.” When I came to Grace Bible I said, “Please don’t call me that, unless you want me to turn around and call you ‘Brother’ so-and-so.” Why?

Because the earliest Christians didn’t just call the pastor “brother.” They called everyone in the church “brother” or “sister.” In Matthew 23, Jesus says to his disciples, “[Y]ou are all brothers.”

Critics of Christianity in the first and second century thought this was crazy. No one had ever before used these words to include people outside of the immediate family. But once we become believers in Jesus Christ, we become either a brother or a sister to everyone else who follows Jesus, for we are all members together of the family of God.

Therefore, since we are in the same family, we should often be in one another’s homes. Families live together and eat together. And while churches today don’t have to build a big dormitory and all live under the same roof, if we aren’t at least regularly seeing one another outside of this room then it’s hard to see how we could really say we are family.

Francis Chan, a pastor in California, tells the story of how he baptized a young man into his church who had been a gang member. At first, the young man was very involved in church life. But, after several months, he disappeared. No one saw him for a several weeks.

Finally, one of the other members of the church saw him out at the store one day and said, “Hey, we haven’t seen you at church in a while. Why not?” The young man replied, “I guess I didn’t understand church. When I was baptized, I thought it was going to be like being in the gang, where 24/7 they’re my family. But it turns out church is just a place where we see each other on Sundays.” It crushed Chan’s heart to hear that. It hurts mine, too.

Some of you may not feel the need to spend time with other Christians outside of Sundays. Your relational cup is full with your family, your kids, your own friend network. I understand that. But while you don’t feel the need I assure you others do. They feel it desperately.

Rosaria Butterfield wrote the best book on hospitality I’ve ever read: *The Gospel Comes with a House Key.* In it she quotes first Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who says, “Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more extractive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation.” Then she writes, “[Closing your home and your life] is an act of violence and cruelty to people in your church who routinely have no place to belong, no place to need and be needed … Know that someone is spared another spiral binge of pornography because he is instead playing Connect Four with you … Know that these small things that you may take for granted have been the Lord’s appointed way of escape for a brother or sister. Know that someone is spared the fear and darkness of depression because she is needed at your house … safely in community where her place at the table is needed and necessary and relied upon.”

But Christian hospitality isn’t just for those who already believe, as important as that is. *Second, we must open our homes to strangers.* Verse 2: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” The gospel message is to be spread among those who have not yet heard it and who don’t yet believe it. And I am increasingly convinced that the ***single best tool*** Christians have at their disposal when it comes to evangelism, when it comes to introducing people to Jesus, is their homes. Few things make people feel important and cared for and ready to talk about important things quite like being invited into your house, fed a meal, and you being genuinely interested in their lives.

Rosaria Butterfield writes, “Practicing … hospitality is your street credibility with your [unbelieving] neighbors … In post-Christian communities [and by that she means the culture in which we live, in which Christianity is increasingly ignored or even despised], your words can only be as strong as your relationships. Your best weapon is an open door, a set table, [and] a fresh pot of coffee …”. If we ever want to win a hearing for Jesus among those who do not yet believe, **we must show up in the lives of unbelievers,** and opening up our homes enables us to do that.

Did you notice the end of verse 2, where it says, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, *for thereby some have entertained angels unawares”*? That’s a reference to Genesis 18, which we read earlier in the service. Three strangers approach Abraham and he brings them into his tent and feeds them a meal. It turns out the strangers are the Lord and his angel messengers (by the way, the word “angel” in the Bible literally means “messenger”).

When we invite people into our homes regularly, who knows what the Lord will do with it? Who knows the extent to which your food, your conversation, your thoughtful questions, and your prayers will impact your guests? You may not know for years. You may not ever know, but at least some of those guests you have in your home will be strengthened in their faith, while others actually will actually become Christians because of you. Then one day you’ll find they are turning around ***and practicing hospitality themselves*** by opening up their homes and loving others and telling them about Jesus.

Do you realize what this means? **All those years ago, when they were in your house, you were entertaining angels unawares.** They were future messengers of God when they were in your home and you didn’t know it. They probably didn’t know it. But now, in part because of your hospitality, they’ve been built up in or even brought to the faith and are going forward and doing wonderful things as fellow messengers for the Lord.

Now I want to spend a few minutes and give you some concrete ideas for how you can practice hospitality with both your brothers and with strangers.

*First,* obviously,just invite them to your physical home, whether it’s a house, an apartment, or your residence hall room. It’s true, some will wonder, “What is she trying to sell me? What is he trying to sign me up for?” Some will be suspicious, but most will be intrigued by the idea of seeing where you live, thankful for a free meal, and honored that you would have them in your home. People know that’s a big deal, and so they won’t not take an invitation like that lightly.

And by the way, it doesn’t have to be fancy. Everything doesn’t have to be spotless. One author says this: “What people are craving isn’t perfection. People aren’t longing to be impressed. They’re longing to feel like they’re home. If you create a space full of love and character … they’ll take off their shoes and curl up with gratitude and rest. No matter how small, no matter how undone, no matter how odd.”

