



It was a hot, dry and dusty night. I was sitting on a makeshift wooden bench in a cinderblock room in Juarez, Mexico. Ricketty fans were circulating the dusty hot air in a futile attempt to cool the room. Despite the fans my skin was still sticky from sweat.

Then our host brought out ice cream sandwiches and gave them to the 35 Americans in my youth group who had traveled there to serve this orphanage for a week.

It was glorious snack. An ice cream sandwich had never tasted so good. As I was enjoying my cold treat, my American liaison sat next to me, smiling and enjoying his ice cream. He said, “The Mexicans never buy ice cream for themselves. It’s too expensive.”

I looked at him with confusion and he continued. “They are so grateful that you are here that they will spend every dime they have to make your stay better.”

On trips around the world, I have had the privilege to be shown the heart of God through hospitality.

In Moscow I sat in a family’s dining room as they served us caviar and their weekly meal of meat. Caviar—yuck! I choked down every bite with a smile knowing that this family had sacrificed greatly to show us the heart of God through hospitality.

In Tijuana, Mexico a sweet family who lived in a one-room house with a dirt floor and no plumbing served us chicken tacos for lunch. To this day, they’re the best tasting chicken tacos I’ve ever had. Our efforts to persuade her to not kill the chicken for our lunch were unsuccessful. It was her privilege and pleasure to serve us the very best food her family had. We couldn’t stop our host from showing us the heart of God through hospitality.

As we continue in our preaching series, “Building a Home: One Room at a Time,” we are looking at the topic of hospitality today, considering the question, How does God want a family to function in relation with people outside of their immediate family? As I’ve been studying the topic of hospitality, I’ve been surprised to see how it permeates the Scriptures from the Old Testament to the New. It’s everywhere! What I’d like to show you today is how the heart of God is expressed through hospitality.

In our American culture we’ve generally reduced hospitality to a man grilling meat on the BBQ, or a woman preparing a meal in the kitchen. These can certainly be part of hospitality, as we’re going to see in the scriptures. But there’s more to it; there’s a heart that’s looking to bless someone else before you look after your own needs. Biblical hospitality looks to bless

someone else with the resources of your home before you look after your own needs.

Turn in your Bibles to Genesis 18. As you’re turning there, let me set up the scene we’re about to read. The Old Testament Jew believed that because God was their host, they were obligated to show hospitality to others. Hospitality wasn’t an event for them; it was a way of life.

Those who were traveling, the poor and the needy were their responsibility to host. This theme went so far that it’s said that rabbis suggested that a door be placed on every side of the house and these doors were to be opened so that travelers and the poor coming from any direction might have easy access. This mindset will help you understand Abraham’s actions as we read Genesis 18, starting with verse 2.

Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

Abraham is in his tent because it’s hot. He’s resting. And although we know that this was a visit from the Lord, Abraham doesn’t know that. We know that during this visit the Lord will tell Abraham that his 90-year-old wife will have a baby, but Abraham doesn’t know that either. It’s interesting that the blessing Abraham received in this encounter, and the revelation God gave him about what God was going to do, came after Abraham extended hospitality.

Later in this story we learn that one of these men is actually God himself making an Old Testament appearance. Two of the men were angels and that’s where in the New Testament we read from Hebrews 13:2 that some have in opening their homes to strangers, entertained angels without realizing it. This is one of those instances.

So Abraham sees them and hurries toward them. He’s not sitting back wondering, “Do I have time today to show hospitality to these strangers? What’s on my schedule today?” I’m sure Abraham had things on his schedule but whatever it was, he was flexible. He was willing to make changes to his schedule to receive these men because he understood how important the action of hospitality was.

He said, “If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and

rest under this tree. Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant” (verses 3–5).

In essence he's saying, "You have done me a great honor by visiting me. It's a privilege that you would come to my tent." He's urging them to not keep going but to rest in the shade of his tree and eat and find refreshment.

Do you feel that way when people drop by your house unexpectedly? What a blessing that you'd stop by so I can make an impromptu meal for you.

It's interesting to consider how we have been shaped by our upbringing and culture. Many of us would never stop by someone's house unannounced today. We'd be embarrassed by the social inappropriateness of it. But how would you speculate that you'd react if this did happen?

I confess that sometimes when I have my own agenda, my "to do" list, my goals for the day, that it's not always easy for me to interrupt my plans and shift to an attitude of serving and hosting others. But I see in Abraham a great example of focusing—not on himself, not on the cleanliness of his tent, not on whether a meal is ready to be served—but on serving his guests. His focus is on making them comfortable. He's attentive to their practical needs. These travellers are hot from a long walk. They are thirsty. They are hungry. Their feet are dirty. Abraham is tuned to meet these needs.

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said, "get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it and bake some bread" (v. 6).

This is funny! After he's offered hospitality, he goes to his wife to make it happen. Just like a man. He tells her to make the bread quickly! Bread can't be baked quickly!

Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it (v. 7).

Now he's running to the field to find a good animal for slaughter. Abraham was not prepared at all to host these guys. It would be the modern equivalent of running to the store as your guests rested in your living room. But his lack of preparation wasn't going to prevent him from showing his heart of love through hospitality.

We're seeing in this story that hospitality involves a lot of work; it involves flexibility; it involves sacrificing if you don't have a lot; it involves the whole family. Abraham has gotten his wife and a servant involved in this situation.

He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and set these before

them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree (v. 8).

