

CHRISTIAN HOME AND FAMILY LIVING

by

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CHAPTER EIGHT

CHRISTIAN HOSPITALITY

Genesis 18:1-8; II Kings 4:8-17; Matthew 25:31-46

Be not forgetful to entertain strangers . . . (Hebrews 13:2)

Words have a way of losing and changing their meaning through the years. People living in the United States in the middle of the twentieth century no longer speak the English of Shakespeare, or even of Woodrow Wilson. Do you know that “silly” once meant “holy,” “fond” meant “foolish,” and “beam” meant “tree”? Words that were once wrong to use, for instance “ain’t” and “crick,” gradually become correct, and words that vary in meaning in different localities are accepted according to common usage.

When Paul used the word “**simplicity**” he meant “*holiness and singleness of heart before God*”; today it has several shades of meaning varying from “*plainness*” to “*lack of mental acuteness*.” **Vocation**, which was at first “*a calling from God*,” has come to simply mean a particular occupation, business or trade; the word is hardly used, except in the new meaning it has acquired in education. A vocational school is a trade school—a school that teaches its students “practical courses.”

The word “**hospitality**,” which was important and well understood in the days of Paul, is seldom heard any more. It has certainly lost its original meaning: “love or lover of strangers.” After a fruitless search through the card files of more than one library, a kindly librarian replied to my query: “Hospitality . . . hmm, hospitality . . . that is such a particular subject (or did he say peculiar?) we never hear about it anymore.” His young assistant could give no help other than a sympathetic nod.

“Is hospitality out of date, then . . . un-American, perhaps?”

“Well, no,” he replied with a wry but friendly smile, “the concept is still here.” Yes, the concept is still here, buried under an avalanche of entertainment! However, in the Book whose Word is indestructible, whose concepts and values never change in spite of contemporary usage, we find that hospitality is God’s commandment in the Old Testament, that it is called a “**good work**” in the New, and that it stood first in Christian social service in the Early Church.

There is no social duty which the Lord urged more strongly than hospitality and kindness to strangers who were classed, in the Old Testament, with the widow and the fatherless. They were the objects of divine tenderness, for we read that **“The Lord preserveth the strangers; He relieveth the fatherless and widow”** (Psalm 146:9). He did this through the medium of His children who were told to show mercy and compassion, to feed, lodge, protect and show respect for the person and rights of the needy stranger (Exodus 20:10; 22:21,22; 23:9; Leviticus 19:9, 10; Deuteronomy 1:16; 14:29; 26:12, 13; Jeremiah 22:3; Zechariah 7:9, 10).

Hospitality was a religious duty to the ancient Hebrew, enjoined as it was by the Law of Moses which read: **“But the stranger . . . thou shalt love him as thyself; for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God”** (Leviticus 19:33, 34; Deuteronomy 10:17-19). Even after roads became better and inns were provided, home hospitality was not neglected. Job says (31:32), **“The stranger did not lodge in the street: but I opened my doors to the traveler.”**

Israel was always distinguished for hospitality. One of the earliest and most perfect examples is that of Abraham who rose from the door of his tent to give a royal welcome to three strangers (Genesis 18:1-8). He was a perfect host, sincere in his invitation, courteous, kind, modest and generous. Inconvenience and expense were nothing; the joy of service was everything. The three dusty strangers became his honored guests as he bowed in deference to them, as he **“hastened”** and **“ran”** and **“fetched”** everything needful and more. He then waited on them, as a servant, while they ate under the oak of Mamre. Abraham and Sarah, whose warm oriental hospitality is an example to us, became the recipients of rich blessings, for they had “entertained angels unawares” (Genesis 18:1, 14, 32; Hebrews 13:1-3).

Hardly less distinguished for genuine hospitality is the impoverished widow of Zarephath, who shared her last handful of meal and cruse of oil with the prophet Elijah (I Kings 17: 8-16).