*Second,* invite them to your spiritual home, to church. In the South it’s often easier to invite someone to church than into your home, especially if they claim to be Christians but they aren’t involved in a church right now for whatever reason.

But don’t just invite them; pick them up. Buy them lunch afterward. Ask them what they thought about the service. And just as importantly, if you’re a member take a few moments each Sunday and just look around and see if there’s someone who looks new or someone you don’t know. Introduce yourself to them.

If you do that, someone might say, “Oh, I’ve been coming to Grace for a long time.” If that happens, don’t feel bad. I’m the pastor and I still meet people and they say, “Oh, I’ve been coming to Grace for two years.” It happens a lot, especially with students who may only be able to come on Sunday morning. It can’t be helped once a church gets to a certain size.

But more often what will happen is you’ll strike up a conversation and you’ll both walk away feeling more like Grace Bible Church is a spiritual home for you.

One of the big complaints I’ve heard over the years from people visiting a church for the first time is this: “no one spoke to me.” Sometimes, that’s on them. Yet all of us who have through membership formally made Grace Bible Church our spiritual home should want this environment to be as hospitable as possible ***because we do not want to worship around strangers***. We should want to find those who are strangers to us and do what we can to turn them into friends.

*Third,* you could regularly (once a week or every other week) host a Grace Group in your home (that’s our church’s small group ministry). We never have enough group leaders and we never have enough homes in which to host them. Danica Boyd, our staff person overseeing this ministry, would love to talk to you about that.

*Fourth,* you can serve here on Sunday mornings. When we open up this building each Sunday for worship, we are saying to anyone who wants to come, “Please let us show you hospitality.” And it takes a lot of volunteer effort to make sure it’s done well. We need people to set everything up and break everything down, we need ushers, nursery workers, parking lot attendants, people to help Graceland and Emma’s Friends.

Before we move on to the second point, there’s one more group of potential recipients of our hospitality we need to talk about. Verse 3: “Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.” This verse requires a little explanation so that it can be understood properly.

We think of prisons as places to house convicted criminals for long terms – years and years, sometimes for life. But imprisonment was not a considered a form of punishment in the Roman legal system. Rather, prisons served only as a place to detain suspect awaiting trial and those awaiting sentencing and punishment. But if you found yourself in a Roman prison, it was up to you to provide your own food and clothing. Therefore, people frequently died in prison because of starvation and exposure, even if they were only there for a week or two.

The best way to apply verse three today is not necessarily to start a prison ministry (though there would of course be nothing wrong with that, and it is a great need). Instead, we apply this verse to ourselves by saying, “If ***anyone*** is mistreated or suffering in the body, if ***anyone*** (and especially a fellow believer) is in need, Christians should be there to show hospitality.”

In the Bible, four different groups of people are repeatedly referred to as those for whom God has a special place in his heart and who are especially worthy objects of Christian hospitality: the poor, the widow, the fatherless, and the sojourner. Just one example (of ***dozens*** of possible ones) is Zechariah 7:9-10: “Thus says the Lord of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, **10**do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart.”

Christian friends, is there a place in your heart and, just as importantly, in your home or in your budget for those who, for whatever reason, don’t have a home of their own (or they do but they just can’t stay there right now), for the elderly, for children who need adopting, for children in foster care, and for those people who are in our country and in need but who aren’t natives of our country? The Bible says all of them are worthy objects of your hospitality. Is there a place in your heart for them *or are they not even on your radar?*

That’s the end of the first point. It was long, I know. But our second point is much more concise.

Second, the cost of hospitality. Verse 5a: “Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have …”. Why would the author of Hebrews feel the need to warn against the love of money after writing all these other verses about hospitality? Because it is incredibly expensive to do this, and if you love money, you’ll never do it. You’ll never part with your money to show hospitality.

Even if you resolve to just have people over to your house once or twice a month, ***it costs money*** to buy the food, to buy the drinks, to accommodate the various people who will come over.

***It will cost you time***, time that you could have spent on other things. ***It will cost you energy***, as you spend it to get everything ready, and all the more so if you are introverted. Introverts refuel and recharge by getting alone, so hospitality will be especially taxing to you because you’ll have to be around people.

For some of you ***it will cost you your pride***. You like having your house look a certain way, but the more you show hospitality the more difficult it is to keep everything looking clean and nice.

But if you resolve to really open up your home and life to others, the costs go up tremendously. In her book Rosaria Butterfield coined a phrase that describes the practice in their house. She calls it “radically ordinary hospitality.” The Butterfields have resolved to have the people from their neighborhood and their church over virtually every night of the week. They’ve adopted children. They have a guest room in the basement ready for friends recovering from surgery, for students at the local university that have lost their housing, or for children that have to get out of a home environment where they’ve been neglected.

