

Entertaining Angels

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“Then the LORD appeared to him by the terebinth trees of Mamre, as he was sitting in the tent door in the heat of the day. So he lifted his eyes and looked, and behold, three men were standing by him; and when he saw them, he ran from the tent door to meet them, and bowed himself to the ground, and said, “My Lord, if I have now found favor in Your sight, do not pass on by Your servant. “Please let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. “And I will bring a morsel of bread, that you may refresh your hearts. After that you may pass by, inasmuch as you have come to your servant.” They said, “Do as you have said.”

-Genesis 18:1-5

The beauty of reading Abraham’s story is we get to see a great man of faith truly seek to honor God in his life, with all the ups and downs that go along with that. While we have seen Abraham fail a couple times already, he is always quick to repent, but more importantly, he is a man that is genuinely striving to do good. In stories like Genesis 18 we get to see Abraham demonstrate his genuine goodness and we can see more clearly why God chose him as the ancestor of the Messiah and built multiple nations through his descendents.

While this chapter might seem very odd to us, the main point of this chapter, as well as the next, is, surprisingly, the importance of hospitality. The account begins with Abraham seeing three strangers coming towards him. While the biblical author lets us know that these are not just ordinary men but angelic messengers, one of which was more than likely a preincarnate Jesus, Abraham is not immediately aware of that fact, and yet, he rushes to meet these men. Upon meeting them he discovers who these “men” really are and he offers them food. As they stay with Abraham, they reiterate the promise of Abraham and Sarah’s son Isaac, this time for Sarah to hear, and then they let Abraham know about a coming judgment on the land of Sodom and Gomorrah, where his nephew Lot still lives. And the chapter ends with Abraham given the ability to intercede for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah.

As I said at the outset, this story has a lot of strange elements to it, both with the angels “eating” a meal with Abraham, Sarah being rebuked for laughing at God’s promise, and Abraham spending time seemingly “bartering” with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. And yet, this one story has been a point of major discussion for those who follow God throughout the millennia and serves as the basis for why hospitality is seen

as such an important virtue. In this story, Abraham is greatly honored by his angelic guests for showing them kindness, and when juxtaposed against the following chapter in which the city of Sodom is immediately judged after the inhabitants meet the angels with attempted violence instead of hospitality, the point becomes more clear. This is why the writer of Hebrews can make such a loaded statement in an almost flippant way:

“Let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels. Remember the prisoners as if chained with them—those who are mistreated—since you yourselves are in the body also.”

-Hebrews 13:1-3

This passage might seem cryptic to us today, but for someone well acquainted with Genesis 18 and 19, they would have immediately understood the point. Throughout the Old Testament, this idea of hospitality is repeatedly stressed by God. Those who are faithful to this virtue are rewarded, but those who don't, both individuals and whole nations, are subjected to God's judgment. What we will talk about in this paper is what Godly hospitality really is, why God values it so much, and how we can grow this virtue in ourselves as well as in our culture.

Godly Hospitality

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, ‘that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.’ ‘For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ‘And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? ‘Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.’”

-Matthew 5:43-48

The term “hospitality” in Greek is “philoxenos” which is a conjunction of two different Greek words “philos”, meaning brotherly affection, and “xenos”, which is the word for a stranger. So, to put it as simply as possible, a hospitable person or culture is one who “loves” the “stranger” or the outsider. When Jesus was giving His sermon on the mount, He emphasized this virtue and said that this virtue is something that actually distinguishes God's divine love from our own. Loving those who love you back, though it isn't wrong, is not actually a divine form of love, but merely a human form. Jesus is not denigrating our human love, but He is instead showing us a higher form of love that His followers are to strive after.

The call to love “strangers” even “enemies” is a type of love that is foreign, and even impossible, for someone who is not unified to Christ. In fact, for most of human history, this was actually seen as a bad thing. Notice that, even amongst the Jews of His day, Jesus mentions that many of them were teaching “love your neighbor but hate your enemy.” This is the human norm. We seek to love those that are near to us, and those who we care about, but to those outside of our self-interest, we tend to neglect.

