

# Hospitality

## A Characteristic of God

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In Homer's *Odyssey*, the theme of *xenia* appears time and again. It is a concept that is pretty far-removed from our modern life; it may be a word of which you have never heard. For those who have read the epic, you might remember that the hero of Troy, named Odysseus, leaves Troy after the war, and tries to get home. He partakes of *xenia* frequently on his travels back to Ithaca.

His son, Telemachus, gives *xenia* first at home and then receives it while in search of his father in the later books.

Although it is far removed from our own lives, at least in its ancient application, scripture mentions a form of *xenia* countless times, without directly using the Homeric Greek word *xenia*. There is no single, one-on-one English equivalent for *xenia*. The root word is *xenos*, and it has come down to us partly as the prefix in *xenophobia*. If you know that word, then you are getting an idea of what *xenia* is. *Xenophobia* is the fear of strangers or foreigners.

Other technical and scientific words also use the prefix *xeno-*, and it means either "strange," "foreign," or "alien." Some examples include *xenocide*, the killing of strangers or foreigners. *Xenology* is the study of strange or alien things. A *xenobiotic* particle is something within the chemical or biological makeup of something that scientists believe should not be there; it is an alien thing. There is also *xenotransplantation*, a long, strange word. This means putting an alien or strange part into another species. This might be like putting the heart of a pig into a man, giving a person an organ that should not be there. Of course, since many of you have been through science and chemistry classes, you may remember the element *xenon*, a gas found way over on the right-hand side of the periodic table of the elements. However, none of these words is commonly used. Even *xenophobia* is not used very much, although it is coming into vogue because of the immigration issues.

The Greek concept of *xenia* is a bit more technical than merely "strange," "foreign," or "alien." This word actually refers to a relationship between a guest and a host, for which we English speakers use the weaker term *hospitality*. The root word *xenos* can (in Greek) mean "guest," but it can also mean "host." It can mean "stranger," but it can also mean "friend." Of course, it can also mean "a foreigner." You can see already, just by these definitions and their usage, that it covers both sides of this relationship. It is not only the guest who comes in, but also the host who gives the hospitality.

Our word *hospitality* is weaker, because *xenia* is a reciprocal and divinely sanctioned duty and responsibility, whereas *hospitality* is merely a kindness we offer out of courtesy. That is how we normally think of *hospitality*: something we offer to someone out of courtesy. When it comes down to it, *xenia* is a particular kind of friendship between people who began as strangers but, by virtue of a sort of providence or care, end up having strong lifelong bonds. To repeat, *xenia*

is a particular kind of friendship between people who begin as strangers, but by virtue of a sort of providence or care of a host to his guest, end up building lifelong bonds.

Xenia, or obligatory hospitality, was practiced all over the ancient world. It seems to have been quite a serious matter in the Middle East and Mediterranean areas. A person was obligated, if he found out that a person did not have a place to sleep or was hungry, to ask that person into his own home. The Hebrews, Arabs, Greeks, and the Romans all practiced some form of xenia.

Abusing it from either side, as host or as guest, was a serious offense. Wars and feuds happened because of this abuse. In fact, Homer's *Iliad* begins with a serious breach of xenia. If you know the story of *The Iliad*, you will remember that Paris, a prince of Troy, went to Sparta to stay in the house of King Menelaus, who had a beautiful wife named Helen. Menelaus, as was proper, offered Paris xenia, and Paris accepted. However, he overstayed his welcome, fell in love with Helen, and took Helen back to Troy. Because of all the oaths—alliances—made, most of Greece took up arms against Troy, and we then had the Trojan War. The whole thing began with a breach of xenia, a breach of hospitality.

Today we will look into the Bible's approach to hospitality. By the end of it, we will see that not only is it a duty enjoined upon Israel under the Old Covenant and the church of God under the New Covenant, but that it is actually a returning to the xenia approach that the Greeks had. God's way is closer to the Greek form than you might think. We will see that godly hospitality goes far beyond mere dinner parties; it is an attitude that is part of the character of God Himself. This is where it begins to approach the ancient idea of xenia.

America is not without its version of hospitality. Southern hospitality is renowned. We are known for our genteel, effusive, can-do attitude. Our southern hospitality is willing to open up the house to you to give you what you need.