What a test of faith, of self-denial and hospitality, this was for a desperate and hungry mother. Holding, perhaps, the slim hand of her little undernourished boy, she watched Elijah eat her last morsel. Nonetheless, because she obeyed the Lord and shared what she had with the prophet, she was blessed with a miracle of abundance of meal and oil for the duration of the famine. And it was only because she continued to show hospitality that the prophet was there to restore her son to life (vvs. 17-24). When the widow of Zarephath loved the stranger as herself, she became the object of divine tenderness, and of two miracles. She became the first woman we know of to hear the glorious words: **“See, thy son liveth.”**

There is a story of another hostess in the Old Testament that we cannot pass by. It is that of the Shunammite woman whose guest room appointments were of Emily Post proportions (II Kings 4:8-17). The “great woman” as she was called, had often seen Elisha pass by Shunem, Galilee (which was on the edge of the rich grain fields of the plain of Esdraelon), on his way to different parts of the Northern Kingdom. One day she asked him in for dinner and would not take “no” for an answer. A sincere and gracious hostess, she urged him to come again. After that he stopped in **“to eat bread”** every time he passed by. One day the woman said to her husband, **“Behold now, I perceive that this is a holy man of God, which passeth by us continually. Let us make a little chamber, I pray thee, on the wall . . .”**

We can almost hear her say, “And we will furnish it just for him and then he can come any time and stay as long as he likes. No guest wants to be entertained every minute, you know; he will be able to relax, and feel at home in a room all his own . . .” Many another would say, “It’s all right to be good, but having a stranger around that much is going a bit too far!” Or simply, “Wouldn’t you think that Naomi would take a turn entertaining the old man? Look how often he has been here.” Instead, the great woman’s husband soon had the carpenters busy, and the guest room was added to the house.

Thoughtful planning went into the furnishings, and not just any old thing would do. A comfortable bed, and a table with a chair and a lamp, so that the prophet could read and write if he wished, were moved in. It is easy to imagine a pitcher of water, and a bottle of wine and of oil on the table, pens and parchment, clean linens and other things to add to the comfort of the room. Likely reached by an outside stairway from the garden whose spices carried up a pungent aroma, this cool, quiet room became a favorite retreat for the prophet and his servant, Gehazi, as they traveled the beaten down paths from place to place.

A guest also has certain obligations, and one day Elisha said, “**What can I do for you, who are doing so much for me?**” The woman insisted that it was nothing, for hospitality is a pleasure when it is of the heart. Elisha was grateful, but he was determined that she should have more than a formal thank-you note. Like Sarah, the woman stood uncomprehending in the doorway when the prophet said that the deepest desire of her heart would be fulfilled, for she would have a son. The friendship of the prophet and the Shunem family was lovely and lasting and mutual. When later the son died within a few hours of a sunstroke, the great woman appealed to the prophet, and her precious son was restored to life. And it was through Gehazi’s influence at court that her property was restored after a famine (II Kings 4:18-37; 8:1-6).

That great blessings accompany true hospitality was also the experience of Mary and Martha, who often entertained Jesus in their home in Bethany. Their Guest was despised and rejected of men, but the sisters gave of their best to the Master, and enjoyed friendship that was sublime, not of this world, yet for this world. They gave Jesus food and rest, understanding and fellowship in their cottage in Bethany; He gave them the bread of life, rest for their souls, sympathy in sorrow, life from the dead, eternal fellowship and a mansion in glory.

Jesus was also entertained at the home of a wealthy Pharisee (Luke 14:1-14). “**To eat bread on the Sabbath day**” as a guest was common practice; and the food at a wealthy home was often bountiful and costly. This appears to have been a carefully prepared dinner, with the upper ranks of Jewish society, along with more intimate friends and relatives in attendance (vv. 7, 12). However, it was not for love of the stranger of Galilee that Jesus had been asked to come that day.

Instead the Pharisees were angry with Him, for He had but recently denounced their proud party (Luke 11:37-54). They had evidently invited Jesus so that they might find an accusation against Him (Luke 14:1-6). When Jesus observed the miserable society tradition that dictates only conventional hospitality, He spoke to the host about it.

He spoke of the difference between entertaining the elite and friends with the hope or understanding of a return invitation, and of true hospitality which gives all and expects nothing in return. **“Call the poor,”** He said, **“and thou shalt be blessed”** (vvs. 12-14).

