Sermon Notes

Sunday, 27 September 2026

Practicing Hospitality

Romans 12, ESV

Most people already think they know what hospitality means: a set table, good food, and a circle of people they already enjoy. That picture is only a thin slice of the word. Romans 12 presses three questions that must be answered in order:

1. what practicing hospitality actually means,
2. how it is done with the right spirit, and
3. how a person begins when the natural heart has no appetite for it.

What Hospitality Means

In Scripture, hospitality is not mainly the entertainment of friends. A meal with people one already enjoys belongs inside the word, but it is not the center of it.

"Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." Romans 12:13

The Greek word Paul uses is built on the root for "stranger." Hospitality is love of strangers, not a search party for people who already resemble us. The natural heart leans the other way. Call it xenophobia if the word is used loosely: not always fear, but distance, suspicion, and a slight hostility toward those unlike us. At a potluck we sit with our own. After the assembly we talk with our own. At a company picnic we find our own again. In a tiny college of a few thousand where drinking could get a student sent home, one drinker was able to still locate the two or three others who drank within a week. That is the natural heart asking, Where are the people like me?

A heart God has transformed asks a different set of questions. Who is new here? Who is different, alone, or routinely overlooked? Who comes from another country or another color, who speaks with an accent, who lives on the fringe of the room? Where are those other people will not take the trouble to love?

Hospitality in Scripture is meeting another person's need in a loving and personal way. That is why Paul sets it next to contributing to the saints. The two belong together, and they are not the same act. A collection for a homeless Christian is contributing; a bed in the house is hospitality. Arranging a ride to the doctor is contributing; going with him is hospitality. A sympathy card is

contributing; sitting with the grieving person is hospitality. Sometimes the card or the gift is exactly the right act. The point is not that money is counterfeit love. The point is that hospitality adds a personal touch the gift alone does not carry.

Practice Means Chase

Household chores sit on a spectrum. Some tasks a person avoids at all costs. Some get done only after the second request. Some happen now and then, when no one else can. Paul does not place hospitality on the avoid list, the if-asked list, or the occasional list.

"Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord." Romans 12:11

Practice, paired with hospitality, means making the work a habit: running toward a chance to help someone with a personal touch rather than hiding in the back until a name is called, or waiting to see whether someone else will take the need. Diligence is the opposite of lagging behind.

How It Is Done Rightly

Children can clean the living room and still stomp through the process, throwing things into the box. The act happened. The spirit of the act did not. Paul is after the spirit of this work, not merely the appearance of it.

Do it genuinely, without hypocrisy. Mean it. Meet the person with cheer and with a real emotional connection, which is the hardest piece of the work. Everyone is an interesting story. No one manufactures a genuine heart by announcing that, from this day forward, my heart will be genuine.

Do it intentionally. Needs are met by people who are present enough to see them. Contributing to the saints assumes involvement, awareness, and a living connection to the body.

Do it indiscriminately, with the same mind toward one another, rather than helping the person who is easy to like and quietly ignoring the one who is not.

"Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight." Romans 12:16

The same applies even to an enemy. If an enemy needs a personal touch, give what is needed.

Do it diligently and generously, not with just enough effort to get the task off the list, but with a devoted, fervent, open-handed spirit of love.

What Gets in the Way

Some people are eager to accept help and never offer thanks to God or to the person who gave it. Some take freely and rarely give anything back. Some are awkward, or they wear on the nerves, and they cannot seem to stop. Some always need something done and never quite stand up under their own weight. Differences of race, class, or money can freeze a room. Crisis is exhausting, and so is the member who is seldom present, seldom involved, without family in a military town at the holidays, or thin in faith. Frankly, some people in a congregation will never be favorites, but hospitality is still owed.

The charge runs both ways. The church must seek those people, and those people have work of their own: gratitude instead of a closed hand, effort to be easier to live with, a little more independence where it is possible, and a deeper tie to the body. Hospitality will not become full if only one side moves.

The current runs against that kind of connection. In churches of Christ the reported drift has been sharp: thousands leaving in a month, congregations closing, a large share of young people not remaining faithful, and more than half of members less than fully engaged. The world is part of that problem, and so are entertainment-shaped churches. If the New Testament spends a modest share of its work on how to run the assembly, and a congregation spends most of its preaching there, the percentages are off. Arrogant, self-assured teaching does not draw people in. Size is not proof of faithfulness either; a majority can still be empty and wrong. The villains of the gospel accounts of Jesus's life were the majority. The honest work is simpler than the statistics: those who mean to be hospitable seek the less connected, and the less connected come nearer.

How a Reluctant Heart Begins

Genuineness and sincerity are not easily created within a person. Surrender comes first: I want to do your will. Then the work depends on the Spirit, who enables what the flesh is not inclined to do. Practically, that looks like Scripture, which was written for our instruction and will teach this work. It looks like staying tied to the church, where people admonish, teach, and encourage one another, because maturity does not grow in isolation. It means a good deal of prayer.

"May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus." Romans 15:5

Grant means give and give means gift. Harmony of mind is not a mood a person works up in private. God gives it as people surrender.

Paul has already named the foundation.

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*"I appeal to you **therefore**, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Romans 12:1*

"Therefore" reaches back to the gospel. We were lost, and God provided salvation in Christ. In other words, God practiced hospitality by reaching out to us, those who were estranged from Him. Romans 5 says we were helpless, sinners, and enemies, and that God personally and lovingly met the need. That mercy is both the model and the motive.

This Week ToDos:

- Pray for a hospitable heart, the kind that wants to meet another person's need in a personal way, and ask one friend to pray the same.
- Schedule and take one hospitable action for someone outside the usual circle.
- Let someone else practice hospitality by naming a need and asking for help and prayer.

God loved strangers. He loved people who stood apart from him, everyone of us. That is why a person comes to Christ, and that is why the church meets needs. Anyone who is not a Christian will find this congregation glad to talk about a relationship with God through Jesus. Anyone who is a Christian and is carrying a need this morning will find the church ready to help meet it.