Only in the Bible do we see this emphasis on loving those outside of our “tribe” and even those who are opposed to us. We do this because we believe that we were made in the image of God, which means that we were made to reflect God’s nature. And God’s nature is to love those outside of Him. God’s love is so radical that, as Jesus says, God even allows natural good to bless those who hate Him and rebel against Him. Jesus then perfectly embodies this morality on the cross when He dies for those who crucified Him. To be a follower of Christ is to strive to emulate His example, and this means, seeking to practically love those who may not love us back. As the ancient Christian theologian John Chrysostom put it so eloquently in his homily on Romans 12:

“For you are a disciple of Him Who desired the salvation even of them that crucified Him Who said upon the Cross itself, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” [Luke 23:34] You are the servant of Him Who healed him that smote Him, Who upon the Cross itself crowned the man who had scorned Him. And what can equal this? For both the robbers at first scorned Him. Still to one of these He opened Paradise. And He bewails those who were upon the point of killing Him, and is troubled and confounded at seeing the traitor, not because He was going to be crucified, but because he was lost. He was troubled then as having foreknowledge of the hanging, and the punishment after the hanging. And though He knelt his wickedness, He bore with him to the last hour, and thrust not away the traitor, but even kissed him. Your Master kisses, and with His lips receives him who was on the very point of shedding His precious Blood. And do you count the poor not worthy even of a loaf, and reverencest not the Law which Christ laid down? Now by this He shows that we ought not to turn aside, not only from the poor, but not even from those that would lead us away to death. Do not tell me then, that so and so has done me grievous mischief, but just consider what Christ did near the Cross itself, wishing to amend by His kiss the traitor by whom He was on the point of being betrayed. And see with how much power to shame him.”

Biblical Examples

“Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not bear false witness,” “You shall not covet,”

and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law."

Romans 13:8-10

Since this virtue is so important to God's character, as well as His design to save mankind, we see hospitality emphasized throughout Scripture. We see it in Genesis 18-19, but we also see it throughout the Law given to the Israelites:

"And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. 'The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

-Leviticus 19:33-34

It is also given as a reason for praise and cursing:

"Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: 'for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 'I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.' "Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? 'When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? 'Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' "And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.' "Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: 'for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; 'I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me.' "Then they also will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?' "Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.'"

-Matthew 25:34-45

This is not just in the New Testament, throughout the prophets in the Old Testament, the nation of Israel is repeatedly condemned for "shedding innocent blood":

“Moreover Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides his sin by which he made Judah sin, in doing evil in the sight of the LORD.”

-2 Kings 21:16

Oftentimes, this referred to the specific practice of infant sacrifice. But it also has a broader understanding that the nation was no longer protecting the innocent. Meaning that the nation had become “inhospitable” to others, giving biased justice to the elite, and denying justice to those without a voice, namely the poor and destitute, which would include the “stranger”.

Even in one of Jesus’ most famous parables, the good Samaritan, hospitality is the issue being discussed. This is why the question that precedes the parable goes like this:

“But he, wanting to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

-Luke 10:29

This man wanted to get around the implications of the law and “justify” his selfishness by trying to restrict the term “neighbor” to only apply to those in his “circle”. However, Jesus does not accept this interpretation and instead challenges the man by showing him the outcome of this philosophy. We think that we can restrict love to those we care about, but over time, what we will find is that the more we restrict love, the more our “tribe” shrinks until only we are in the circle of our own affection. This is why the man who is assaulted in the story is passed over by two religious leaders before finding aid from a man who is outside of the nation of Israel, a Samaritan.

Heartless Self-love

“You shall not pervert justice due the stranger or the fatherless, nor take a widow’s garment as a pledge. “But you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this thing. “When you reap your harvest in your field, and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.”

-Deuteronomy 24:17-19

While this whole point might seem overblown in all these passages, for the Biblical authors, the main indicator of a person’s, or a culture’s, overall virtue was their hospitality. When a person, or a nation, has shut themselves off to helping the “stranger” they are necessarily becoming more self-centered and arrogant. They think they can focus their energy on loving those that truly matter to them, but this is a caustic mindset

to adopt. Given enough time, anyone who thinks in these terms will find that the only love that they are capable of is self-love.

Let's take the fall of Egypt as an example. Egypt actually begins as a good nation because they do offer aid to the stranger, namely Jacob and his family through the intercession of Joseph. But over the years, they turn against the Israelites and enslave them. The Pharaoh who made this decision could have said that he was doing this to prioritize his own people over the Jews, but over time, his narcissistic self-interest is on full display for everyone to see. He is given numerous opportunities to simply let the people of God leave, but he instead refuses to let them leave until, as his servants put it:

“Do you not yet know that Egypt is destroyed?”
-Exodus 10:7

Pharaoh didn't actually care about his people, he only cared about his own authority and image. Losing his slaves would have been embarrassing for him, and so he arrogantly let his own people pay for his selfishness.