Typically, as Americans almost always do, we have also made hospitality into a huge moneymaking industry. We think that any opportunity is an opportunity to make money. In 2005, the lodging industry grossed \$122.7 billion, while the restaurant industry boasted of sales of \$537 billion. I have not added to these the casinos and the remainder of the tourism industry that is often included under the label of the hospitality industry. These two—lodging and restaurants—make up about 5% of the United States GDP (gross domestic product), and they are the number one employer of people outside of the government. In fact, it is estimated that half of all the American employees have worked in the hospitality industry at one time or another. More than half of all women have worked in the hospitality industry, mostly as waitresses. Even our daughter has just recently been hired in a local coffee shop. As is the American way, we have commercialized what is, in the Bible, a sacred duty.

The word xenia is found only twice in the New Testament. And they are Acts 28: 23, and Philemon 22. In Acts 28: 23, xenia is translated as "lodging," that Paul went to his lodging. To Philemon, Paul says,

Philemon 22 But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room [xenia] for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

In the Bible as a whole, *xenia* is often in this form of a person being offered room and board while traveling. This is very typical. The verb form, *xenizo*, occurs seven times with the meaning of "to lodge or entertain." The New Testament writers, though, seemed to prefer a different word, *philoxenia*. This literally means "the love of strangers" or "the kindness to strangers." It is the *philia* type of love shown toward others whom you do not necessarily know.

Turn to one of the best-known Bible verses on hospitality.

Hebrews 13:2 Do not forget to entertain strangers [*philoxenia*], for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained [*xenizo*] angels.

Perhaps this is best known because it mentions entertaining angels. It is intriguing to think that one could open up his house to a stranger who could be an angel.

Entertaining angels happened at least four times in the Old Testament. We know that Abraham, in Genesis 18, entertained Jesus Christ and two angels. We know that Lot in the very next chapter, Genesis 19, entertained those same two angels when they arrived in Sodom. We know that Gideon entertained an angel, and we know that Samson's parents, Manoah and his wife, entertained an angel.

In each case, the angel or angels were bringing a blessing of some sort, maybe a message of good news. Even to Lot, the message was that he was going to be saved from the catastrophe that God was about to pour down from heaven. To Abraham, the good news was that he was going to have a son by Sarah—the promised son. To Gideon, the message was that he was chosen to deliver Israel. Samson's parents were to have a son who would begin to deliver Israel. In each case, the angel came and gave some very good news and a blessing.

Paul's caution in Hebrews 13:2 is that we should not be neglectful of the attitude of hospitality because an angel may come with some good news. If we are not hospitable, maybe he will leave without giving us the good news or blessing. Perhaps his giving or not giving the blessing is determined on how he is received. Who knows? Therefore, Paul says that we had better make sure that every time we give hospitality, we give it our all—just in case it happens to be an angel bringing something good. Of course, Paul is not saying that we should give this hospitality in order to get something from God at every turn, but he is saying that God will reward the practice of this Christian virtue. It is that important.

It is interesting that he uses the phrase *do not forget*. It is easy to forget to be hospitable. What Paul is suggesting is that hospitality is something that might slip our minds or something that we might neglect because of the busyness of our normal, everyday life. We get so caught up in our own affairs that we tend to think that we do not have the time or that we do not have the money or that we do not have whatever-the-excuse-may-be. Maybe weeks or months—or even years—go by until we pick up the practice again. Maybe we never do.

Urging them not to neglect the giving of hospitality fits what was happening to these Hebrews; they were neglecting a lot of things. It had become a habit with them to neglect the things that were good and godly, and the cares of this life had begun to overwhelm them. They had begun to receive mounting trials that were taking up their thoughts and activities. They were growing

apathetic in many ways to the way of God. Paul, then, implies that being hospitable is part of the cure for these spiritual ills that they were having. Their practice of hospitality would change, inwardly, their own attitudes and, outwardly, their relationships with one another.

Hospitality, then, becomes quite useful and beneficial and important to the Christian walk, because a great part of hospitality is fellowship with the brethren. This is not something he mentioned only to the Hebrews. He does so also in Romans 12, where he starts out beseeching us to become living sacrifices, a thing good and acceptable to God. It is a holy thing. As Paul goes through the chapter, he begins to expand on this; and by the time you get to verse 9, he is expounding on this principle in terms of Christian behaviors. What are the Christian behaviors that are a part of being a living sacrifice? He starts to list some of these things:

Romans 12:9-13 Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. [These are things we do—verbs, commands.] Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.

