

“Learning to Love Strangers: That’s Hospitality” **

Main Idea: As we open God’s Word today, we want to learn how to reflect God’s love for us, and to accomplish that we’ll do two things. First, we want to get a handle on the big picture of hospitality in the Bible, doing so by surveying three key words. Secondly, we want to take a close up look at a specific example of a person who showed hospitality to strangers.

I. If we want to love people in ways that reflect our Lord’s love for us, we need to give serious attention to three words in the Bible.

A. We need to consider the importance of the word “hospitality.”

1. It involves using what God has loaned to us for the good of others (Rom. 12:13).
2. It requires proper motive (1 Pet. 4:9).
3. It is to be modeled by the leaders of the church (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:9-10).

B. We need to consider the importance of the word “house.”

1. The house can be a wonderful tool for the Lord’s work (Luke 5:29; Acts 16:15; 16:34; 17:5-7; 21:8; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15).
2. The house can be a place that undermines the Lord’s work (1 Tim. 5:13; 1 Cor. 5:11).

C. We need to consider the importance of the word “stranger.”

1. Jesus taught us to open our homes to strangers (Matt. 25:35, 40).
2. The early church did what Jesus taught (Acts 10:32).

II. If we want to love people in ways that reflect our Lord’s love for us, we can learn from the example of Gaius (3 John 5-8).

A. Gaius used his home to show hospitality to strangers (5-7).

1. He did it because he loved the truth.
2. He did it because he wanted others to love the truth.
3. He did it knowing that people who love the truth are brothers, not strangers.

B. We ought to do what Gaius did (8).

1. We’re supposed to look for ways to help God’s servants.
2. We’re supposed to work together for the advancement of the truth.

Make It Personal: Ask yourself these questions...

1. How have I responded to God’s love?
2. How can I better use what God has given me so others will know of His love for them?
3. How can I show Christ to someone this week?

In *The Grace of Giving*, Stephen Olford tells of a Baptist pastor during the American Revolution, Peter Miller, who lived in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, and enjoyed the friendship of George Washington. In Ephrata also lived Michael Wittman, an evil-minded sort who did all he could to oppose and humiliate the pastor. One day Michael Wittman was arrested for treason and sentenced to die. Peter Miller traveled seventy miles on foot to Philadelphia to plead for the life of the traitor.

"No, Peter," General Washington said. "I cannot grant you the life of your friend."

"My friend!" exclaimed the old preacher. "He's the bitterest enemy I have."

"What?" cried Washington. "You've walked seventy miles to save the life of an enemy? That puts the matter in different light. I'll grant your pardon." And he did.

Peter Miller took Michael Wittman back home to Ephrata--no longer an enemy but a friend.^[1]

When a person does something good for those who have been good to him, that’s nothing spectacular. But when he does good to those who’ve caused him grief, now that is attention-grabbing. In fact, it’s God-like.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, think back. God did something amazing for us, didn’t He? When we were His enemies, He came after us! He sent His Son on a rescue mission to seek and save us, at the expense of His own blood, shed on the cross. When we were estranged from Him, He took action to reconcile us to Himself. He brought us into a right relationship with Himself. We might say, our Creator brought us *home*.

Beloved, if we’re truly grateful for what our God has done for us, we’ll constantly be looking for ways to make Him known to others. Showing hospitality, and especially hospitality to *strangers*, is a significant way to do just that. Think about it. When we demonstrate love to people who don’t know us, we are doing with them what God did with us, and in so doing we are giving the world a tangible picture of God and His grace.

That puts hospitality in a different light, doesn’t it? It’s not just about being social. It’s about being like our Savior. It’s doing with others what our Savior did with us, and for His glory.

Remember what Jesus told His followers? “In my Father’s house are many rooms...I am going there to prepare a

place for you (John 14:2).” Our Lord is preparing His house so that we who were once His enemies might enjoy His presence, His food, His shelter, His friendship, indeed, all that’s His...forever. And we have the opportunity to resemble Him, to help others think rightly about Him, through hospitality.

