
The Gift of Hospitality

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is not at all unusual to hear. Someone in your church is an exceedingly talented hostess. Her Sunday noon dinners, to which she invites visiting college students and many others, are legendary. Her Christmas party is the one everybody wants to attend; and so you say to her one day: You have a wonderful spiritual gift. To which she replies: Oh, no; it is not like I am a preacher or a missionary or something. I just make pot roasts and help people have fun; no big deal. Well, the New Testament says that such a gift and such a virtue is a big deal. Today on *Groundwork*, we will explore why. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we are beginning, with this program, a new, fairly short, a four-part series, on what we could call the unsung virtues or gifts of the New Testament.

DAVE BAST

Right; and there are several places in the New Testament, specifically in Paul's letters, where lists of virtues or gifts of the Spirit are written down; and it is a little bit like a laundry list. I mean, they go all the way from the spectacular...from the clearly supernatural things like a gift of healing or even the gift of tongues, down to very ordinary...we might say, mundane things. I love that word *mundane* because it literally means earthy or worldly; and they are the everyday gifts of everyday life in the world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, in this series, we are going to look at some of these that pop up in those various lists; and we will be looking at, on this program, hospitality; and then mercy, service, and generosity; and we will be digging into scripture, of course, as we do here on *Groundwork*; but, as we get going here, Dave, we can kind of set the stage by reminding ourselves that, in the New Testament, and in our sort of doctrine of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we have said that there is something called the economy of the Trinity; how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit divvied up the work of salvation; and within that economy, the Holy Spirit is the incessantly busy one in the era of the Church, nurturing in our lives fruit of the Spirit and doling out gifts.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly; so, these are gifts of the Spirit, and the Spirit is the Spirit of God. He is also the Spirit of Jesus. He is Jesus within us, working within us. We have done a series in the past here on *Groundwork*, on the fruit of the Spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; that wonderful list. Three groups of three virtues or qualities that all Christians need to have; and as we said in that series, this is not a cafeteria where you can say: Well, I've got gift three and I've got gift seven, but the other ones...forget about it. No; we all need all the fruit of the Spirit.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, there are also other lists, where Paul does list some of the talents of whatever people are good at: Prophecy, teaching, preaching, healing, speaking in tongues, discernment, evangelizing, knowledge,

insight; and as you just said, Dave, you know, we have often noted that the virtues...fruit of the Spirit and other virtues like compassion and humility...those need to be common to all; but when it comes to gifts, some people have a concentration of those. Not everybody is a preacher; not everybody can be a missionary or...but what we are looking at in this series, and we will see this again today, something like hospitality, which we are looking at in this program, is kind of a combination...and maybe they all are in a way...but, hospitality is in one sense like a fruit of the Spirit. It is a virtue that, in some sense, should be in everybody—every Christian—but it gets concentrated in some people, who are particularly gifted at reaching out to and enfolding others.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and you know, it might surprise people to see this listed as one of the gifts of the Spirit...hospitality...I mean, doesn't that just mean you like to have people over, or you enjoy company?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It seems like it would be just a normal, ordinary human trait. Some people have it; they are more extraverted. Other people don't have it; they are introverts; but, the New Testament clearly says...in fact, the Bible says quite a bit about this, and it refers to it as a kind of gift that the Spirit can prompt in us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as theologian Neal Plantinga has pointed out, and he has done some writing on this, and did a January series speech on this some years back at Calvin College, hospitality pops up a little more often than you might guess in the New Testament, for the very reason you just listed, that is seems sort of homey, and just sort of, you know, not all that spectacular; but, it is very important, and that is why we want to dig into it also on this program; and maybe we can begin, Dave, going back to one of the earliest stories of hospitality in the Bible.

DAVE BAST

Right; it is told in Genesis Chapter 18, and it involves Abraham. If you just recall a bit of Abraham's story, he has been called by God to leave his home and go out to a different place, the land of Palestine, where he has been promised a country, and he has been promised a child; and many years have gone by without either of those promises seeming to come true.

So, in Genesis 18 we read this story:

The Lord appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre. While he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day, ²Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them, and bowed low to the ground. ³He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my Lord, do not pass your servant by. ⁴Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. ⁵Let me get you something to eat so you can be refreshed, and then go on your way, now that you have come to your servant." "Very well," they answered, "Do as you say."

