

Exemplary Hospitality

Genesis 18:1–16, Acts 28:1–10

One of my fondest memories from the Middle East was the day my son and daughter-in-law got married. The day we arrived there was a big pre-wedding party, and we got to meet the whole extended family. Now, a few days later, we were getting over jet lag and starting to feel more at home. Jeff’s future mother-in-law had made the wedding gown by hand and was putting on the final trim when there was a knock at the door. It was a friend who needed to talk. The future mother-in-law dropped what she was doing, made a tray of coffee and sweets and sat down to talk with her friend. We were aghast! What about the wedding dress? Westerners tend to put projects ahead of people, but in the Middle East it’s definitely people first. The culture puts a high value on hospitality.

There are numerous examples of hospitality in the Bible, and our Old Testament text is perhaps the earliest and most touching. Abraham is sitting at his tent door in the heat of the day. Yahweh himself, the God of heaven, comes by in human form—apparently a preincarnate appearance of Christ—and Abraham offers hospitality. His tone is urgent in a manner foreign to Western ears: he positively begs to be given the honor of serving a fine meal to the travelers, whom he does not yet even know. Why he does this is expressed in the concise phrase “inasmuch as you have come to your servant” (v. 5). Abraham believes in divine providence, that every detail of our lives is exquisitely worked out by our heavenly Father for his glory and our good. The very fact that the three travelers are passing by his tent is reason enough to want to serve them; it is God himself who has brought his heavenly visitors past his door. “I being in the way, the LORD led me” (Gen. 24:47). We who speed down freeways enclosed in air-conditioned automobiles are more self-sufficient—and poorer—than Abraham and his heavenly guests.

The Bible not only illustrates but prescribes hospitality, using such language as “Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to *hospitality*,”¹ “a bishop . . . must be . . . of good behavior, given to *hospitality*,”² “a lover of *hospitality*”³; “use *hospitality* one to another without grudging.”⁴ The word translated *hospitality* (φιλόξενος) is a combination of two words: φίλος (friend) and ξένος (stranger).⁵ It literally means *a friend of strangers*. It is a vivid word. The word *hospitality* does not mean only inviting people to be guests in your home; it means also meeting physical, emotional and spiritual needs wherever they may be found, as did our Lord Jesus.

¹ Rom. 12:13

² 1 Tim. 3:2

³ Tit. 1:8

⁴ 1 Pet. 4:9

⁵ Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon, φιλόξενος (Logos Bible Software)

I saw part of a documentary the other day that followed a man who had a burden to reach out to the homeless in San Francisco. This man makes it a point to reach out to the homeless every day; he walks up to them and offers food, drink, bus passes and an encouraging word. Most are loners; some respond, others do not. His hope is that someday, when they might be inclined to truly desire positive change, they might seek him out. It did not appear that the man was a Christian, but his zeal to reach out to needy human beings is admirable, reminiscent of Jesus: “I was sick and in prison and ye visited me.” The only hope for the homeless—and for all of us—is Christ. The only truly positive change is the Spirit’s regenerating work: “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them” (Ezek. 36).

There is quite a different picture of hospitality in today’s reading from the book of Acts. Let us consider it under three heads: salvation, hospitality, and common grace; first,

1. Salvation

Note that our text begins with the words “now when they had escaped.” Here is a reference to the 276 souls that survived the raging storm and disastrous shipwreck described in the previous chapter: the able-bodied swimmers who jumped overboard and swam to shore; and the rest, clinging to boards and parts of the ship, who were carried in by the surging waves. Chapter 27 closes with the words “and so it was that they all escaped safely to land”—just as the Holy Spirit had revealed to his servant Paul, “not a hair will fall from the head of any of you.” Here is a remarkable prophecy that is fulfilled within hours of its being uttered, validating the fact that Paul was a true apostle of God, and giving us confidence in the divine authority of the many New Testament books authored by him. Humanly speaking, what is the likelihood of all 276 persons in various stages of health and physical strength, fleeing a ship that is being broken up by the violence of the waves in the middle of the night, making it safely to shore without a scratch?

The word in the original for “escaped safely” and “when they had escaped” is “saved” (διασώζω). In this word is the root of the words for *save* and *Savior*. In 1 Peter 3:20 it is used of the eight souls in the ark who were saved through water. In Acts 23:24 it means that they might bring Paul *safely* to Felix.⁶ In Matthew 14:36 we learn that as many as touched the hem of Jesus’ garment “were made perfectly *whole*”—that is, cured of their diseases.