There it is, coming last in this line of commands, of sacrificial behaviors that Christians need to add to their spiritual repertoire. Notice also,

Hebrews 13:1-2 Let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to entertain strangers...

Do not forget to be hospitable.

Going back to Romans 12, Paul mentions brotherly love also. "Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love," he says in verse 10. Then he expands a bit on how we can do that and gets to hospitality by the time he is finished.

The reason he does this is that brotherly love—love of the brethren, love of fellow man, doing what is good for one another—must precede the physical act of providing for another's needs. First you must have the heart to do it, and then you actually do it properly. You must set your attitude and orientation to love the brethren before you can accomplish the deed. This should not hold us back. Sometimes it is good to go through with something and learn how to do it, and then the spiritual part is built up stronger and stronger over time. At least, have the attitude that this is something that we need to be doing.

Notice that Paul puts "given to hospitality" in a couplet. There are two things he mentions in verse 13: The first is distributing to the needs of the saints; the second is being given to hospitality. This follows a principle that is stated in Galatians:

Galatians 6:10 Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

He mentions first helping and giving to the saints, supplying their needs. We can combine this thought with another one from Paul:

I Timothy 5:8 But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

If we put these all together—Romans 12:13, Galatians 6:10, and I Timothy 5:8—we can get a hierarchy of giving: We give to God first, because He always comes first. Then, we take care of our families, or we are worse than any unbeliever. Thirdly are the church brethren—"distributing to the needs of the saints." Lastly would be strangers or outsiders—"given to hospitality." What I am getting at is that while we have to think about being hospitable, we also must be good stewards of our resources.

Ephesians 4:28 Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.

The principle of being good stewards of the things that God has given us means that we labor to have a little bit extra so that we can give along this line of hierarchy of giving. Of course, tithes and offerings come off the top to God. Then we have to make sure that our families are taken care of. If we have some left over, we can begin to entertain and show hospitality to our brethren in a way that is good. After all this, should we still have some left over, we can give to others. There is certainly a hierarchy of giving here to make sure that we prioritize the resources that God has given us.

I Timothy 6:17-19 says basically the same thing. However, I want to read this to you also, because I consider all of us to be among this group spoken of in this scripture, especially those of us in America who live in the wealthiest nation on the earth.

I Timothy 6:17 Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy.

If anybody thinks that God had not given us richly all things to enjoy, he needs to good look at himself in comparison to the way that others in this world have to live.

I Timothy 6:18-19 Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

Paul implies here that doing this properly is a way to clinch one's entrance into the Kingdom of

God. Of course, you cannot work your way into the Kingdom of God, and you cannot buy your way into the Kingdom of God; but Paul is saying that these attitudes are ones that a person who enters the Kingdom of God must have. We must be working on them. As the rich of this world, these verses certainly apply to us, even though we may not feel rich.

A final detail from roman 12: 9-13, especially verse 13: Paul says that we are to be given to hospitality. That is a very interesting way to put it. The margin literally says that this is "pursuing hospitality." We can look at this in two different ways: literally and the interpreted way.

Literally, we go out of our way to be hospitable. We eagerly look for opportunities to entertain strangers. It is not something I recommend in today's society and environment. It is not a good idea to hale strangers from off the street and giving them room and board at your own expense. Even in Paul's day, this was not something that they recommended to the church brethren. It is not wise. Who knows what you may drag into your home?

However, among the brethren, seeking out opportunities to be hospitable is certainly a fine thing. This is where I believe that Paul was going with this; we are looking for ways to be hospitable to our brethren. By the time that Paul wrote this, the idea of *philoxenia* had changed from "the love toward strangers" to meaning "the love toward the brethren." It was not the same as it had been in the beginning when it meant to show kindness to foreigners in your land. It comes closer to our use of the word *hospitality* today. Certainly, we should all remember Matthew 10: 16, where Jesus sent out His disciples. He told them to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves. They were going to be on the receiving end of hospitality, but they needed to be careful about where they went and with whom they lodged, as well.

The other way to look at this is the interpreted meaning, which is how it has been translated in the New King James Version. What it means is that our attitude is inclined to hospitality. We desire to be hospitable, and we are open to being hospitable when the opportunity arises. When the need arises—maybe someone new arrives—we are quick to act and relieve the need should there be one. Other instances of this in the New Testament bear this out. We will see that this is a qualification for an elder.

I Timothy 3:1-2 This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach...