And there’s one particular expression of hospitality that portrays His likeness more clearly than perhaps any other, and that’s when we show tangible love *to strangers*. Again, that’s what God did with us. When we were estranged from Him, He demonstrated His love for us through Christ to bring us home to Him. No, hospitality is certainly not restricted to strangers, for the Scriptures command us to show hospitality to those we already know, too. But loving strangers is probably one of the hardest expressions of hospitality to learn, and it’s one that God’s Word addresses head on.

As we open God’s Word today, we want to learn how to better reflect God’s love for us, and to accomplish that we’ll do two things. First, we want to get a handle on the big picture of hospitality in the Bible by surveying three key words. Secondly, we want to take a close up look at a specific example of a person who showed hospitality to strangers.

I. If we want to love people in ways that reflect our Lord’s love for us, we need to give serious attention to three words in the Bible.

Here’s the first...

A. We need to consider the importance of the word “hospitality.” Listen to this observation by Mortimer Arias, a former Methodist bishop from Bolivia:

“Hospitality is becoming an almost forgotten Christian virtue in our style of life today, particularly in big cities with their rampant crime on the streets, their locked-in apartments, and all their affluent, urban and bourgeois devices which attempt to create privacy in our homes and our lives.

In the New Testament, however, hospitality was a distinctive mark of Christians and Christian communities.”^[2] When he talks about “the devices which attempt to create privacy,” I think back to my childhood when we were on a party-line telephone system. That meant you shared a phone line with several neighbors, and that meant you might have an eavesdropper listening in on your phone call. Today we’ve got private lines and *Caller ID* to maintain our privacy.

The desire to cut off oneself from other people isn’t new. Nor is the perspective that my home is my castle. That’s one of the reasons why the New Testament church stood out, according to Mortimer Arias, because hospitality was “a distinctive mark of Christians and Christian communities.” Church members, in contrast to the world around them, took hospitality seriously.

Where did they get such a notion? They were taught it. How do we know that? By reading the New Testament. So let’s investigate the presence of the word “hospitality” in the New Testament, and in so doing we’ll discover three things about hospitality.

1. *It involves using what God has loaned to us for the good of others (Rom. 12:13).* The noun “hospitality” appears five times in the New Testament. For instance, Paul commands Christians to practice it in Romans 12:13, “Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice **hospitality**.” Notice the connection between *sharing* and *hospitality*. Sharing what we have to meet the practical needs of others, that’s at the heart of hospitality. And this doesn’t come naturally for sinners, even saved sinners with their tendency to be ingrown. That’s why Paul uses a strong verb here, “*Practice* hospitality.” The Greek verb *dioko* means “pursue, strive to do something with an intense effort.” In a negative context, it’s actually the word for “persecute.” In other words, *go after people*, not to harm them but to meet their needs.

Beloved, what we own isn’t really ours. If we are saved people, we belong to the *Lord* Jesus Christ. He is the owner and master. We are His and what we have is His (1 Cor. 6:19-20), including our house, our food, our bed, our time. It’s all His. And He tells us in His Word to use what He has loaned to us for the good of others.

Peter offers a similar instruction in 1 Peter 4:9, “Offer **hospitality** to one another without grumbling.” That indicates that when we show hospitality...

2. *It requires proper motive (1 Pet. 4:9).* No grumbling, says Peter. “Without grudging,” says the KJV. Or as the *NLT* puts it, “*Cheerfully* share your home with those who need a meal or a place to stay.”

Motive is critical. It’s not enough merely to host a guest. If we do it begrudgingly, the offering isn’t pleasing to the Lord. Nor does it please Him if our intent is to impress our guests with our cooking or decorating skills. It’s not about us, but Him and them.

Of course, that’s yet another reason why we need the cross. Only by coming to the cross of Christ, can we be pardoned from sin’s penalty and set free from its self-absorbing power.