As a result, she says, her grocery budget is three times higher than it otherwise would be. She’s often tired. And her house is never as clean as she’d like.

That’s an extreme case. I do think they have been called by God to practice a level of hospitality that’s not for everyone. Yet all Christians should look at our lives and ask: are we willing to give up something significant in our lives in order to love and serve people in this manner? Are we willing not to travel quite so much for work or leisure so we can just be around our neighbors more to love them? Are we willing to at least limit some of the sports that keep us and our kids gone so many weekends? Are we willing to tell the coaches, “We’re just not going to play that many games”? Are we willing to just pray about the possibility of giving up the money that comes from two incomes (money that, perhaps, some families don’t really have to have) in order for one spouse, if they feel so called, to stay home and be able to focus energy on serving others in this way?

Hospitality is a command of God and it is extraordinarily expensive. So how can we show it?

Third, the source of hospitality. Let’s look at the end of verse 5 and verse 6. The author of Hebrews quotes the book of Joshua where God tells the people of Israel, “‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ **6**So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?’”

That’s a promise that no matter what happens to us, God will be there for us. No matter the injury, God will bind our wounds. No matter the setback, God will sustain us. No matter the disappointment, God will comfort us. There is literally nothing you can go through in this life nor is there anything you can do that will cause God to abandon you. The God of the universe on your side all of your days. That’s a great promise.

But can we believe it? How can we *know* God will never leave nor forsake us? Because God showed us hospitality first!

In Jesus Christ God became man and came down to earth and lived among us. Why? One way to put it is to say Jesus came to show us hospitality. Ephesians 2:12-13 says, “[R]emember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and **strangers to the covenants of promise**, having no hope and without God in the world. **13**But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.”

We were estranged from God because of our sins. But God refused to leave us strangers. Jesus Christ lived the life we should have lived, a perfect, sinless life of communion with, not estrangement from, God. And on the cross he died a death and shed his blood in such a way to pay for our sins and reconcile us to God ***so as to make us friends***.

I love Galatians 6:2, because this verse might sum up what I think happens through true hospitality better than any other single verse in the Bible: “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

I can’t tell you how many times over the years Mimi and I were going through a stressful time in our marriage or with the kids or at work and we found ourselves in the home of a friend. And we walked in the house in a bad mood, maybe she and I weren’t happy with each other, maybe we didn’t really even want to be there, but after a couple of hours we walked out changed people. The burden was lifted. Our spirits were strengthened.

What happened? Were they trained counselors who got us to talk about our issues and solved our problems? No. They just showed us hospitality. They just fed us and talked with us and in so doing they *bore our burdens*. I can’t explain how it happened except to say the Holy Spirit was at work. He’s at work, ***even when it doesn’t feel like you are***, and he frees people and strengthens them when you are obedient in practicing hospitality.

But the end of Galatians 6:2 says this: “and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Almost all the commentators agree: to fulfill the law of Christ is to love one another and, friends, no one has loved you like Jesus Christ. He truly bore our burdens, the greatest burden any of us will ever have – the debt we owe for our sins.

You think showing hospitality will cost you? It won’t cost you anything like it cost Jesus. It cost Jesus everything. We sing about this hospitality all the time in the hymn where it says: “Jesus sought me when a stranger, wandering from the fold of God, he to rescue me from danger interposed his precious blood.”

When we see what Jesus did for us and see how God will never leave us or forsake us, we won’t worry about the costs of hospitality (because who cares if God is always on our side?). Rather, we will find it a joy. We’ll see how God turned us into family, his children, and so we’ll long to do the same: turning strangers into friends and turning friends into, by God’s grace, brothers and sisters through, in part, our hospitality. We’ll see that it’s not just life-giving to receive hospitality, but it’s life-giving to show it.

John MacArthur tells the story of a woman who came to his church in Los Angeles years ago. She was Jewish, she was having a rough time in her marriage, so one Sunday she went to her synagogue to see if someone at the synagogue would provide counseling. But no one would speak to her because she hadn’t paid her synagogue dues in a couple of years.

Of course, this made her mad, so she walked down the street to the nearest religious building to try and get some help. It just happened to be MacArthur’s church. It was a Sunday, so she walked in. She wasn’t at all sure about whether she wanted to be there, but she just kind of got caught up in the crowd, sat through the service, and by the end of that Sunday service she became a Christian.

Later on she told MacArthur her testimony. She said, “I was so upset that they wouldn’t counsel me, so I just came in here, and it changed my life.” MacArthur thought she was talking about his preaching (as preachers tend to do), and so he said, “Did you enjoy that sermon that day?”

She replied, “I don’t even know what you said. I was just overwhelmed by the love of these people for each other. It was so foreign to anything I’d ever experienced. And it was that that drew me to my Messiah.” When you’ve been drawn to Jesus, the Messiah, by hospitality, you won’t find the cost of hospitality to be a burden. You find bearing the cost to be a joy, because you’re so happy at how Jesus showed hospitality to you. PRAY