SCOTT HOEZEE

⁶So Abraham hurried into the tent to Sarah. "Quick," he said. "Get three seahs of the finest flour and knead it; bake some bread." ⁷Then he ran to the herd and selected a choice, tender calf and gave it to a servant, who hurried to prepare it. ⁸He then brought some curds and milk and the calf that had been prepared, and these he set before them. While they ate, he stood near them under a tree.

So, Abraham sees some strangers. We believe, in retrospect, they were an appearance of the divine...of God himself...but he didn't know that, we don't think; and they lay on quite a banquet...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It must have taken a little while.

DAVE BAST

That is the point that strikes me...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Quick; bake some bread...

DAVE BAST

Right; you know, it wasn't just open the freezer and throw something in the microwave, you know. This took some doing to prepare a meal; and of course, this beautiful Eastern hospitality: Wash your feet first because they would have been dusty from the road; and rest under the shade of the tree because the sun was hot. So, this was a rather elaborate offering of hospitality to these strangers.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I love the little detail in verse 8 there of Genesis 18, where while they eat, Abraham just stands by and watches. He doesn't join them at the table; he is not eating with them. He just kind of stands by like he is a waiter and just watches them absorb his hospitality. It reminds me of a friend of mine who is a chef, and I would sometimes go to his restaurant; and he was very shy...a lot of chefs are quite shy...he was very introverted...but, every once in a while, you would look up and you would see him in the shadows of the corner of the restaurant, just enjoying watching people eat his food; and that is sort of what Abraham is doing here as well. So, it is a great act of hospitality; and again, as it turns out, we really do believe, because the story will go on, that these people are speaking for God and reaffirming the promise to Abraham and Sarah and so forth; but it does remind you of a classic verse from Hebrews 13 in the New Testament, where the writer of Hebrews says:

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. ²Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers; for by so doing, some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

DAVE BAST

Right; that is probably a reference back to this story; and maybe even more than angels, because in Christian tradition, these three strangers really represent the Trinity. Abraham is entertaining, in a sense, God himself. In fact, interesting side note to this: In orthodox iconography...the theory behind it is, because Jesus really was incarnate, you can depict him as a human being, but you can never depict God the Father; you can never depict the Trinity because the Father and the Spirit did not become incarnate, except when they want to allude to the Trinity an icon of this scene is painted: Abraham and the three visitors; so, it is God who has come, and Abraham, in showing ordinary hosp...he didn't know this...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

To begin with, but in showing ordinary hospitality, he welcomes the Lord himself into his home and into his heart. That is something significant.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; so, when we do hospitality, it is not usually angels or God himself, but it could be. In just a moment, we will want to continue thinking about this, and ask why does hospitality crop up as much as it does in the New Testament? We will take up that question next.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and on this program, the first of four programs on what we are calling sort of the unsung virtues of the New Testament, we are looking at the virtue and the gift...it is kind of both...of hospitality.

We want to start this segment, Dave, by going straight to some words from the Apostle Peter, from his first letter, 1 Peter Chapter 4.

DAVE BAST

And Peter writes: ⁸Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. ⁹Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.

SCOTT HOEZEE

¹¹If anyone speaks, they should do so as the one who speaks the very words of God. If anyone serves, they should do so with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power forever and ever.

So, here is an interesting place in the New Testament, Dave, where Peter links up hospitality and a couple other forms of service...he links it up with love...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is rooted in love above all; and it somehow redounds to God's glory and praise, too.

DAVE BAST

Which is another unusual thought. I mean, how often have you invited somebody over for pizza or...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Because hospitality does not have to be a lavish banquet like Abraham served.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It can be something quite simple. We will think about that in a bit, about different forms of hospitality; but, how often have you done that almost without thinking, and you are just trying to be nice, and actually, it adds to God's praise and glory. It glorifies God when you do that, which is rather amazing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is amazing. We said at the beginning of this program that if anything, people in the church, even people who are really good hosts and hostesses, tend to think that pizza and pot roast are decidedly not spiritual. I mean, not compared to be a missionary, you know, or a preacher; but, here Peter says: No, these ordinary acts of service are rooted in the love of God, and therefore, they become acts of praise...

DAVE BAST

Yes...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And glory to God.