A great prayer to pray before hosting a guest would be, “Lord, let my guests see You when they enter my home. Use me as an instrument so they’ll leave encouraged to love You more.”

3. *It is to be modeled by the leaders of the church (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:9-10).* In the list of qualifications for an overseer/pastor, Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:2, “Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, **hospitable**...” We find the same qualification in Titus 1:8. In order for a man to lead God’s church, that man must lead it the way God Himself would, which means he must be *hospitable*.

Lee Iacocca was the long-time president of Ford Motor Company until he was fired, and then recruited by Chrysler to salvage it from its decline. Iacocca had this to say about the qualifications of a leader:

“Now, there’s one phrase that I hate to see on any executive’s evaluation, no matter how talented he may be, and that’s the line: ‘He has trouble getting along with people.’ To me, that’s the kiss of death. ‘You’ve just destroyed the guy,’ I always think. ‘He can’t get along with people? Then he’s got a real problem, because that’s all we’ve got around here. No dogs, no apes—only people. And if he can’t get along with his peers, what good is he to the company? As an executive, his whole function is to motivate other people. If he can’t do that, he’s in the wrong place.’”^[3]

There’s some good food for thought for potential church leaders. If a prospective leader has trouble getting along with people, he is in serious danger, and so is the church if he assumes a leadership position. The reason is obvious, to paraphrase Iacocca: “If a potential church leader can’t get along with people, he’s got a real problem, because that’s all we’ve got around here. No dogs, no apes—only people.”

And how does a man show that he can get along with people? One vital way is through hospitality. But this isn’t just for pastors. They’re just the pace-setters. In fact, their primary task isn’t to *do* all the hospitality in the church, but to equip the saints to do it.

In fact, there’s another group of hospitality pace-setters mentioned in 1 Timothy 5. There Paul gives a list of qualification for determining whether a woman should be on the church’s “widows’ list.” Here’s what he says in 1 Timothy 5:9-10, “No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, and is well known for her good deeds, such as bringing up children, **showing hospitality**, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in trouble and devoting herself to all kinds of good deeds.”

I’m so thankful God has blessed this church with some widows who meet that standard, widows like June Conley and others, ladies who live their lives in ways that reflect our Savior’s selfless love for others. In case you feel uncomfortable with naming names, Paul did. He mentioned a role model of hospitality in Romans 16:23, “Gaius, whose **hospitality** I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings.” So thank you, June, and others, for revealing Christ to us through your hospitality.

There’s a second Bible word that can help us get the big picture...

B. We need to consider the importance of the word “house.” The word “house” appears 971 times in the Bible, and a survey of those verses reveals two insights to us.

1. *The house can be a wonderful tool for the Lord’s work (Luke 5:29; Acts 16:15; 16:34; 17:5-7; 21:8; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15).*

Jesus went to houses. He went to Levi’s house in Luke 5:29 and shared not only a meal, but His life with “a large crowd of tax collectors and others.” He went to a Pharisee’s house and did the same in Luke 7:36.

What’s more, Jesus gave His disciples instructions about going to houses for ministry purposes. He told them in Luke 10:5-7, “When you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house.’ If a man of peace is there, your peace will rest on him; if not, it will return to you. Stay in that house, eating and drinking whatever they give you, for the worker deserves his wages. Do not move around from house to house.”

It’s worth noting that the church began in a house according to Acts 2:2. And the early church continued to meet in houses, as seen in various texts...

1 Corinthians 16:19 “The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.”

Colossians 4:15 “Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.”

The outreach of the early church involved going to houses. Acts 5:42 states, “Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.”

Believers met in houses for prayer and learning God’s Word. A great example is Lyddia in Acts 16:15, “When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. ‘If you consider me a believer in the Lord,’ she said, ‘come and stay at my house.’ And she persuaded us.” (see also verse 40)

The Philippian jailor did the same thing in Acts 16:34, “The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal

before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole family.”