This is why God has the angels go into Sodom to “prove” their depravity. It is also why Luke points out that Mary and Joseph were not provided with shelter when she they came to Bethlehem. This is not just a random point that Luke wanted to show, for him, it was an indicator of the spiritual state of Israel and Rome when Jesus was born. This tiny detail foreshadows the eventual rejection of Christ by both the Jews and the Romans.

The Voice of the Stranger

“A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire; He rages against all wise judgment. A fool has no delight in understanding, But in expressing his own heart.”
-Proverbs 18:1-2

Those who engage in this selfish behavior are also closed off to a message from outside of them. In order to listen to God, you have to be able to hear a voice that speaks in contrast to your own. Someone who has closed off their hearts to the stranger, is also someone who has closed off their ears to the stranger. They have become so enamored by their own voice, that they can't hear any voice that contradicts their own. So, the same nations that have oppressed the helpless are the very same nations that reject the message of the angels and the prophets.

“Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness. “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Because you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, “and say, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers with them in the blood of the prophets.’ “Therefore you are witnesses against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets.”

-Matthew 23:28-31

This is an aside but, we always think that we are not capable of the evil of the past, that if we had lived during a particular atrocity, we would have certainly stood against it. The truth is, that the majority of us would not have the integrity to stand against real evil within a corrupted culture. The way that we can challenge ourselves is to look at our own culture, and to see those who are being denied justice by our current system. If we are willing to risk our own safety and reputation for those people today, it is likely that we would have done it in more corrupt times.

But, if we are relatively closed off to others, and do not actively practice hospitality, it is likely that we would have been, at the very least complicit, in the atrocities of the past. This might sound like a harsh statement, but we have to remember that the evils of say the Nazis, the Soviets, or the Chinese communist party were only possible through the complicity of the majority of people. Standing against real evil when large consequences are possible is not as easy as it sounds. It takes an awful lot of courage and genuine care for those who are being oppressed.

Back to the point though, the cultures that killed the prophets of old are the same types of cultures of Sodom and Gomorrah. These are the cultures that don't want to be corrected and would try to violently oppress and violate messengers from God Himself in order to shut their ears to a message that contradicts their own. Oftentimes this sin is not as severe as Sodom and Gomorrah, but it still carries with it a similar consequence.

And He said, “I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son.” (Sarah was listening in the tent door which was behind him.) Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in age; and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, “After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?” And the LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?’ “Is anything too hard for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.” But Sarah denied it, saying, “I did not laugh,” for she was afraid. And He said, “No, but you did laugh!”

-Genesis 18:10-15

Sarah doesn't aggressively oppose the voice of the angels, but she does mock the message in laughter. This action, though small, and even comedic in the way that God rebukes her, still precludes her from being able to properly receive the message that God has for her. This attitude is also connected to how she treats the "stranger" in her own home, Hagar. Remember that it was Sarah who abused Hagar after she encouraged Abraham to have a child with her. Abraham, on the other hand, is shown consistently in the text to listen to the "stranger". One of the key traits that we know about Abraham is that he does listen to the voice of God, even when that voice rebukes him or tells him something unbelievable.

This quality is not just manifested in Abraham hearing the messages of God, but even hearing truth from pagan kings. In both Genesis 12 and Genesis 20 Abraham goes to Egypt to escape a famine and lies to the king of Egypt about his relationship with Sarah. In both cases, God prevents the kings from actually sleeping with Sarah, and in both instances the kings rebuke Abraham and he receives the rebuke. This is not to say that Abraham was not a discerning individual, but that his willingness to hear truth, no matter the source, is actually a part of his virtue of hospitality. It is a small detail in the story, but this is why the messengers of God are shown to receive Abraham's offering, but not Sarah's.

This stands as a lesson for us. So many people think they want a message from God, but aren't faithful with the messages that God has already given them. God has given us so much wisdom and morality in His word, and He surrounds us with people who speak these messages to us, most of the time in the form of rebuke. But, since no one likes being corrected, we try to find an excuse for why we don't listen. We attack people's character, their attitude, their lack of understanding, their lack of expertise, etc. But really we are just closed off to offensive truths.