The peril of the 276 persons on board that fateful vessel is a picture of the human race. Having inherited the sin of our forefather Adam, we were all dead in

⁶ Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lexicon, διασώζω (Logos Bible Software)

trespasses and sin—spiritually dead—utterly without hope. We cannot save ourselves, for God’s standard is absolute perfection. We have all sinned, and fall woefully short of the glory of God. The world, the flesh and the devil rage against us. Our only hope is Christ, the mighty Savior, who took upon himself our human nature, so as to die in our place. “The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Through his powerful Spirit the message of the gospel comes to us: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be *saved*, and thy house.” Those who leave the sinking ship of their own self-righteousness and flee to Christ are saved eternally; those who clink to the sinking wreckage go to eternally damnation. Our only hope is to flee to God.

Our text today begins: “now when *they* had escaped”—that is, the 276 souls who “escaped the wreckage of the sinking ship and were brought safely to land” by the mighty power of God. All 276 were saved physically, but those who turn in true faith to Jesus Christ are saved spiritually, delivered from sin, death and hell and brought into Christ’s church. God has “saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began” (2 Tim 1:9). We are given the gift of eternal life that can never be taken from us.

Do you believe in Christ? Have you turned to him in faith? Are you convinced that he is your only hope? The Scriptures invite you to confess him before men and become his worshiper, gathering together each Lord’s day with his people to sing the Savior’s praises and sit at his feet to be instructed by his truth.

This is the first point, salvation. Secondly, consider

2. Hospitality

Our text informs us that those who escaped the sinking ship landed on the island called Malta—a tiny island in the middle of the vast Mediterranean sea. By God’s providence they landed not just on land, but were surrounded by a caring community. Luke writes that “the natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome.” If the survivors had landed on uninhabited land, they would have been safe from the raging sea, but God, out of his loving concern for the apostle Paul and his fellow missionaries Luke and Aristarchus, providentially guided the 276 survivors to a place of hospitality.

Hospitality is a beautiful word. It is defined as *kindness in welcoming strangers or guests*. God’s word instructs, “be ye *kind* one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32). How do we know what kindness is? It is demonstrated in God himself, who forgives us for the sake of Christ. God was under no obligation to save us. He is perfectly just. His word declares, “The soul that sinneth, it shall die.” We were all sinners. God would have been perfectly just to send us all to hell. But it is “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved

us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Tit. 3:5). God was kind to us in Christ; therefore, we are to be kind to one another, by the power of Christ. “The natives showed us unusual kindness; for they kindled a fire and made us all welcome.” Here were people who woke one morning to find a group of 276 survivors, soaked to the skin, wearied and worn, crawling up onto their beach. They could have cried out, “We’re being invaded!” They could have grabbed their weapons and repelled the invaders. But, moved by the Spirit of God, out of his supernatural concern for the apostle Paul and his promise to him that he would live to be able to preach the gospel in Rome, the natives “showed . . . unusual kindness.” The refugees had survived a violent storm and shipwreck. What are the chances that they would also be warmly welcomed onto somebody else’s property?

The KJV has “the barbarous people showed us no little kindness.” The original has simply “the barbarians.”⁷ The word *barbarian* now carries the meaning “primitive, uncivilized, lacking refinement or culture.” This was not the meaning of the word at the time of the New Testament. *Barbarian* comes from the Latin *barbarus*, from Greek *barbaros* foreign, ignorant,⁸ a person who speaks a foreign or strange language. It referred to non-Greek speakers. The word itself is imitative of the sound of unintelligible speech: bar-bar-bar-bar-bar, etc. To the Greeks, a barbarian was any foreigner ignorant of the Greek language.⁹ In our text it is not meant as an insult or slur. The ESV retains the term in Romans 1:14, “I am under obligation both to Greeks and to *barbarians*”—that is, to Greeks and to non-Greeks. The people of Malta did not speak Greek, but they did speak the universal language of kindness and hospitality. They kindled a large bonfire to dry out wet bodies. They no doubt brought out food and drink as well. The leading citizen of the island, a man named Publius, received the survivors and entertained them courteously for three days. The name “Publius” is Latin. This is in keeping with the fact that the Romans had governed Malta since 216 BC.¹⁰

But let’s take this a step further and consider

3. Common grace

Here were people practicing kindness, hospitality and generosity. How much money would it take to feed 276 people for even three days—a small fortune!

Were these people Christians? The “viper” incident shows that they were not. We read that “when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and laid them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat.” What is a viper? A venomous snake. This particular viper bit Paul and fastened on his hand. The “natives” (again, the

⁷ Οἱ . . . βάρβαροι

⁸ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/barbarous> accessed 5-26-23

⁹ Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon, βάρβαρος (Logos Bible Software)

¹⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Malta#History> accessed 5-27-23

original has “barbarians”) took particular notice. When they saw the creature hanging from Paul’s hand, they said to one another, “No doubt this man is a murderer, whom, though he has escaped the sea, yet justice does not allow to live.”