Titus 1:7, 8 For a bishop must be blameless,...but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled...

The ministry is supposed to be an example of hospitality. Perhaps, at the time, Paul and others saw it as reciprocation, a kind of giving back to the brethren for the times that they had been shown hospitality on their travels. Just like today, the church of God at the time was scattered all over the place, and ministers were few and far between. Apostles were especially rare, and they all had to depend upon the hospitality of the various members throughout the Roman Empire to take them in—give them shelter, give them food, and support them while they

preached the gospel.

What Paul is saying is that the ministry, by definition, are servants; and hospitality is service. The ministry is expected to be first in line in giving hospitality. It is showing the Christian way to the rest of the brethren. To show you how important it was to the Christian church at that time:

III John 5-8 Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, who have borne witness of your love before the church. If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth.

At that time, the lodging and feeding of the ministry was a large part of doing the work of God, of preaching the gospel and helping to get the word out. He commended Gaius for the work that he had done for God, for the ministry, and for the church of God by faithfully taking these people in, making sure that they were rested and fed and given what they needed for the next part of their journey.

Hospitality at the time was part of doing the work of God in a major way for the brethren. Think of how far the ministry and other traveling members of the church of God had to go—on foot. They were alone in a sea of pagans, across a very wide geography of the Middle East and the Mediterranean area. They relied on the hospitality of fellow Christians wherever they went. They could not trust the inns, which, at that time, they were known as places of ill repute. Since they were places where one was more likely to get mugged than get some sleep, going to an inn was not a thing most of them considered doing.

Often what they did do when they had to travel was carry a letter, such as II or III John. In fact, some commentators think that II John and III John are actually that very thing: letters of commendation from an apostle—in this case, John—given to someone to carry to show brethren along the way that they can be trusted as true Christians. It is interesting that they had to carry such things with them, and it tells you a bit about what was going on at the end of the first century, that such things were even necessary in the church of God.

This man, Gaius, might or might not be the same one mentioned in Romans, but if it were he, he was after a very long time still being hospitable towards the brethren. He was quite a man—very open to everyone.

Romans 16:23 Gaius, my host and the host of the whole church, greets you.

III John was perhaps written 30 or 35 years later than Romans. It may not have been the same man; Gaius was a common name. Either way, he gets commendation right here in God's word that he was a man who knew how to be hospitable in a Christian way. He was hospitable not only to Paul but to the whole church. Some have thought that this meant that his house is

where they met, and this is certainly a possibility. However, there is some Greek scholar that thinks it means more than that—that he was open to anyone of the church of God to come and stay with him. Quite a commendation!

There is a caution in II John. I want to pick this up and give it to you.

II John 9-11 Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.

Remember that, as we saw in III John, being hospitable to these ministers and the brethren was part of doing the work of God and preaching the gospel. John gives a warning to these people not to provide this same service to the deceivers, the ones preaching the anti-Christian gospel. Doing so would be serving the enemy, sharing in their evil works, being an accomplice to their anti-Christian message.

Instead of binding Christians together in fellowship, these are working to drive them apart. Do not serve them. It is totally against the idea of Christian fellowship. Be aware of this. Do not give help to those who are against God and His way of life.

Peter puts hospitality in an end-time context, bringing it right up to today.

I Peter 4:7-10 But the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. And above all things have fervent love for one another, for "love will cover a multitude of sins." Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

In this end-time context, Peter puts hospitality right behind two very important things: prayer and showing love toward each other. He offers this three-pronged spiritual plan for during hard times, especially during the end of all things. This is written to us. It is something we need to understand and put into practice. It is a three-pronged spiritual plan of how to make sure you stay with it during the time of the end.

In verse 7—be "watchful in your prayers"—is our relationship with God. This comes first. Stay in communion and fellowship with God through prayer, and God will reciprocate through His Spirit. There is the relationship.

The second is that we show fervent love for the brethren—our spiritual care for them. This is the *agape* love, not the *philos* love. It is the spiritual love the love that does for others what is good for them despite all that is going on around them. It is a love that can be thought of as a cold love—doing for someone else what needs to be done—but it is not cold if it is done in warm affection and godly care for the other person. This is within our spiritual relationship with each

other.

Thirdly, hospitality covers our practical, physical care for them in service.

There you have the three prongs: (1) Maintain your relationship with God. (2) Maintain your relationship with your brethren. (3) Do practical works of service to them; be hospitable. Those are the three things that we need to put into practice now in the end-time.