DAVE BAST

And do it without grumbling, Peter says...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Which I also like. One of the interesting things, I think, that will emerge during the course of this series on these unsung virtues or mundane gifts, is that attitude matters. This is something great. You are not just doing it for others, you are not just doing it out of a sense of, oh, I've got to; I have to or else, you know; it is something you can offer, not only to another person, but offer it up to God for his praise and glory.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and why might that be connected to the love of God and the praise of God, as Peter points out here? Well, we can think about it this way; and I think we have mentioned this, Dave, on other *Groundwork* series, but here is an interesting angle we don't often think about: The very act of creation was itself an act of hospitality; because what happened? Well, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit had overflowing, abounding love for one another from all eternity within the Godhead—within the Trinity—and they decided to share that love with others; and so, what they did in creation was they literally made room for us. It is sort of like, you know, in your house. You make up a guest room for somebody as an act of hospitality; well, the whole act of creation was, in a sense, a hospitable act, in which God quite literally made room for a whole universe of creatures not like himself.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Not like God and the Trinity. When we have looked at Genesis, we have sometimes noted here on *Groundwork*, a well-known line from the writer Simone Weil, who said that the most startling revelation that you get from early Genesis is that God is not God centered. God loves extending into the lives of others.

DAVE BAST

So, he makes a room for us in creation; and I cannot help but think of Jesus' last words...just about his last words to his disciples in the upper room: I go to prepare a place for you. He is still in the business of making room for us; and he does it in this world; he is going to do it in the world to come. It is a very Godlike act; and for us to practice hospitality is, in a simple way, to make room for others in our lives...make room for them...make physical space in our homes; welcome them, move ourselves aside a bit...move our stuff out of the way...move our needs maybe a little bit back...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So that there is room for someone else; for the stranger to come or the guest...or maybe the friend...and be with us and experience the gift that hospitality gives.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And the arc of all of that for God climaxes, of course, in Jesus the Son of God, becoming human in the form of Jesus; and through his sacrificial death, in which we are all saved; and God again in redemption made room for us; and that all makes sense when you hear these words from 3 John, where John writes, beginning at verse 5 in that very short letter: Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. ⁶They have told the Church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God. ⁷It was for the sake of the name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. ⁸We ought, therefore, to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.

DAVE BAST

So, there is a very practical reason added here for us to practice the gift of hospitality. It is to aid the cause of the Gospel in the world. So, you can just picture this, how this went. The first Christians were mostly poor. They were mostly nobodies; we know that from the New Testament. They didn't have a lot of resources; and as they traveled, there were not a lot of options for places to stay. So, Christians in other places were saying take these people in, because they are traveling for the sake of the Name...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

They are traveling for the sake of the Gospel.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And they may be fellow Christians, but they are still strangers in the ordinary sense...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is an interesting thing; you know, many of us know the word *xenophobia*, which means the fear of strangers—the fear of the other. Well, the New Testament word for hospitality is the exact opposite of *xenophobia*, it is *philoxenia*, or the love of strangers; and of course, Jesus himself tells us in Matthew 25 that sometimes those strangers whom you visit in prison, whom you feed when they are hungry...it turns out they are Jesus himself, in a sense.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; I think of the familiar line from the Christmas story: There was no room for them in the inn. So, when we make room for the stranger in our lives, maybe it will be Mary and Joseph bringing the baby Jesus into the world; maybe it will be Christ himself; maybe it will be the Holy Trinity visiting Abraham; whatever it is, it is going to be an assistance for the work of God in the world, and we are going to advance the cause of the kingdom...of the Gospel...by practicing this gift. So, that is a great thing to think about, but we also want to wrap up this program by hearing another passage, where we actually see one of those gift lists that mentions hospitality. We will look at that in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this first program of a four-part series on the unsung virtues of the New Testament; and today, looking at hospitality. Dave, you just mentioned it at the end of the previous part of the program, so let's go right to the Apostle Paul in Romans Chapter 12.

DAVE BAST

⁹Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil, cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be devoted to one another in love; honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹²Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.
So, that is quite a list.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and you know, it is not as easy as it looks, either; but, the last line there: Practice hospitality, that love of strangers...the love of the other. What might that mean? Well, you know, as we conclude the program, Dave, we can make kind of a short list of some examples of hospitality. I think one thing we do want to point out is that hospitality...we exercise hospitality in our lives, and we do often...as with that Genesis 18 story...we do often associate hospitality with food and drink...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Somehow or other, those two go together because we all need to be fed and nourished, and so forth, to live and to thrive; but, we should point out that hospitality isn't all candle-lit dinners on fine bone china. It really can be just having friends over for Chinese takeout; or having some friends over for pizza, even though you haven't really had a chance to pick up your house and make it all Martha Stewart spic-and-span...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Just simple acts like that are certainly acts of hospitality.