*"Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him."
-Proverbs 26:12*

What really separates the truly faithful men and women of God from the unfaithful is not that they don't fail, but that when God corrects them, whether directly, through angels, through prophets, or through other sources, they are open to hearing His voice. Even though sometimes the faithful, like Sarah here or Zacharias in Luke 1, can fail to do this all the time, they eventually hear the correction of God and turn their face back to Him. But the unfaithful are closed off to correction, they stubbornly follow the dictates of their own heart and can't listen to God when He speaks to them, no matter what source God might use. Humility is truly the key to most issues in the Christian life. If we speak to

people with humility, we can hear the voice of the “stranger” and be corrected from any false thoughts that are removing us from the will of God.

Pure and undefiled Religion

Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.

-James 1:27

On the flip side, someone who sincerely seeks to love the “stranger” is someone who is growing in their overall love and goodness towards others, especially those in their home. James points to the love of the orphans and the widows as “pure and undefiled religion”. This could seem strange, why isn’t pure and undefiled religion praying, worshiping God, studying His word, or evangelizing? James isn’t discrediting any of these things, but he is indicating that spiritual types of religion can be faked for selfish reasons. The genuine pursuit to better others is something that can’t be faked, it must come from a sincere heart that is in consonance with this divine virtue.

This is why Abraham was given such incredible blessings as a result of this one small act of kindness in Genesis 18. It isn’t the simple act that garners him an audience with God Himself, but instead the overall heart of Abraham demonstrated in this act. This is why Abraham actually spends time interceding for strangers.

“Then the men turned away from there and went toward Sodom, but Abraham still stood before the LORD. And Abraham came near and said, “Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? “Suppose there were fifty righteous within the city; would You also destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous that were in it? “Far be it from You to do such a thing as this, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous should be as the wicked; far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” So the LORD said, “If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes.”

Genesis 18:22-26

Abraham once again shows his heart by doing this. He shows concern for Lot, even though Lot has been disrespectful in the past, but he also shows concern for a pagan nation steeped in sin. He does all this while still trying to honor God and not deny His justice. Abraham passionately intercedes on the behalf of others, but remains perfectly submitted to God’s divine will. This kind of heart is not easy to come by, it must be worked towards, but hopefully we have seen that it is a worthy pursuit. But before we talk more about this pursuit, let’s address a common mistake.

Naivete

“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.”

-2 John 1:9-11

Like many other things in the bible, this principle might sound simple, but it is actually more complex than we tend to think. The virtue of hospitality can be misused and even become a cover for evil and abuse. In the above passage, John actually advises the early church to deny hospitality to those preaching heresy. Hospitality is a beautiful virtue, but like all other good things, it is possible to have it in too great an abundance without balance.

In our modern day, this seems to be one of our greatest errors. We aren't like the ancient pagan cultures who saw hospitality as a sign of weakness, but instead we are a naive culture who has taken this principle too far. Many today might even struggle with the above passage because it sounds too exclusionary, but this passage should give us pause and recognize that hospitality is not a universal good that needs no balance.

This truth used to be understood by us, but it is one that we have since forgotten. Take the story of “Beauty and the Beast”. In this story, the beast is cursed by an enchantress for not showing her kindness while she was disguised as an ugly stranger. As a result, he is transformed into a beast, and his servants are transformed into objects. The punishment towards the servants seems undeserved, but this is really a commentary on the beast's attitude. He is a selfish and vain young man who sees those around him essentially as objects for his use. This is why he denies kindness towards a stranger on the basis of her looks. The only hope for him is to learn to love another and *earn* their love in return.

Belle on the other hand is shown to be kind and generous to all, even to the point where she can learn to love the beast, yet her generosity is not universal. For Gaston, who shows her unlimited amounts of attention and interest, she is seemingly rude and rejects his advances. Is this a lack of hospitality? No, she is able to see through his good looks and recognize his narcissistic egoism. The same is true with many other fairy tales in which the protagonist is placed in danger by inviting in the dangerous stranger. Take “Little Red Riding Hood” or even “Snow White”. The protagonist is depicted as good, yet innocent and naive.

