

Hebrews 13:2-3

“The Marks of Love: Hospitality & Service”

September 18, 2022

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Ordinary Time

Our sermon text this morning, as we continue in our study of the Epistle to the Hebrews, comes from Hebrews 13:2-3. I'll read verse 1 as well to give us the context. Remember, here the Apostle, as he concludes his epistle, is describing for his readers and for us the fundamentals of the Christian life - the habits and practices that we must embrace as we, as Apostle puts it in chapter 12, strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord.

Listen now to God's holy and inerrant word.

*1 Let brotherly love continue. 2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. 3 Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

*Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.*

*Love one another*, Jesus tells his disciples on the night before his death, summarizing in one command all his instructions to them.

On another occasion, when Jesus is asked to specify the greatest commandment in all of the Law of God, he says: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”*

In like manner, in Hebrews 13, as the Apostle sums up the Christian life and describes the holiness for which we are to strive, he instructs his readers: *“Let brotherly love continue.”*

Love one another. Clearly, this command is the center of the Law of God. It was the heart of the Old Testament law, and it is the heart of the commands given by Jesus and his Apostles as well.

But what does it mean to love one another, particularly in the context of the body of Christ? If we're not careful, it's possible that this command might devolve into something purely internal, as though loving each other is primarily about having a positive disposition toward other people, and the command “love one another” becomes something like “be nice.”

But the command to love one another, given to us by our Lord Jesus, and reiterated by his apostles, is about far more than our internal emotions, and it's about far more than niceness.

In fact, as we come to Hebrews 13:2-3 this morning, which is really just an initial explanation of what the Apostle means in 13:1, where he tells his readers: *“Let brotherly love continue,”* I have both good news and bad news.

The good news is that these two verses really begin to spell out what it means to let brotherly love continue. You don't have to worry any more about that commandment being overly vague when you read and wrestle with these two verses.

That's the good news.

The bad news, so to speak, is verses 2 and 3 really began to unpack the costliness of what it means for us to love one another in the church of God.

Friends, it is no easy thing to love another. To love one another, as we will see in our text this morning, requires far more than a positive internal disposition.

No, loving one another requires sacrificing, for the sake of others, our energy, our wealth, our time, our emotions, and even our own preferences.

In fact, I would argue that there's no way to love another in the body without cost — and one clear way to test whether or not you are truly loving others is whether you know something of the cost I'm talking about.

Here's how the Apostle describe what it means to let brotherly love continue:

*2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. 3 Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.*

We summarize these two actions of Christian love in this way.

First, as an expression of love, we are show hospitality to strangers. In other words, we are to bring outsiders in.

And second, we are to go out to those in the body who are in need - those in prison, those who are mistreated.

The two movements expressed in these verses - bringing strangers and outsiders in, and going out to those in need - are the two great and costly movements of Christian love, and they give us a framework to think about our own habits, our own practices as those who follow Jesus.

Let's start with verse 2, which instructs us to make space for the stranger, the outsider, at cost to ourselves.

Listen again to what the apostle says: *"2 Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."*

Almost certainly, the backdrop for the apostle's wording of this command is Abraham's encounter with the three mysterious men who come to visit him in Genesis 18, which we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning.

In that story, the writer of Genesis tells us that Yahweh appeared to Abraham, but he appeared in this manner - in the figure of three strange men who approached Abraham's tent in the heat of the day.

Abraham didn't know these men. They were strangers to him. But his response forms a kind of vision of Christian hospitality looks like.

Abraham, who had been resting before the men arrived, gets up and immediately begins to serve them. He welcomes them with kind words. He brings water for their feet and tells them to rest in the shade.

And Abraham and Sarah together rush to prepare a feast for these strangers. Although Abraham and Sarah are wealthy and have many servants, they personally prepare the food - Sarah makes the bread, Abraham goes to the herd to find a calf, and Abraham personally serves the men the delicious meal, standing while they eat as though he was their servant.

And it is only after the meal, it seems, that Abraham and Sarah begin to realize who these men are — that the LORD himself has appeared to them — probably, as best as I can understand this strange passage, in the form of a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Son of God, along with two angels.

The Apostle's exhortation to his readers to not neglect hospitality because by showing hospitality to strangers some have entertained angels unawares also is a clear allusion to the words of our Lord Jesus, who, as we heard in our gospel reading this morning, taught that when his followers welcome strangers, they are actually welcoming him.

Beloved, what I want you to see is that there is a deep and mysterious holiness to hospitality — indeed, hospitality is not a sort of optional add-on, but actually a fundamental practice of the Christian life.

And hospitality, in its essence, is welcoming those whom you do not know well into your home, into your space, and serving them there with welcome, with interest and attention, with food and drink.

Now, to be clear, hospitality is very different from entertaining. There's nothing wrong with having our friends over to our homes for a meal or a party. That's a wonderful thing. But, that is not, according to the Scriptures, what hospitality is.

Because hospitality is something you offer to people who are on the outside, people who might not repay you for the kindness you offer them.