Jason let Paul use his house for ministry in Thessalonica in Acts 17:5-7. Titius Justus did the same in Acts 18:7. Philip the evangelist let Paul and his companions stay in his house in Caesarea, according to Acts 21:8.

In Acts 20:20, Paul made it clear that the house was strategic in his evangelism and disciple-making efforts, stating, “You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house.”

Believers opened their houses to lodge traveling ministers. Simon the tanner did with Peter in Acts 10:6. Philemon did with Paul, based on his request in Philemon 22.

So the house is a wonderful tool for ministry. Personalize it. Your house could be a wonderful tool for ministry. You can know the joy that your brothers and sisters in Christ knew in the first century, the joy of using your house as a tool for the Lord’s work.

I wish I didn’t need to say the following, but I must, because when you survey the Bible you discover a second, regretful reality about the house.

2. *The house can be a place that undermines the Lord’s work (1 Tim. 5:13; 1 Cor. 5:11).* How so? Think about it...

When folks gather in the privacy of their homes, they can talk with each other about how much they love Christ and their church, they can pray for their church leaders and the needs of their brothers and sisters, and they can encourage each other to live for Christ, OR...

In those same homes they can talk with each other about what they don’t like about their church, they can slander their church leaders and their church family members, and they can discourage each other from living for Christ.

It’s a sad reality. The Lord’s work can be enhanced in our houses, or *undermined* in them. The fact is that a host of church problems, like gossip and dissension, often begin in the houses of its members. Paul knew that. That’s why he gave this reason for not including younger widows on the church’s widow-list in 1 Timothy 5:13, “Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and *going about from house to house*. And not only do they become idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying things they ought not to.”

Something else detrimental to the Lord’s work can happen in homes, and that’s *inappropriate* fellowship. What’s that? It’s what John had in mind when he wrote in 2 John 10, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, *do not take him into your house* or welcome him.” It’s also what Paul had in mind when he wrote this exhortation to church members in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 5:11, “But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man *do not even eat*.”

Are you serious, Paul? Are you saying that if I’m invited to a home for a meal and I know the person who invited me professes to believe in Christ but loves to turn the subject of dinner conversation to church-bashing, I shouldn’t go? Isn’t that what, in essence, Paul said? He said don’t associate with a person who professes to be a brother who also is a slanderer. Don’t even eat with him.

Why would Paul give such strong counsel? It’s for the good of your brother, the good of your church, and the glory of your Savior. Just think. If enough brothers stop eating with him, he may realize he’s got a sin problem, repent, and allow Christ to turn his tongue from slander to service.

The early church understood the negative potential of the homes of its members. That’s why in the latter part of the first century, a church manual was written called *The Didache* which, in part, addressed the potential abuse of hospitality. Let me read you some of the guidelines intended to curb this abuse (taken from chapter eleven):

If an apostle comes to your house, receive him as the Lord. But he shouldn’t stay more than a day, “or if there be need, a little more.” If he stays three days, “he is a false prophet.” When the apostle leaves, give him bread for his journey, but if he asks for money, “he is a false prophet.” If the person is not an apostle but simply an ordinary Christian traveler, he must not be entertained free for more than two or three days. If he wants to settle up with you, “let him work for and eat his bread.” If he refuses to do this, “he is trafficking upon Christ.”^[4]

The point is this. If we want to love people in ways that reflect our Lord’s love for us, we need to give serious attention to what we do with our houses. A third word...

C. We need to consider the importance of the word “stranger.” The Greek word for “stranger” is *xenos* and can be translated “foreigner,” “alien,” or “guest.” “Do not forget to entertain *strangers*,” says Hebrews 13:2. Two things stand out...

1. *Jesus taught us to open our homes to strangers (Matt. 25:35, 40).* Here’s what He said in Matthew 25:35, “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a **stranger** and you invited me in.” In response to the question, *when were you a stranger that we helped*, Jesus gave

this reply in verse 40, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”

What we do for the least of our brothers, that is, for those who can’t return the favor, we’re doing to and for Jesus. Giving food, a cup of water, clothes to wear, a place to stay, it’s part of our calling. Jesus called us to open our homes to *strangers* realizing that He is the stranger we’re helping.

