

Hospitality in a Foreign Land

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What does it mean to be hospitable or given to hospitality? Does the biblical charge from the Apostle Paul — “Distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality” — mean to exercise hospitality wherever you live?

Webster’s Universal College Dictionary defines hospitality as follows: 1) “The friendly reception and treatment of guests or strangers; an act or show of welcome. 2) The quality of being hospitable and welcoming to guests and strangers.”¹

Wikipedia defines hospitality as “the relationship between a guest and a host, wherein the host receives the guest with goodwill, including the reception and entertainment of guests, or strangers.”²

According to Jesse Tyrrel: “True hospitality is inviting people into your space while making them feel at home. Hospitality does not mean I change my practices just to make them feel more comfortable, more so I am to be as helpful as possible explaining to them why it is I do what I do.”³

Jamie Balmet notes that “hospitality is about God and how he uses you and your possessions to serve those you come into contact with—both friends and strangers, both believers and unbelievers... The ultimate purpose of hospitality is to minister to those around us.”⁴

The last and most important definition is the biblical meaning of hospitality, which is the foundation of this article.

Hospitality according to Jesus is reflected in the following entreaty: “When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14:12-14, NKJV⁵)

Let me paint the picture of my own hospitality journey so that you can understand where I came from. My first exposure to the concept of hospitality was after reading Romans 12:13: “Distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality” during the early days of my marriage to Joseph Jones. This Scripture challenged me to use what I had, though it was little. Joe and I correspondingly opened the doors of our home to those we barely knew. I questioned God

on whether he was really requiring this of me because it was not my natural tendency nor was it a practice passed down from my own family.

Understand that I grew up in a family in the Bronx that struggled to keep enough food on the table to feed eight children and make ends meet. My mother was known to stretch a dollar until the eagle on it screamed. I remember standing in the line at food distribution centers in which the label on the canned food read, “Not to be sold.” I thought to myself, “How bad is this food that they don’t want it sold?”

Hospitality in our home did not include the practice of reaching out to outsiders or strangers. But after accepting Christ into my heart and diving into the Scriptures to understand this new way of life, I was challenged to do something that was not customary, comfortable, or convenient. James 1:22 removed my hesitance and excuses—not having adequate resources or the dream home—when I read, “Be doers of the word and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.” My husband pushed the envelope that activated hospitality in our lives by inviting over whoever he met during the worship service. Whoever looked like they needed a family to connect with became immediate guests. Our Sunday dinner table was usually set for three or four people but this number often doubled or tripled in size by the time we got home from church. When I looked at the little amount of food I had defrosted as enough to feed our immediate family, I remembered a book called, *Hey God!* In which an Italian woman cried out to the Lord to increase the food quantity to feed all of the unexpected guests that arrived at her home. She experienced miracles as she prepared what she had available.⁶ That message made an impact on my journey back in the early 1980s as I embraced the ministry of hospitality. As I continued to develop the honorable character of hospitality, I witnessed the power of God’s love and care touch the hearts of many who experienced the welcoming embrace of the Lord through us.

As an African American woman, I enjoyed multiple freedoms in ministry throughout the United States and abroad. My skin color and freedoms/privileges were not a major issue. But they indeed would be when we moved to Pakistan. The customs and practices of hospitality I embraced in the United States were not the norm in the foreign land in which I found myself living in the 2000s as a helpmate and compliment to my husband’s call as Vice Rector of Forman Christian College in Lahore. I learned quickly that hospitality there was shared primarily with family and friends, rarely with outsiders, especially foreigners.

It came as a surprise when I noticed that most foreign missionaries as well stayed to themselves within the confines of their dwelling places after the work or ministry of the day was completed. I witnessed very little activity of reaching out to the stranger or the poor within the 100-acre compound of Forman Christian College and this was very disheartening for me to grasp and accept. I accepted the call of God to go to Pakistan to shine the light of hope and love and the only way I could do this is through hospitality. We propelled this ministry by organizing an appreciation cookout for all those who unloaded our 40-foot container when it arrived at 2 A.M. one morning. This group of servants, made up of gardeners, cooks, and campus workers, were often referred to as “peons,” meaning the lowest class of worker. But in God’s eyes they were cheerfully serving us and deserved to be acknowledged and appreciated. This act of appreciation was a shock to them coming from a high-ranking official who they saw as their responsibility to serve without expecting anything in return.

Another opportunity presented itself when we decided to host a game night and dinner to bring Expat (Expatriate) and Pakistani Christians together for fun and fellowship. It seemed to us that most of them were getting too comfortable in their own circles or spheres of influence. As Christians, we should be about dying to self by doing the uncomfortable. The fellowship was a hit and the atmosphere of our home was filled with laughter and joy which became a subtle therapy activity for frontline missionaries. We continued hosting these types of gatherings and cookouts, including those for the poorest of the poor, to demonstrate in action what the Lord Jesus Christ told us to do as we follow Him. “Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself” (Romans 15:2-3, NKJV); “Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (Matt. 5:16).” These words of the Apostle Paul propelled me to continue seizing the opportunity to show those who were strangers that we are equal in the eyes of the creator. If it was not for God’s mercy and grace, I would not be able to demonstrate the type of hospitality that equalizes and levels the mission field that produces a harvest of hope and love toward those who were created uniquely different. I could not afford to let a caste system based on color and socio-economics define how I should show hospitality in a foreign land—just as I do not allow that to influence what I do in the United States—because souls were at stake. People needed to see

the witness of Christ's love lived out in how we treated the people he sent us to serve, whether in different parts of the United States or in a foreign land.

It is important to always remember what our Lord said to those who accept the call to serve through the ministry of hospitality, "Who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves" (Luke 22:27). Jesus made it clear to his disciples that greatness in his eyes is demonstrated by those willing to be a servant, and not by expecting to be served, nor by putting people down as "peons" to belittle them, to exalt self. This should never be the customary practice of God's people who are serving in foreign lands. It does more damage than good in spreading the Good News of love and hope.

I am an ordinary woman who aspires to live an extraordinary life for Christ. My challenge is to serve when and where it costs something. Adopt the philosophy of King David who said, "Nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing" (2 Samuel 24:24). Step out of your comfort zone and seek to get to know those who are of a different culture and race that they may be touched by hospitality the Bible way. But beware that dying to self is a prerequisite: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20, NKJV).

May the Lord increase your passion for hospitality in a world that is filled with walls and barriers to keep strangers out of our comfort zones.

NOTES

- 1 *Webster's Universal Dictionary* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1997), 393.
- 2 "Hospitality", Wikipedia (2018).
- 3 Jesse Tyrell, "Christian Hospitality," *Papyrus* (December 8, 2013). *Papyrus* is the student newspaper published at Greenville University.
- 4 Jami Balmet, "Hospitality Defined: The Art of Serving Others," www.youngwivesguide.com, (March 30, 2015).
- 5 The *New King James Version* (NKJV) is used for biblical references in the article.
- 6 Frank Foglio. *Hey God!* (Plainfield, NJ: Bridge Logos, 2009).