Notice that Peter tacks on "without grumbling." There are a lot of times that we think we have to do this sort of thing out of obligation. Peter wants us all to practice hospitality—these acts of service toward one another—in a right attitude. If we do it in a wrong attitude, it will not be effective or helpful to our character, and maybe not toward our brother, either. Our hospitality is not supposed to be done as a chore or to simply fulfill another obligation to God or to the brethren. We are to try our best to approach hospitality cheerfully and eagerly. It should be something we come to love to do. After you do this a while, in a right attitude, you begin to enjoy it. You will see the benefits of it for all.

Some folks pull this off better than others. Some people seem to have a natural talent and desire to have folks over, cook them a meal, carry on long conversations over dinner, entertain them, play games, or whatever. Some people just love to do this. It is almost second nature for them.

For others, it is not quite so easy. Some folks really have to work at this. Maybe they were not brought up in a family that did this sort of thing. Maybe they were not brought up in the church, and they never did anything like this. The best they might have done was some cookout on the Fourth of July or something with their extended family, and that was the end of it. Maybe it was Christmas dinner for them. (That did not come first to my mind, which shows my church of God background!)

People are different. Some folks are shy. Some are reticent. Some do not think they have anything to talk about. Some people think that they are terrible cooks and always burn the hamburgers. Some just feel very inferior and untalented. Some people do not have the means to be hospitable very often. Most of us fall someplace in between.

Putting these verses together shows that we should take the opportunity to have brethren over from time to time. We should not feel constrained at all to do this constantly. You do not have to do it regularly, even, but you should be doing it as you are able and the opportunity arises. We should be, as Paul says, given to hospitality. This should be a drive and desire.

If we are not very hospitable, if we have not learned about hospitality, if it is not part of our nature, then we need to work this into our character by having someone to dinner once in a while. It does not have to be anything big. Then, as we become more comfortable with it, we will want to do it more frequently. It is something into which we can grow. We do not have to do it perfectly the first time. It is part of our Christian growth. As Peter implies, as the end approaches, the strong ties that are made through our hospitality will be a great benefit when the trials get worse and the pressure rises.

I remember when I was attending Ambassador College—I think it was in my senior year—Mr. Carn Catherwood taught a very popular class called "Christian Leadership." He was the perfect

instructor for this class because, as you may remember, Mr. Catherwood could tell some stories. He must have had cabinets full of stories of the things that had happened to him since he had been married and since he came into the ministry God's church for all those many years. The class was intended to teach the students what they should do when they graduated and returned to their home areas. I kept my notes from this class and put them in the back of my Bible. In them is a section on hospitality.

I remember a fairly long portion of this class was on the subject of hospitality. I remember Mr. Catherwood waxing eloquent on all the places he had been, the hospitality he had received, and the things that he and his wife had done as newlyweds coming from Ambassador College, and that sort of thing.

One thing Mr. Catherwood stressed was that Christian hospitality is not to be thought of as entertaining your guests, as Americans might think of it. Holiday dinners or business dinners are not quite what Christian hospitality is supposed to be. "Entertaining" is only a part of it; it must be more. We need to think of Christian hospitality as a means of binding us together, forming a bond. In fact, it should be an outgrowth of Christian fellowship.

This is where it comes full circle to the Greek term *xenia*. *Xenia*, when you get down to it, as mentioned in my introduction, is a particular type of friendship between people who begin as strangers but continue into life-long bonds through hospitality. We should look at Christian hospitality as a service provided by one for another to bring two or more parties closer together through the serving of food and fellowship. This is what hospitality is.

In fact, Mr. Catherwood gave us an equation: A serving spirit plus fellowship plus food equals hospitality. (Being director of the Italian work back in those days, he, of course, stressed the food part.) What he recommended was that when we got back to our own church areas, we plunge right into being hospitable as soon as we owned a table and some chairs. "The first thing you buy," he said, "is a card table and four chairs." That is all you need to begin to bring in the food and sit around and fellowship.

Start simply with friends and/or family. Then you can begin to include others you might not know as well—maybe one or maybe another family. You do not have to invite the whole church over. You do not even have to invite someone you do not know at all. Maybe the best mix would be a bit of both: some you do know and some you do not. Start expanding your relationships in the church.

Mr. Catherwood also suggested to start with something simple, such as snacks and some drinks