2. *The early church did what Jesus taught (Acts 10:32)*. For example, in Acts 9:43 we’re told that Peter traveled to the city of Joppa and was a guest in the house of Simon the tanner.^[5] That meant that Simon the tanner gave Peter a place to stay for ministry purposes, provided food for him, even allowed Peter to visit with Gentile guests sent by Cornelius. We often think about how God used Peter that day to broaden the church’s outreach to Gentiles, but thank God for Simon the tanner, too! He provided the home that the Lord used to get Peter’s attention through a vision that resulted in the gospel going to the Gentiles.

So there’s the big picture. We’ve pondered the words hospitality, house, and stranger. Now let’s pull it all together by taking a close-up look at a man who used his house to exhibit a wonderful, Christ-like love of strangers.

II. If we want to love people in ways that reflect our Lord’s love for us, we can learn from the example of Gaius (3 John 5-8).

We meet Gaius in the tiny letter of 3 John. According to verse 1, the letter open before us was penned by “The elder” (that’s the apostle John) to a dear friend of his named Gaius.

We can’t be sure who this Gaius is. There are at least three men by the name of Gaius mentioned in the New Testament. There’s Gaius of Corinth who was baptized by Paul (1 Cor. 1:14; Rom. 16:23). There’s Gaius of Macedonia who suffered in a riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:29). There’s Gaius of Derbe who traveled with Paul through Macedonia (Acts 20:4). One fourth-century church tradition says this letter went to the third Gaius, Gaius of Derbe, although that can’t be proven. In fact, Plummer says that Gaius was “perhaps the most common of all names in the Roman Empire,” so it’s pointless to speculate.

Let’s listen now to what John told Gaius in verses 5-7, “Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans.”

What’s that tell us that Gaius did? Simply stated...

A. Gaius used his home to show hospitality to strangers (5-7). Apparently, here’s how it happened. It seems that John, who was living in Ephesus at the time (around AD 85-95), sent some itinerant missionaries (John calls them “the brothers” in verse 5) to take the good news of Christ throughout Asia Minor.^[6] These brothers visited Gaius’s church who opened his home to them and cared for their needs. Another man in the church, however, Diotrephes (mentioned in verse 9), rejected them. Consequently, John wrote a letter to the church to correct the problem, but Diotrephes intercepted and rejected that letter. So John wrote another letter, this one directly to his friend Gaius, possibly delivered to him by Demetrius (mentioned in verse 12). We call that letter 3 John.

But here’s the question. Why did Gaius open his home to total strangers? What would motivate a person to give up their privacy, their food, even their bed, to people they don’t even know? Gaius did it for three reasons.

1. *He did it because he loved the truth.* That’s what the missionaries he served told John. Notice verse 3, “It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth.”

Granted, some people are wired by God to be more social than others. We call them “people persons.” But you don’t have to be a “people person” to do hospitality. That’s not what motivated Gaius. He did it because he loved the truth.

What truth? The truth about the One who said He *is* the truth, Jesus Christ. The truth that Jesus Christ died on a cross in the place of sinners, rose again, and offers eternal life to all who will repent of their sins and believe in Him. Gaius loved the truth, and that’s why he housed these strangers. But there’s another reason...

2. *He did it because he wanted others to love the truth.* That’s why these missionaries came to town, and that’s why Gaius helped them, because there are people all around us who need to hear and become lovers of the truth.

By the way, did you catch the reason John gave as to why these missionaries left their homes and went out? Verse 7 makes it clear their motivation was “for the sake of the Name.” That’s critical to see for it points out that missions is not primarily about helping people. Missions flows out of an absolute allegiance to Christ.