How well the Pharisee knew what he meant. Not only the Bible, but also the rabbis insisted on hospitality to the poor and the stranger in the strongest terms. In Jerusalem no man was to be selfish with his home; and it was said that during the pilgrim feasts room was made for everyone.

A prominent rabbi said, “Let thy house be wide open and let the poor be the children of thy house.” Some went so far as to say that every house should have four doors, to welcome travelers from all directions. The Talmud declared that hospitality is meritorious of reward both in this life and in the next. In a day when most inns were unfurnished shelters along the highways, when rough characters and tax gatherers insulted the wayfarer (Luke 10: 3, 4, 30), and beggars lay at rich men’s gates (16:19-21), **“Be not forgetful to entertain strangers,”** had a special meaning.

In the years that followed the death of Christ, when persecution marked the path of His followers, “love of the stranger” was tested and tried as never before in the history of God’s people. Again and again the Early Church was urged to show hospitality faithfully and without grudging, even at the risk of identifying themselves with those **“in bonds”** (Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:1-3; III John 5). Priscilla and Aquila **“laid down their own necks”** to befriend Paul (Romans 16:3, 4); Mary, the mother of John Mark, opened her large home in Jerusalem to the hunted disciples, to protect them from Herod and hostile Jews (Acts 12:1, 12); Lydia urged Paul to accept her hospitality even though it might mean ostracism and adversity (Acts 16:14-24, 40); and Gaius was known everywhere for his faithfulness and hearty hospitality to **“brethren and strangers”** (III John 5-7). **“Let brotherly love continue,”** and let it be seen in the **“good works”** of hospitality and sympathy, is the message sent to the Hebrews in 13:1-3. Love is the heart of **“good works,”** but it is not in itself a **“good work.”** Feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and visiting the sick are good works (Matthew 25:34-36).

The Master himself said that good works were to be distinctive marks of his disciples (Matthew 5:16). His disciples remembered vividly that Jesus said, a few days before his death: **“When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in . . .”** (Matthew 25:31, 34, 35).

It took real brotherly love to show hospitality and sympathy to Christians in the face of danger, but the visit of a persecuted Christian brother, or of one in the service of the church, might be the means of stirring the spiritual atmosphere of the household, of strengthening the faith, or of inspiring the children of the family to consecrate their lives to the service of the Lord. For us the dangers are not without, but spiritual apathy is within our hearts and homes. **“He that receiveth you receiveth me,”** the Master said (Matthew 10:40), and **“brotherly love”** must continue till He comes again to reward his servants.

Today Christ says: **“Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me.”** That is the beginning, the end and the ultimate of all hospitality; for we were once **“aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers . . .”** (Ephesians 2:12). **“Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another . . . If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us . . . let brotherly love continue; and be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.”**

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Why did the Israelites have to show hospitality to the strangers? Compare Leviticus 19:33, 34 and Deuteronomy 10:17-19 with Matthew 22:37-39. Who were the strangers?
2. What is the etiquette of hospitality as shown by the Shunammite woman; by Abraham and Sarah; by the widow of Zarephath?
3. What is the difference between conventional entertaining and hospitality? What did Jesus say about this?
4. Does the fact that there are motels and hotels everywhere today excuse us from showing hospitality?
5. How can we show hospitality “to the brethren” today? Do you think that there might be a real opportunity to show hospitality in our growing suburban communities? Give reasons for your answer. Make practical suggestions how to go about it, if you feel a Christian has a mission in this area.
6. Did Jesus say when He was visiting at the Pharisee’s house that conventional entertaining was wrong? What about the social life of Jesus? Can entertaining ever become sinful? If so, when and how?
7. What were the “good works” of the worthy widow in I Timothy 5:10? What do you find among the requisites of a bishop? (I Timothy 3:2)
8. Why was hospitality such an important Christian service in the Early Church?
9. Why was Gaius commended? (Ill John 1-6) What of Diotrephes? (vvs. 9, 10)
10. Name other New Testament Christians that showed hospitality to the missionaries, Christian workers, and needy Christian strangers. How was it expressed?
11. What is the heart of hospitality? Where does it begin? What is the reward? Prove from the Word of God.
12. Compare the influence that Christian hospitality and conventional entertaining may have on children in the family.

~ end of chapter 8 ~

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