“Justice” should be capitalized. The original has Δίκη, the root of the Bible word *justified*.¹¹ One commentator observes that “when Paul was bitten by the viper, the islanders concluded he was a murderer whom Justice [Δίκη] had at last caught up with, since he hadn’t died at sea. The Greek goddess [Δίκη] . . . was apparently venerated by the Maltese.”¹²

So the native people of Malta were idolaters. Though they were ruled by the Romans, they venerated the Greek gods and goddesses. Their reasoning was that a bad thing like being bitten by a viper must be caused by one of the petty Greek gods or goddesses—probably the goddess Δίκη. Though Paul had escaped Δίκη at sea, his fate would surely be sealed by being bitten by a viper. So they watched and waited. Paul shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They had been expecting that Paul would swell up and suddenly fall down dead. “But after they had looked for a long time and saw no harm come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god.”

What do we make of this? The Maltese had been practicing hospitality not out of Christian principles—not out of an ardent love for the true God—but strictly out of love of man. This is what the Reformed call common grace. What the natives did was in accord with God’s moral law, which requires kindness (the sixth commandment). This is explained in our Westminster Confession of Faith, which teaches that “we cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him.” Specifically, “Works done by unregenerate men, although for the *matter* of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others: yet, because they proceed not from an heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right *manner*, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God” (WCF 16.5–7).

The confession contrasts between two words beginning with *m*: *matter* and *manner*. What the people of Malta did was the things that God commands—in this case, welcoming strangers, showing them kindness, and supplying their physical needs. As to their *matter* these were truly good works, scripturally speaking. But as to their *manner*, they did not proceed from a heart of faith; nor were they done to a right end: the glory of God. Therefore, these good works could not please God.

And so it is with us. We are—each of us—duty-bound to obey the commands of Scripture. This we never do perfectly, so we each stand in need of the Savior, the

¹¹ δικαιώω (cf. Rom. 5:1)

¹² Expositor’s Bible Commentary (PocketBible)

Lord Jesus Christ. We are to let our light shine before men, that they may see our good works, and glorify our Father who is in heaven (Matt. 5:16). Note well: the good works that we do should not be done so that people will glorify *us*, but glorify our *God*.

“An high look, and a proud heart, and the *plowing* of the wicked, is sin” (Prov. 21:4)—the plowing of the wicked! Plowing the ground is part of the cultural mandate: subduing the earth (Gen. 1:28). Since it is something commanded by God, it is by definition a good work.¹³ Yet if it is not done to the glory of God, it is sinful. So likewise, the hospitality of the Maltese, since it was performed by idolators, was not done to the glory of God, and was sin. This is not to deny that it was a great benefit, not only to Paul, Luke and Aristarchus, but also to the 273 soldiers, prisoners and crewmen. The good works of the wicked, done in response to common grace, certainly make the world a better place, but since they fall short of God’s standard of absolute perfection, they do not merit eternal life. Only the perfect work of Christ merits eternal life.

Finally, consider some application.

4. Application

Paul, writing to Timothy, expresses the will of God for those who have a competent portion of the things of this life: “Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share” (1 Tim. 6:18). Believer, here is God’s will for you: that you do good, that you be rich in good works (Paul uses two different words for “good,” synonyms), that you be ready to give, willing to share.

We are all naturally selfish, we want to make sure there’s enough for us and for our own family, we want to hoard, to put something away for a rainy day, prep for an uncertain future. Yes, the future is uncertain; yes, we ought not to spend our entire income, just because we have it, but we ought to save for a rainy day. But we must never put our *trust* in our savings, but in the God who gives us power to get wealth.¹⁴

God wants to challenge us, to grow our faith. God wants us to be generous, to walk by faith, not by sight, trusting him to take care of us and our families all our life long.

O dear one, take advantage of opportunities the Lord providentially puts before you. You can’t meet every need in the world, but, like the patriarch Abraham, like the Good Samaritan, like the natives of Malta, you can begin with those needs God in his providence puts before you. “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matt. 25:40).

¹³ “Good works are only such as God hath commanded in his holy Word” (WCF 16.1), https://opc.org/wcf.html#Chapter_16 accessed 5-27-23

¹⁴ Deut. 8:18

Good rule of thumb: tithe 10% of net income. God promises to open up the windows of heaven and pour out upon us a blessing so great that we cannot even receive it.¹⁵

After the survivors divided up and were taken into the various households of Malta (probably laboring in the family businesses), we read that “the father of Publius lay sick of a fever and dysentery. Paul went in to him and prayed, and he laid his hands on him and healed him.” This miracle was done by the power of God, not the power of the apostle. The news of this miracle spread, and others on the island who had diseases also came and were healed. When winter was over, and it was time to leave, the grateful islanders supplied them with provisions for their journey.¹⁶

Here, then, was an instance of exemplary hospitality. Let us each, in gratitude to God, delight in doing good works, that those who benefit from them might learn to glorify our Father in heaven. Amen.

¹⁵ Mal. 3:10

¹⁶ Acts 28:10