

Introduction

My first experience with a prostitute was at the age of 18. I was a youth minister at a church down in Bay City, TX. And there's this verse in the Bible, ***“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers”*** (Hebrews 13:2). Anyway, I took the verse seriously...and would help out pretty much everyone who asked for help. Apparently, word got around. Because business was boomin'. Whenever I was in my office people would show up out of the blue, out of no where, and ask for help...for gas, for food, for you name it. And one day, this couple shows up. They tell me their situation, need a place to stay for the night. So I “did not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,” I took them to a local motel, gave them cash for the room, and thought it was all over. Next morning, I get to my office and it's been broken into and ransacked. I called the cops, they come out and start asking questions. Eventually, my good deed for the needy couple is revealed. So the police head out to the motel to question the couple, and lo and behold it ends up she was a prostitute, and the man was her “John” and the cash I gave them for the hotel room, well it paid the bill for ol' John. But apparently I didn't give them enough money for their transaction, so they broke into my office and robbed me that night to cover the deficit!

Hospitality Defined

Now let's go back to that verse I quoted. This word “hospitality” – the New Testament was originally written in Greek. And this word, in its original greek is, ***“philoxenia”*** = which literally means, “love of stranger.” Now, in the Bible, hospitality is basically ***extending the quality of kindness to needy strangers that you usually reserve for your friends and your family.***

One more time, in the Bible, ***hospitality is basically extending the quality of kindness to needy strangers that you usually reserve for your friends and your family.***

Think about this, we tend to think of hospitality as having a friend and family over. People whom you know and get along with. But in the Bible, and for most of Church history, hospitality has been about welcoming needy strangers.

But, like my experience down in Bay City goes to show, practicing hospitality (when it comes to strangers) always involves risk and the possibility of failure. And there are horror stories galore. Still, the Bible is clear. There is a risk, but that doesn't let us off the hook. There's the verse I quoted earlier...

- ***“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers”*** (Hebrews 13:2)
 - That was written at a time where there was a lot danger, in fact we can't say that our culture is different...more dangerous...and so we are off the hook.
- ***“Seek to show hospitality”*** (Romans 12:13)
 - So, not only are we “not” off the hook, this word ***“seek”*** suggests that we should not wait for the needy to ask, but we should look for them, and get good at finding them.
- ***“Show hospitality without grumbling”*** (1 Peter 4:9)
 - Here's the icing on the cake, we've got to do all of this with joy and without complaining.

Transition

But if it's dangerous, and difficult, and people take advantage of you, Why?
three reasons

(1. Hospitality Flows out of a Grateful Response to God's Generosity)

To explain why this is so important, we need to understand something from the first half of the Bible – the part that Christians call the Old Testament.

When the Jews first moved into the land that we call Israel today, it was about 1500 years before Christ (so 3,500 years ago). When they moved into the land, God *insisted* that they **see themselves as immigrants**. **Leviticus 25:23**, *“The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine. For you are strangers and sojourners with me.”* God owned the land. They were to see themselves as immigrants, or sojourners – something akin to the modern day migrant workers.

You see, the Jews were **not that impressive** as a country. For a long time they were puny, landless, and basically slaves to Egypt. But God always took care of them.

So their **own experience** was of being *needy* and *dependent* on God when they were a baby country. But God protected them, and provided for them. He was generous with them.

So when **a Jew** comes across somebody who is needy and vulnerable, he is supposed to remember his roots. He supposed to remember where he came from. He's supposed to *remember that he owes his existence* to the **generosity** and **kindness** of God.

- A key verse here is **Leviticus 19:34**, *“You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.”*

You see, *hospitality was at the heart of Israel's identity*.

- Because God was gracious and generous to Israel when Israel was needy and vulnerable, a group of wandering, homeless people...
- Because God was generous toward Israel when Israel did not deserve and couldn't earn God's generosity...
- well Israel was supposed to treat others with that same hospitality, that same generosity.

And, that's our heritage. As Christians, we are the children of Abraham. The Jewish identity is our identity.

But it's not just our heritage.

- So many of us in this room – we've seen our sins very clearly. And we know how dark and rebellious and selfish our hearts have been. And yet, *Jesus, God in the flesh, came to visit us* here in our prison and physically opened his heart to us. And God is so gracious and generous and kind toward us.

Transition

As people who have been treated with ultimate kindness, we are open our hearts, our lives, our homes to other needy people out of overflowing gratitude to God. God welcomes us, so we welcome others. That's one reason for hospitality.

A second reason was in our gospel passage that Aaron read to us earlier (Matthew 25:31-40).

(2. Hospitality is a Tangible Expression of Our Love to Jesus)

This teaching Jesus gives us is astonishing.

Those who welcome strangers and met their needs, well in *some mystical but very real way*, they have welcomed Jesus himself. Look again at Matthew 25:35, *“I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”*

Hospitality to humans is **personally connected to care for Jesus**. The fact that Jesus personally and powerfully experiences our response to the needy (for good or bad) challenges us to offer the most gracious welcome possible.

Illustration

There was this one church, it wasn't a rich church. Kind of a blue collar church. (This is a true story, it's not a preacher story.) So this church, *when they got ahold of this truth that Jesus taught*, they started caring for the poor in their city. And before long, get this,

- they were feeding **3,000 widows** and unmarried ladies – everyday. (You see, in their culture, women couldn't work).
- They also took care of the **prisoners** in their city,
- and the **sick** (because their city had no hospital).
- They took care of the **disabled**.
- And they took care of people who were **traveling** and were away from home (because there were no hotels in their city).
- And in addition to all of that, they provided **food** and **clothing** to huge numbers of people who popped everyday.