Many modern problems are actually caused by this kind of naivete. Let's take homelessness as an example. Everyone agrees that we should help the homeless, but many of the policies "addressing" homelessness are actually making things worse. It may sound compassionate to offer homeless people infinite hand outs, housing opportunities, and even, as some cities have done, places where they can "safely" use drugs. These policies might sound kind on paper, but the results are anything but kind. They have had a clear and marked effect of making cities less safe, and even enabling homeless individuals from getting the help that they need.

Some homeless individuals are there because of an unfortunate reversal of fortune, some due to a lack of financial no-how, but many more are there because of a severe mental illness or a drug addiction, and many have a combination of the two. The actual working solutions to this problem might seem harsh because they put expectations on those seeking help, but this is actually a biblical principle.

'When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. 'And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the LORD your God.

-Leviticus 19:9-10

Notice that the "welfare" for ancient Israel was "handed out". Instead the poor and the stranger were supposed to go into the fields and reap the edges that were left for them. This means that they did have to work for their sustenance. But even then, this was a stop-gap measure at best. Since these "gleanings" would only be available during harvest season. This means that God designed a system in which people could be helped, but this was not a permanent solution, those being helped were supposed to be helped out of their situation, not enabled within it.

"For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us. For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but are busybodies. Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread."

-2 Thessalonians 3:7-12

Work in Christianity is seen as a good thing, it is a participation in God's work of creation and is therefore a part of our godly purpose on this earth. We ought to offer help to those who are in trouble, but this help should not be an enablement to avoid work, but to find meaningful work. Obviously there are exceptions to this rule for those who literally can't, we will talk more about them in a second, but the general principle here is that to "help the stranger" means providing them with their best opportunity to live a life pleasing to God. This is not a life of sloth or addiction, but one of integrity and hard work. This is not demeaning the difficulties that many face, or suggesting that such a calling is "easy" for everyone, only that this is the only "help" that will legitimately benefit the stranger.

As I said though, so much of our social issues are built around this one misconception. This is why we are struggling with immigration policy and why we have lost every conflict that we have involved ourselves in for the last thirty years. It is also why Christians find it hard to take biblical stands on issues like sexuality and abortion. In our attempts to fight for the "stranger", which is noble and good, we might be falling into the mistake of naivete. And the backlash to this mistake is coming.

*"And because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold."
-Matthew 24:12*

One of the reasons why Europe became so hostile to the "stranger" in the last century was because of this false naivete that ended up nearly destroying these other nations. In response, heavy nationalistic movements began that ended up hurting both the stranger and the native born. For the church, no matter which way the culture goes, we ought to strive for the heart of hospitality described in the bible, and if the church can really stand firm on this issue with clarity and power, it can have a social impact.

Growing In Hospitality

*"Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. 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."
-Romans 12:9-13*

But how can we practically grow in this virtue? Like all other things in life, practice makes perfect. In order to become more hospitable, we have to exercise our wills towards charity and kindness towards others. Not in the cold religious way of the

Pharisees who sought to do good out of fear or arrogance, but instead, out of a sincere love for others.

Herein lies the primary obstacle to our current cultural moment. The reason why hospitality is going down in our current culture, is because opportunities for true hospitality are going down. As you can see from the passages mentioned in Leviticus 19 as well as 2 Thessalonians 3, the concept of charity has always been something performed by individuals and not by the state. This is a massive error that many Christians fell into. Since we are called to be hospitable, many Christians thought that social welfare systems would fulfill that goal, but the opposite occurred.

“Honor widows who are really widows. But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God. Now she who is really a widow, and left alone, trusts in God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day. But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives. And these things command, that they may be blameless. 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.”

-1 Timothy 5:3-8

Notice that in this passage, Paul is discussing a type of “welfare” system that the early church set up for widows. But, Paul gives a strict definition for “widow” and makes sure that the church only provides for “widows who are really widows”. Is this because Paul was cheap and hoarding money? No. It is so the children and grandchildren could “learn to show piety at home and repay their parents...” Paul believed that “practicing” hospitality in the home made someone a more virtuous person, and if the church took on this role for the home, it would prevent people from learning this valuable lesson.