As we wrap up this scene, we see that hospitality means the host has to have a servant's heart. Just that last little phrase, **"He stood by them under the tree as they ate"** (v. 8). That was considered appropriate and polite in the Old Testament culture. As your guests were eating, you would stand by them. Why? Because you were their servant. You said, "Come into my home, and let me serve you." So when we extend hospitality, we are showing the servant heart of Jesus.

Abraham was the kind of host that I want to be: spontaneous, flexible, open tent, open home, open heart—come in and be refreshed. This is a helpful model, isn't it? Let me read some additional scriptures on hospitality. Let's start with **why** God wants his followers to have a heart of hospitality that looks to bless others before you look after your own needs.

"He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt" (Deuteronomy 10:18-19).

"When you are harvesting in your field and you overlook a sheaf, do not go back to get it. When you beat the olives from your trees, do not go over the branches a second time. When you harvest the grapes in your vineyard, do not go over the vines again ... Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I command you to do this" (Deuteronomy 24:19-22).

In these verses God provides three examples of intentionally being inefficient so that you can be a blessing to others. I don't know about you but that rubs me, a calendar-keeping guy, the wrong way. The part of me that the Bible calls the flesh, resists this. But then God includes that we will be blessed when we offer hospitality.

In these verses, the **why** of hospitality that's offered is because God himself offers his people hospitality. God offers it so he wants his followers to offer it.

The New Testament builds upon this foundation. In the New Testament a Christian is described not only as having a personal relationship with God, but to be a Christian is to be a part of a family. For the New Testament believers, that was a powerful concept. They had come out of all different kinds of backgrounds—slaves, free, Jews, Gentiles, men, women—but they had come to be related to each other, brothers and sisters in the family of God.

So for those first Christians who were living in a pagan, hostile world that rejected Christ, cultures a lot like the Peninsula, this family was very important to them. They stuck together, they

had to. Their survival depended upon it. They shared their material possessions. They met in homes for worship. They ate meals together. They cared for each other's widows. They showed hospitality to each other.

God used the acts of hospitality as one of the key factors that explains how Christianity was able to expand and advance so rapidly into the New Testament first century world. It was because of the love that Christians showed for each other through hospitality. When the pagans looked at the Christians, they were forced to acknowledge, "See how they love one another!" Jesus told the disciples that this would happen.

"By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35).

"Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling" (1 Peter 4:8–9).

"Love must be sincere ... be devoted to one another in love ... Honor one another above yourself ... Share with the Lord's people who are in need ... Practice hospitality" (Romans 12:9-13).

The connection between showing love to our brothers and sisters in Christ and hospitality is a powerful and direct one. God wants his children to behave like he behaves—be on the lookout to bless someone with your stuff before you look after your own needs. How do we do this in practical, down-to-earth terms? It's one thing to sit in church and talk about how we love each other, but how do we **show** that we love each other?

Here are some hospitality tips:

1. Give Jesus control of your calendar. Are you too busy? If so, ask Jesus what you should stop doing.
2. Cook a meal for more than your family. Doing so will compel you to be on the lookout to invite people to join you.
3. As you're able with your budget, buy extra food for the freezer.
4. Lower your personal expectations. This can be done by serving a simple meal or just dessert or serving take-out or hosting a potluck. Perhaps the expectations you've set for yourself are so high they're preventing you from showing hospitality like God wants you to.

I learned a lot about this from the Francis family while I was a seminary student. Mike Francis was a seminary student too and his family lived next door to us in our condo complex and hosted my roommate and me to dinner 2–3 times a week. Imagine the high frequency of this; 2–3 times a week we ate dinner around the Francis dinner table. You might conclude that the Francis's had a lot of extra time on their hands to invite two single guys over for dinner so often. Not so. They had three children, ages 7, 5 and 3, and they were struggling with some behavior problems with their oldest child, who was soon to be diagnosed with Asperger's. Their plate was full!

Here's how Maria Francis was able to extend hospitality—she lowered her personal expectations. Although she knew how to host an amazing dinner with all the frills, most nights we ate simple meals of tater tots, hot dogs wrapped in croissant rolls, or homemade pizza. We ate this so often I don't remember eating anything else. No special accommodations were made for us, except more food was prepared. In this way, the Francis family showed us the love of Christ and a loving heart through hospitality.

5. Set a monthly budget for hospitality.

6. Set a cleaning schedule for your house.

Imagine with me a church that's filled with people who are extending hospitality. Just imagine how that would integrate our lives relationally; how that would bless others and how our lives would be blessed too.

It will be inconvenient. It will cost us something. But that's no surprise to us. We all know that following Jesus involves that. Imagine how powerful the loving act of hospitality is in our cities where so many are lonely and isolated and looking for relationships. Let's open our hearts by opening our homes. ***"Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels"*** (Hebrews 13:2).

When there is room in the heart, there is room in the house. -- Danish proverb

When was the last time you visited someone and felt truly welcome and comfortable? What made you feel that way? In all likelihood, it wasn't just fancy sheets or top-shelf meals. It was the effort your friend put into making you feel at home. Throughout Scripture, an act of hospitality became the scene for a holy moment. Abraham served a meal for three strangers who turned out to be from God, delivering his prophecy about Abraham and Sarah's future (Genesis 18:1–15). The widow at Zarephath made a cake of bread for Elijah out of the very last of her flour and oil, and miraculously she never ran out of food (1 Kings 17:7–24). Peter's mother served Jesus and the disciples after he healed her from a fever (Matthew 8:14–15).

In our modern day, hospitality can turn into something no less holy. God blesses us for receiving others into our homes. And when we take the time to demonstrate care for someone else, we realize that we are merely returning the love God gives to us.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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