



Hospitality: Loving the Stranger

SESSION 2

| How did persons practice hospitality during the time of Jesus?

Introduction

New Testament scholars have recently given quite a bit of attention to the term *philoxenos*, a Greek word that literally means “love of the stranger” but is often translated as “hospitable” or “hospitality.” First Timothy 3:2, for instance, instructs bishops of the early house churches to be hospitable, as does the writer of Titus (1:8). In Romans 12, Paul encourages the members of the house church in Rome to attend to the needs of “saints” (literally, “holy ones,” meaning all Christians) and “extend hospitality to strangers” (13). But researchers appear to be looking for more than the number of times *philoxenos* and related terms appear in the text. Instead, they are on the quest for something more complex: the ethics and practices of Christian hospitality. This session investigates New Testament and other early Christian writings for evidence of Christian hospitality and looks at possible implications of such a practice by contemporary disciples of Jesus Christ.

The Gospels: Jesus as Stranger, Host, and Meal

In the Gospel of Mark, thought to be composed between 66 and 70 CE, Jesus is depicted as an unknown Galilean peasant and the son of God who gathers men and women to learn about the impending “kingdom of God” (1:15). Strangely, while persons possessed by evil spirits (1:23–26; 5:6–7) knew of the “true” identity of the peasant, the disciples and others remained somewhat clueless. Even Peter does not fully comprehend Jesus, understanding that Jesus must be the Messiah but refusing to accept that Jesus must suffer and die (8:27–



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33). Scholars have noted this unique characterization of Jesus in Mark for decades, labeling it the Secrecy Theme of the text. Jesus becomes the quintessential outsider—misunderstood by many persons—who must rely upon the hospitality of others.

Early in the Gospel, Levi, a tax collector, invites Jesus and his numerous disciples to dinner (2:15)¹. Given the custom of the day, the males would lie on their sides, perhaps on couches or mats, with their heads facing a center, low-lying table on which various foods and wines would be served. Women and children would usually eat at the edge of the room or elsewhere. Position of the guests would be determined by the *paterfamilias*, the eldest male of the household. Positions closer to the *paterfamilias*—in this case, Levi—would be considered more honorable. Perhaps the “scribes and Pharisees” who question why Jesus would eat with tax collectors and sinners are more appalled by his close proximity to Levi than his attendance at the meal (16). Such an interpretation finds support within following text: Jesus gives himself the venerable titles “physician” (17) and “bridegroom” (19). A person of

such importance would surely find a dining spot next to the host.

Mark, thought by many scholars to be the first New Testament Gospel written, established Jesus' role as outsider. While Mark has Jesus spend time "at home" in Capernaum (2:1) on several occasions before heading toward Jerusalem, Jesus also relies upon the kindness of others. Further, Jesus instructs his disciples on hospitality: "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place [the town]. If any place will not welcome you . . . as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them" (6:10–11). Under the hospitality codes of the time, remaining at one house at the invitation of the owner would be honorable. Shaking your dirty feet at a person, however, would demonstrate disrespect and be interpreted as an insult (within ancient Mediterranean cultures, feet were considered unclean). Interestingly, the writers of Matthew and Luke, thought by biblical scholars to possess a copy of the Gospel of Mark when writing their own Gospels, include this basic honor/shame principle of hospitality.²

Of course, the writers also depict Jesus in the role of host, suggesting that early Christian hospitality involved both relying on the kindness of others and caring for the stranger in one's midst. For instance, the story of the feeding of the five thousand strangers appears in all four Gospels.³ While each writer incorporates it differently into his Gospel account, its appearance in all four texts suggests the narrative must have possessed fundamental instructional significance for early Christian communities. Many scholars contend the miracle story promoted a radical egalitarianism, meeting the basic needs of all persons, regardless of race, religion, or ability.