DAVE BAST

It doesn't even have to be in your house. I am thinking of a couple from our church who every month organize lunch after the Sunday morning service for the college students who visit our congregation. We have a couple of dozen regular visitors from a local college; and you know, they line up people to maybe bring food, they maybe make some themselves; but just this kind of organizational gift or skill, saying to the stranger in our midst: We do love you; we do want to reach out and make you feel like you belong; we want to serve you.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, hospitality also could include...as you just said, Dave, it often means opening up our homes. Sometimes it means having a guest bedroom and hosting a missionary who is maybe on home service for a while and is traveling around. It can mean that.

DAVE BAST

You just reminded me of another family years ago in our church, who kept what they called the prophet's room in their home—a guest room for traveling ministers or missionaries; but it is an allusion to another Old Testament story of the woman who had a room, an upper chamber for Elijah and Elisha to stay in when they were passing through...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that kind of thing is hospitality, certainly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it can go beyond that, too, as you said, Dave, even outside our homes. Maybe on your way into Starbucks you have seen a homeless person or someone begging, so you buy an extra blueberry muffin; and on your way out, you share that with that person so that they have something to eat. Bring a bag of groceries to somebody at Thanksgiving or Christmas or any time. Sometimes there is a program called Family Promise that used to be called Interfaith Hospitality Network. A lot of churches around the country participate in it, where the church literally becomes a home for families. Many homeless shelters segregate by gender, so families cannot stay together; but this program lets parents and children stay together; and they provide them with maybe a TV to watch some DVDs, maybe a basketball court, some board games. The church literally opens itself up and becomes their home for the week.

DAVE BAST

Yes; many churches practice hospitality. I mean, that is a pretty big example of it, but I read somewhere recently that the typical church has a huge economic impact on its community without most people realizing it because it makes its building...many churches make their buildings available for meetings: AA meetings, or community Bible studies, or just community groups of various kinds who need a space...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And that is a form of hospitality.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we should, before we close the program, just admit too that all of this takes work...all of this takes some intentionality and a little bit of sacrifice. As Neal Plantinga once quipped: Hospitality is the knack for making people feel at home even when you wish they were. So, it does take a little bit of work, but you know, to do so joyfully, as we saw from Peter earlier, do it without grumbling, those are very important; but as we close, Dave, we can maybe think about one other angle on hospitality that we don't always think about, and that is something I picked up from the writer Kathleen Norris about some of the interactions she has had with monks and people who live in monasteries and the like; and she said one time that the monks told her that, believe it or not, repentance is a precondition for exercising hospitality. Well, how so? Well, because we all have a tendency to become insular and isolated; we all have a tendency to think that, you know, the church is just all people who look and think like us. Well, what happens in hospitality? You repent of that narrow attitude to say: You know what? God could teach me a lot through welcoming the stranger. I will see God at work in the life of somebody different from me, and that person will instruct me and widen the scope of my vision for what God is doing in the world. I really love that angle.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; in fact, I think we can go even deeper than that and say, not only that God may teach me something when I welcome the stranger, but that God himself may come to me in the person of the stranger...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

That it could be Jesus himself. You think of Jesus' words, you know: In as much as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me. So, when we offer that meal, when we give that gift, simple as it may be; it may be the Lord himself whom we are welcoming and serving. There is a verse in John 1 that is poignant I

think. It kind of haunts: He came to his own and his own people did not receive him; but to those who did receive him, he gave the power to become children of God. So, that can be hospitality in its ultimate sense.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, it just opens you up to the wildness and the wideness of God's mercy, and all of the people in whom God is working. So, the next time you compliment somebody on their fine hospitality, and you connect it to a spiritual practice, don't let them dismiss that or wave it away of being of no importance. It is important; the Bible tells us so.

DAVE BAST

Amen. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time, as we discuss the spiritual gift of mercy.

Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you; or tell us what you would like to hear on *Groundwork*.

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