And how did these missionaries fund their effort? John says in verse 7 they went out “receiving no help from the pagans.” We don’t fund the Lord’s work by depending on the world’s money (we ought not depend on their methods

either). Rather, we should do God's work God's way utilizing God's resources supplied through God's people.

But there's another reason that motivated Gaius to show hospitality to strangers.

3. *He did it knowing that people who love the truth are brothers, not strangers.* Verse 5 again, "You are faithful in what you are doing for *the brothers*." Gaius didn't know these men. They were strangers to him. But he helped them because they weren't really strangers. They were related in Christ. They were *brothers*.

Diotrephes didn't see them that way. In verses 9-10 John says that Diotrephes, who loved to be first, manifested his self-love by refusing to welcome the traveling missionaries and, in fact, kicked out of the church anybody who tried to help them.

But Gaius, rather than being self-absorbed, showed his love for the missionaries by giving them lodging, meals, and perhaps money for travel. And he did it because he saw them as *brothers*.

But this isn't just about Gaius. In verse 8 John makes it clear that...

B. We ought to do what Gaius did (8). "We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth." Let that sink in...

1. *We're supposed to look for ways to help God's servants.* Beloved, missionaries need our help. In order for God's work to move forward, God's servants need our help. Prayer support, yes, but material support, too. They need a place to stay and meals when they visit. They need money so they can go to other places to make Christ known.

It grieves me when I receive calls from missionaries who are willing to go to unreached peoples, who invite us to partner with them financially, and I have to say, "I'm sorry. We can't help you. We don't have any money budgeted this year for new missionaries." But the reality is, most of us have some discretionary money. We're just choosing to spend it on cable television, movie rentals, another outfit to put in the closet, ball tickets, Starbucks coffee, music CDs, fishing equipment, and gadgets from the shopping channel. And there's nothing inherently wrong with spending money on these things. But the fact is, we don't need them. They're luxuries. And when we spend our money on things we really don't need, we don't have that money to help those who do have needs.

John says that *we* ought to show hospitality to such men. *We* ought to be doing what Gaius did, looking for ways to use our resources to meet the needs of God's servants. Not everybody can go to Ukraine, like Gary Storm did on Thursday. That's not God's intent. But everybody who names the name of Christ can and should get involved in taking the gospel to Ukraine, and to every other corner of this world, including Wheelersburg. John says...

2. *We're supposed to work together for the advancement of the truth.* And when we open our homes, our kitchen cabinets, and our pocketbooks, that's what we're doing. Verse 8 says we do it "so that we may work together for the truth."

Beloved, it's as simple as this. If we're truly grateful for what God has done for us, we'll constantly be looking for ways to make Him known to others. That's what hospitality is all about, a way to make His love known to others.

Make It Personal: Ask yourself these questions...

1. *How have I responded to God's love?* God so loved the world that He gave His only Son. Have you received God's love gift? Have you accepted Jesus the Christ as your Lord and Savior? If so, take it a step further. *How are you responding to God's love right now?* Are you hoarding it, or looking for ways to share it?

2. *How can I better use what God has given me so others will know of His love for them?* What has the Lord given you? A house, a car or two, time, some money, talents, education. How might you better use those resources for His gospel purposes? Don't be a self-absorbed person like Diotrephes. Look for ways to be a Gaius.

3. *How can I show Christ to someone this week?* That's what life is all about, my friend, knowing Christ and making Christ known.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Taken from www.sermonillustrations.com

[2] Mortimer Arias, quote taken from Alexander Strauch, *The Hospitality Commands*, p. 6.

[3] Lee Iacocca, *Iacocca: An Autobiography*, New York: Bantam, 1984, p. 58.

[4] *The Didache*, chapters 11-12. <http://www.christianissues.biz/pdf-bin/miscellaneous/thedidache.pdf>

[5] Acts 10:6 uses the verb form *xenizo*, meaning "be entertained as a stranger."

[6] New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce suggests, "The ministry of traveling teachers was common in the church life of Western Asia at this time."