Indeed, this same idea surfaces in many of the parables found throughout the Gospels. For instance, in the parable of the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:30–32), the kingdom of God starts from something very small but quickly becomes "the greatest of all shrubs" in which "the birds of the air" can find a home. Note that any bird—regardless of color, plumage, squawk, or beak shape—can find a place. Likewise, the kingdom of God, according to the Gospels, should be open to all persons and seek to meet the basic needs of the stranger.⁴

Matthew and Luke expound on the centrality of Christian-as-host with the use of banquet narratives. For

instance, in the parable of the incredible banquet (Luke 14:15–24), a man has prepared an enormous feast for his friends. According to Mediterranean hospitality code, the guests would then be invited via slaves to dinner, often in a public processional throughout the town. The patron—in this story, the man throwing the banquet—would receive public honor by such a display of the clients—the persons invited to parade down the street and partake of the feast. It would have been unconceivable that clients would show dishonor to the patron by refusing to process and attend. But in this narrative the clients snub the patron. But rather than retaliate against such shameful actions, the patron tells the slave to go throughout the town and find the poor, crippled, blind, and impaired. Needless to say, such persons were considered culturally impure and normally would be avoided. Further, such persons would not be acceptable as clients since they would not be capable of bestowing honor on the patron. Nevertheless, this mass of untouchables parade through the city streets and enter the banquet hall. When the slave announces there are still spaces (sofas) available, the patron tells the slave to find anybody else (apparently regardless of race, creed, religion, or any other possible difference) to attend. The parable ends with a damning statement to the original guests: "I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner," perhaps suggesting that such persons would be ineligible for entry into the kingdom of God.

Matthew's rendering of the parable (22:1–14) is a bit more violent in nature. The guests/clients not only refuse the invitation, but some of them kill the messengers. Outraged, the patron (in this narrative, a king) has the entire guest list killed and their properties burned. Only then does the king invite everyone ("both good and bad") the slaves can find in the streets to the banquet. Strangely, the story ends with the king noticing that one of the guests was not wearing formal wedding attire (the banquet was for the wedding of the king's son). Of course, persons off the street would not possess such finery. Nevertheless, the poor chap is bound and gagged and thrown into "the outer darkness" (13). The parable ends with "For many are called, but few are chosen." Most biblical scholars maintain the writer of Matthew wishes to link a notion of Christian hospitality with true discipleship: while bad and good people can enter the church, only those who become over time loyal disciples of Jesus (in the narrative, those who

possess wedding attire) will remain in the church. So strangers are most welcome, according to Matthew, but with a caveat.

This idea of openness to the stranger is magnified by the writer of Luke within the famous parable of the Good Samaritan (10:25–37). This narrative, found only in Luke, tells the tale of a man robbed, beaten, and left for dead. Incredibly, a priest of the Jewish temple of Jerusalem who would have certainly known what Torah (the first five books of the Hebrew Bible) demanded regarding kindness passes by the bleeding man. Likewise a Levite—a historically honorable Jew perhaps concerned with violations of purity laws—fails to stop. It takes a Samaritan—a person from the northern hill country many miles away who was historically despised by both Jews and Gentiles—to show kindness. By contrasting the actions of the Samaritan with those of the priest and the Levite, the parable suggests aid should be offered to anybody in need, regardless of religious convictions or station in society. Through this unique narrative, the writer of Luke seems to universalize the notion of radical Christian hospitality.

Finally, we find throughout the Gospels an idea of Jesus as the meal to be fed to the guests. In Mark 14, Jesus and the disciples take their reclining positions and begin the *seder*, the sacred Jewish ritual meal that celebrates the beginning of Passover. During the feast, Jesus claims that one of the disciples in the room—the one “dipping bread into the bowl with me,” suggesting close proximity to Jesus and a place of honor—will betray him (17–20). Then after the blessing of the bread, Jesus declares that the loaf shall be his body and a blessed cup of wine his blood “of the covenant,” a radical, innovative relationship between the disciples and God. This narrative, found in all four Gospels as well as in a letter Paul wrote to a house church in Corinth (1 Cor. 11:22–25), suggests another central element of early Christian hospitality: the death of Jesus would make the new way of life—Christian hospitality—possible. To understand this idea, we need to look at the work of Paul.

Paul and Hospitality

The authentic (or undisputed) letters of Paul predate the Gospels by several years, making them a fundamental set of resources in understanding the earliest ideas of Christian hospitality.⁵ A brief investigation of one of the earliest writings, 1 Thessalonians, should demonstrate



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how Paul, the missionary, viewed hospitality as a key element of his ministry. In particular, Paul created urban house churches through his generous hospitality but kept them functional through the efforts of others.