This church it was in the city of Antioch, 1,600 years ago.

When Christians encounter a stranger in need, *we see more than a need*. We see them as someone who is *valuable, made in the image of God* – no matter how tarnished that image is.

And, **more than that** – we realize that the needy stranger in front of us is actually **Christ in disguise**. Christians welcome needy people into our lives, we serve them as a host, we see them as a guest... because when we **feed and give our full attention** to the needy stranger, then we are literally loving the Jesus to whom we sing all of these wonderful songs to, we are loving that Jesus, the real Jesus in a tangible way.

Illus: England, 2nd night, Martin and Rosemary. Holy Trinity - 1st Sunday, Leonard, SG. Peter babysit. Car ride. They were doing this in a natural way.

(3. Hospitality Gives the World a Glimpse of the New Heavens and the New Earth)

A 3rd reason is in Luke 14. Here's an account of this time when Jesus was invited to eat dinner at this guys house. And while he's there, he tells these two stories to the host. **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.’”*

Then in **v15-24**, he tells the second story. *“When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, ‘Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!’ But he said to him, ‘A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’ So the servant came and reported these things to his master: then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.’ And the servant said, ‘Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.’ And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.’”*

It's natural for people to invite their friends, their families, their neighbors over for a party, a feast. Basically people that are easy and fun to be with. Like I said, yesterday. Friendship is a good gift. No shame.

But Christians...must love strangers, need, not just friends.

When we show hospitality to

- people who our society looks down upon
- the ones who are vulnerable to injustice and exploitation
- the powerless, the poor, the widow,
- the fatherless, and elderly
- the mentally ill, and seriously disabled,

When we open our hearts, and our homes, to make room at our tables and in our spare rooms for the ones who:

- offer no value to our social mix, no advantage.
- The ones who bring nothing to the table but awkwardness and need.

Taste of New Heavens and New Earth

- Because, God welcomes all to his feast. He welcomes the least and the lost, and when Christ returns and makes everything right...everyone will be welcomed at his table.
- This is story we tell every Sunday at Eucharist. (Altar - transferred to a table)

Rublev: Trinity = Abraham / hospitality to 3 strangers @ Oaks of Mamre --> Tree of Life.

Hospitality is fundamental way we become agents of God's kingdom, bringing a taste of the New Heavens and the New Earth to this old broken down and tired world.

Bottom Line: Hospitality sits at heart of authentic Christianity.

Conclusion

- (1) I know that there are a lot of **unanswered questions**. That's good, and we've got to ask some hard questions. And we need to be wiser than I was as an 18 year old in Bay City, paying for a prostitute. But it's not that difficult. Get a bucket of KFC, have someone over. Combine with a friend to do it. True, we teach our children "stranger danger". Some singles shouldn't have some people in house. But can be creative.
- (2) And we've got to face up to our **misplaced priorities**. It is difficult to welcome guests into our lives if we are not willing to **risk loss** and damage to possessions we value. When we constantly try to protect our possessions we stifle hospitality. Some things will be broken, other things will disappear or wear out. This is what happens when our lives are open to guests and strangers. Another issue is **time** -- if too busy to love outsiders, life is out of balance. Couples, one important reason for living on one income. Another issue is **money**. Chrysostom (4th c. Archbishop of Constantinople). Learn to cook. Since hospitality almost always involves offering food and drink to a guest and giving them your ***full attention***. Start there. Have someone over, someone who can't repay you. Offer a meal (doesn't have to be much), and focus on someone else.
- (3) And we've got to drop our masks of **perfection**. "When we offer hospitality, our faults as well as our possessions are open to scrutiny. If we succumb to the need to hide our faults or to hide our possessions, we're unlikely to offer much hospitality. ***Think of this as the key difference between entertaining people and offering hospitality***. Entertaining is when we carefully prepare and carefully plan an evening. You create the right atmosphere and you project the right image. But hospitality, it's being willing to say, "Come in – this is how we live." When you confuse hospitality and entertaining, the house is never ready.

You see, 1 John 4:7-8, if we don't love strangers then we need to know God better.

We can't let the **fear of failure**

- or *mistake*
- or *loss*
- or *unanswered* questions
- or *misplaced* priorities
- or *masks* of perfection...

We can't let these things...

- *freeze* us into inaction,
- or cover up our *hardened* hearts.

We just need to get kinder and wiser through **practice**. Because on the one hand, hospitality is a **skill**. And you get good at a skill in two primary ways:

- 1) practice a lot,
- 2) and watch someone who is really good.

On the other hand, not so much a **task** as it is way of living our lives and sharing ourselves. It's an **attitude and a habit**. There's an old **Danish** proverb, "If there is room in the heart, there is room in the house." 1 John 4:8, the real issue.

- Hospitality not option for Christian. Must find a way to do it. Why? because hospitality sits at heart of authentic Christianity. (Rublev).
- The front door of your home is the side door of your church.
- May it be said of Washington, DC and Harrisonburg, VA that our cities are not large enough for the compassionate kindness of the Church of the Resurrection and the Church of the Incarnation.

Let's pray.