Our Lord himself describes the hospitality he calls his followers to in these terms. He says:

*“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. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”*

In Hebrews 13, the greek word that is translated as “show hospitality to strangers” is actually just a compound greek word that means stranger-love.

Do not neglect stranger love, the Apostle says — and that is exactly what biblical hospitality actually is: welcoming into our homes and serving and breaking bread with people who are not well known to us, people who are the outside, people who may never be able to repay the favor.

Throughout our ministry, Ami and I have sought to make hospitality a central feature of our lives.

Over the years, Lord’s Day by Lord’s Day, holiday by holiday, both in St. Louis and now here in Texas, we have had hundreds and hundreds of people in our home and welcomed them with food and drink and conversation and service — especially targeting always those who are new, those who are on the outside, those who don’t have a place to go at Christmas or Easter or Thanksgiving.

And I want to testify to you all that embracing this kind of practice of regular hospitality is a profoundly good way to spend your life on behalf of others.

Some of those people who have come into our home have become deep and faithful friends. Some of those who have come into our home drifted out of our lives just as quickly as they appeared.

But in every situation, the hospitality we have been privileged to share with others has been, in some mysterious sense, a way in which we have welcomed Christ himself.

And what I want you to believe, beloved, is that this is something you are called to as well. Each of you have homes. Each of you have food to share. Use those gifts, open your doors, and see the blessings that hospitality brings.

In verse 3, the apostle describes the second part of brotherly love.

The apostle writes: *Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.*

We are called, it turns out, not only to open our homes to strangers, but to go out in service to those in need.

The prisoners mentioned here are likely brothers and sisters in Christ imprisoned for their faith, and prisoners in the ancient world were dependent on others on the outside for food and clothing and medical care.

If no one visited you in prison, then you starved, or died from exposure or sickness. Those in prison were unable to work, unable to provide for themselves, and so they were completely dependent on the provision of the church for their needs.

The point the apostle is making is that this too, is a fundamental part of brotherly love - to remember those in need, and meet those needs with active service.

The Apostle emphasizes here our need to actively be watching for needs in the body - to keep our eyes open for those who are being mistreated, or are in trouble, or are too weak to take care of themselves physically, emotionally, or spiritually - and to seize the initiative in meeting those needs wherever they appear.

*Remember those who are in need*, the Apostle says - which implies that not being aware of the needs of other is no excuse for failing to meet them.

It is incumbent on us not to wait for someone to ask us for help, but to search out the places where our service is needed.

Again, just like those who are to be the primary recipients of our hospitality, those whom we go out and serve in these situations are typically not going to be able to repay our care for them.

And this dynamic speaks to both the cost and the freedom of Christian love.

The cost of loving others in the way that the Scripture describes is that you end up giving up things there are never “paid back” in this life. You are called to give your energy, your time, your emotions, your wealth, your presence. And that’s a real cost. I don’t want to shy away from that.

I hope you know something of the cost I’m describing, the cost that comes of loving others in the church. I don’t think genuine love of your brothers and sisters in Christ is possible without feeling that tension.

And if you don’t know what I’m describing - if the idea of loving others in the church in a way that is at least a little painful doesn’t resonate with your experience, then I’d encourage you to consider whether you’re really embracing the kind of love that the Scriptures calls us to.



Because loving one another is not simply an internal disposition. It's not just being basically nice and friendly, and thinking, "well if someone asks me for something I'll do my best to help out as long as I have some time in my schedule."

No, the love we're called to is costly. It manifests itself in opening our homes, in seeking out those who are in need.

Love in this way is actually sacrificing, actually giving of ourselves.

But there isn't just a cost associated with Christian love.

There is also a kind of radical freedom in hosting and serving others without any expectation of your hospitality or your service being reciprocated.

And that's because loving others without giving thought to how you might be loved in return is one of the most fundamental ways that we enter into the life of God.

Remember the words of our Lord:

*32 "If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. 35 But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. 36 Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*

Friends, I promise you — when you begin to love others the way that Jesus describes, there is true freedom and blessedness.

Because you're no longer playing the game that everyone plays.

You're no longer keeping score, you're no longer saying, well if I invite them to my house, they had better invite me to their house, if they come to my party, I had better be included in their special events; if I remember their birthday, they had better remember mine.

You're no longer saying, I demand that my service to others be recognized; I demand that all my selfless work be acknowledged and honored and appreciated by those who benefit from it.

That's such an exhausting way to live. It really is.

Because you can never get the ledgers to balance. It just doesn't work that way. Living like that doesn't bring the satisfaction and the joy that Jesus wants for us.

No, friends, the way of freedom is to love as Jesus describes, to love expecting nothing in return, because if you love in that way, mysteriously your reward will be great, greater than any reward you could receive in this world — because, as Jesus says, you will be repaid in the resurrection of the just; you will be sons of the Most High.

Beloved, this costly way of love, these practices of hospitality to strangers and service to those who are unable to repay us, this really is the way to abundant life.

Because the promise of our Lord is really true. It really is. And he says:

*Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High...Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.