Recent scholarship suggests Paul only established *ecclesia* (literally, “assemblies” or “small house churches”) in cities by renting an *insula* (a two- or three-storied apartment). On the ground floor, Paul and a few colleagues would set up shop, plying some trade. Through this means, Paul could meet dozens of Gentiles (non-Jews) each day, establish relationships, and tell them of the *Christos* (Christ), a spirit who could save them from the imminent “wrath to come,” the end of the world (1 Thess. 1:10). If they wanted to hear more, they might attend teachings after business hours on one of the upper floors. As persons became more interested, Paul and others would offer deeper instruction, culminating in a baptism ritual through which the person would become possessed by the *Christos*. Once a small church community was formed, Paul and a few colleagues would depart for another city and begin the process anew. Paul would keep in contact with the house churches through letters.⁶

A clear set of principles of Christian hospitality emerges in the writings of Paul, as illustrated in 1 Thessalonians. First, Paul wanted to offer the “good words” of salvation through the *Christos* free of charge. No strings attached. Salvation was to be considered a gift made available to the Gentiles through the death of Jesus on the cross; they did not need to know the teachings of Jesus to receive it (in fact, Paul demonstrates scant knowledge of the life and teaching of Jesus through his letters). Second, through baptism, the *Christos* would be in-housed in the body of each person. Since all the baptized members of the assembly possessed the same spirit, they should—in theory—behave identically. Paul understood this principle as a freedom from sin and death, perhaps

the greatest gift available. Finally, through his letters, Paul would reinforce the key issues of faith while offering instruction on practical matters of the community. Through such a ministry, Paul truly became a *philoxenos*, a “lover of strangers.”

In turn, the new members of the house church would keep the business at the *insula* running while Paul left to make more churches. In this way, more persons could be offered the gifts of Christian hospitality. But the community also took financial responsibility for Paul’s ministry, sending him money on a regular basis. In this way, Paul became dependent on the hospitality of the new Christians.

Not surprisingly, Paul’s model for Christian hospitality promoted the very work he performed. But how did Christians after the first century make sense of the ideas of hospitality found in both the writings of Paul and the Gospels? In the next section, we will explore the *Didache*, an early second-century instructional document, looking for ideas of hospitality.

The *Didache*

This ancient document, referenced by many early Christian writers but not found until the late 1800s, served as an early *catechism*, or instruction manual, for rural churches. The *Didache* opens with a description of the Two Ways: Death and Life. Needless to say, the Way of Life was to be preferred, since the Way of Death involved a gamut of sins from hypocrisy to murder.

Rituals such as baptism and Eucharist (Communion) are described, providing modern scholars some of the earliest depictions of these sacraments. Then the reader is told how to deal with traveling teachers and other Christians. It is at this point that the *Didache* reflects a more systematic approach to early Christian hospitality.

Traveling prophets and other teachers should be welcomed only if they teach the Way of Life described in the earlier chapters of the *Didache*; any contradiction of these fundamental principles would constitute grounds for casting out the instructor. Second, traveling prophets should be shown extreme hospitality, as if the community was hosting God. Third, the teacher should stay no more than two nights with the community; a longer stay would designate a “false prophet.” Further, only “false prophets” ask for food while “speaking in a spirit,” that is, while possessed. In such a case, the community

should cast out the imposter. Likewise, any prophet who asks for money or for more than bread upon his departure should be spurned. Finally, if the wandering apostle should ask for something on behalf of other persons in need, the community was instructed to favor the request, thus showing hospitality to unknown strangers.

Traveling Christians would be met with similar acts of hospitality—unless, of course, they advocated ideas the community found antithetical to the Way of Life. But, unlike the traveling prophets, visiting Christians were expected to earn their meals by working on behalf of the community. In the *Didache*, idleness appears to be an attribute of the Way of Death, and visitors who refused to work should be outcast.

This ancient instructional manual ends with a brief description of the end of time, suggesting that persons who persevere in the face of evil and sin will be saved. Like Paul, the *Didache* appears to link hospitality, and all the other aspects of the Way of Life, to salvation. And as in the Gospels, the members of the early Christian communities would show kindness to the stranger.

So what might constitute a modern-day model of Christian hospitality? How should we respond to the strangers in our midst? To what extent might early Christian ideas of hospitality influence our understanding of such issues as immigration, interreligious dialogue, or caring for the living species of our planet? For the thoughtful Christian, the exploration of these questions may be of paramount importance.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Compare this version to Luke 5:29ff.
2. See Matt. 10:11–15; Luke 9:4–5; 10:11–12.
3. See Matt. 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–13.
4. Also see Matt. 13:32; Luke 13:18–19.
5. The term “undisputed letters” refer to those texts considered to be truly written by Paul and not merely attributed to him: 1 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Romans, Philippians, and Philemon.
6. For more information, see Ronald Hock, *The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).