If this principle is true for the church, it is infinitely more true for the state. The state is a disconnected and bloated entity. We don’t give money to these programs out of the kindness of our hearts, but because we are forced to through the tax system. And this massive bureaucratic entity acts as the “hospitality” wing of our country and actually enables our nation to be selfish with our money. A child doesn’t have to provide for their aging parents, social security and medicare will do that. We don’t have to help our neighbor or family member who suffers a financial reversal, that’s what welfare and unemployment are for.

Once again, while these all sound good in principle, they have cut us off from a vital lesson that we need to learn, and that is the practicality and goodness of genuine hospitality. This means that for the modern person, practicing hospitality becomes that

much more difficult for us. But if we want to grow in this I would give a three part solution. First, grow in your love and appreciation of God's gracious love for you.

Our Godly Example

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."

-2 Corinthians 8:9

This passage was written to the Corinthian church to help spur them on to providing aid for the persecuted church in Jerusalem. In order to motivate them, Paul doesn't shame them, he doesn't lay a heavy guilt trip on them, but instead he encourages them to meditate on the gracious love of God. We don't serve a God who sits in luxury and can't be touched with our problems. And we also don't serve a God who distantly sends us aid. But instead we serve a God who came to us in the flesh and helped us in our spiritual poverty by dying in our place.

The Christian who really understands God's costly grace is one who is being filled, not with a motive of guilt, but a genuine desire to honor the God they love. This is what we see in Abraham. Abraham was someone who clearly and powerfully understood God's gracious calling on his life. He wasn't someone who arrogantly believed that God called him because he was so amazing. He was constantly in humility before God, which is why he is quick to repent and forgive those who wronged him. But he is also not someone who was so down on himself that he didn't accept God's love or forgiveness. Because Abraham wrestled with this concept of costly grace, he was able to show grace, both in his house, as well as outside of it.

Growing Community

"And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."

-Hebrews 10:24-25

As stated before, this virtue like all the others is only one that we can grow in if we are practicing it. We live in a very atomized culture that allows for more distance and less community. Many people live the majority of their lives online now and don't spend time with friends and family. Many don't even attend church in person, and even those who do, only come for the worship service and never build community with those that they worship with.

So, if we want to pursue the godly virtue of hospitality, we have to endeavor to build community. We must strive to spend more time with friends and family, we have to step outside of our comfort zones and actually meet with people one on one and see how they are doing. When we grow in personal relationships, we open ourselves up to more intimate conversations. We can see more clearly what people are struggling with and we can actually help people in practical ways. We also are given the opportunity to challenge ourselves in our love.

As Jesus said, anyone can love someone who loves us back, but to truly practice Godly love, we need opportunities to practically love people who are difficult and rub us the wrong way. This also opens us up to receive the “voice of the stranger”, that we can be called out for the things that we are doing wrong and learn to repent and change. Even if we genuinely want to do better as Christians, first, we must practice our love in person, and second, we need to be aware of what areas of our life need work. And we tend to be blind to our own issues and need an outside opinion to show us where we are wrong.

Giving Aid to Strangers

*“He who has a generous eye will be blessed, For he gives of his bread to the poor.”
-Proverbs 22:9*

Doing these things will produce in us a heart like Abraham’s, a heart that genuinely seeks the good even of the stranger. For the Christian this is absolutely vital because we are called to constantly perform two actions that seem contradictory. On one hand we are called to have a loyalty and commitment to the people of surpasses all human categories and reflects the very nature of God:

*“I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.”
-John 17:20-21*

But on the other hand, we are called to love those in the world with all our hearts. We are to long for their salvation and betterment, and to pursue their good even at the cost of our own. In doing this, we reflect the beauty of our Lord who laid down His life for His enemies.

“For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would

even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

-Romans 5:6-8

This calling that the church has is so difficult that only the work of Christ can accomplish it. But when we are able to hear this call and pursue it in Christ, we can legitimately shine the beauty of God's perfect love to the world. This is why Christians are to be active in sharing their faith and pursuing areas of need within their local communities. So much of even the charity in our culture is impersonal, it's adding a couple cents to our grocery bill to help out a random charity, or just natural taxes taken out of our income. Not that these actions are wrong, but the true heart of hospitality must come through personal attachment. We are called to be a part of God's work in our world. This doesn't mean that we have to be a part of every ministry happening around us, but a strong church is made up of individuals who care for the stranger and are seeking the betterment of all those around us. Not in a naive way, but in a wise, personal, and powerful way, just like our Lord.

“Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

-Philippians 2:5-11