

Pursue Biblical Hospitality!
“Therefore go into all the world” - #10
November 8, 2015

³¹⁻³³ “When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne. Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.

³⁴⁻³⁶ “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundation. And here’s why:

*I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.’*

³⁷⁻⁴⁰ “Then those ‘sheep’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?’ Then the King will say, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.’

⁴¹⁻⁴³ “Then he will turn to the ‘goats,’ the ones on his left, and say, ‘Get out, worthless goats! You’re good for nothing but the fires of hell. And why? Because—

*I was hungry and you gave me no meal,
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,
I was homeless and you gave me no bed,
I was shivering and you gave me no clothes,
Sick and in prison, and you never visited.’*

⁴⁴ “Then those ‘goats’ are going to say, ‘Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or sick or in prison and didn’t help?’

⁴⁵ “He will answer them, ‘I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.’

⁴⁶ “Then those ‘goats’ will be herded to their eternal doom, but the ‘sheep’ to their eternal reward.”
Matthew 25:31-46 (*The Message*)

When you think of the word “hospitality,” what comes to your mind?

Is it hosting family members on special holidays? Perhaps it’s having people over for dinner, or maybe a game night? At our Mennonite Church in New York once a month they would have a popcorn and ice cream night in which you were encouraged to invite a different family over on Sunday evening for a time of fellowship. Most of us know people who are very good at welcoming people into their home. There is even a “Mennonite Your Way” in which people open their homes to others who are traveling across the country. Usually it’s other Mennonites

but it's open to anybody. There are some in our own congregation who have been "Mennonite Your Way" hosts and others who have used it as they have traveled. Many Mennonites are very good at "hospitality," or at least what we define as "hospitality." There's only one problem with that – it's not "hospitality" as defined in the Bible.

Mennonites are very good at offering hospitality to those who are like us, usually fellow Mennonites, those who have very similar beliefs, those who look a lot like us, those who act a lot like us, those who grew up Mennonite, or went to Mennonite institutions, those who have similar names.

There is even the Mennonite name game. We just can't help it. A couple of weeks ago I went to Cleveland to help with a men's retreat sponsored by a Mennonite church. You could tell which of the men grew up in the Mennonite church because when they found out I was from a Mennonite church in West Liberty, they starting asking "do you know so and so?" and "so and so," almost all ending with names like Yoder, Kauffman, Leichty, Gingerich, Hostetler, Stoltzfus.

Now if you are on the inside that's great. But if you are from the outside it's very alienating. Last week Alex talked about building fences. Fences are not just physical structures, we also, often unknowingly, build fences which make people feel like they are on the outside, and it's not just Mennonites, it's all of us.

Whereas many among us our pretty good with hospitality when it comes to insiders, we're not very good when it comes to outsiders – people who are not like us, people who are different than us, . . .

The Greek word which is often translated in the New Testament in English as "hospitality" is actually made up of two words – love and stranger. The most accurate definition of "biblical hospitality" is love of stranger.

Philoxenia = phileo (love) + xenos (stranger)

And when Jesus talks about the "stranger," it is not just those that are different than us. Jesus refers to the stranger as "the least of these." It includes those who are poor, those who hunger, those who lack clothing, the homeless, those who are sick, those who are in prison. How is your hospitality with that group of people?

Whereas we usually invite our family members over for a nice Sunday dinner (at least the ones we like), or invite people from the church over (those who we are most like and those we most agree with) and call it "hospitality," Jesus says no such thing:

¹² Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Luke 14:12-14 (NIV)

In the apostle Paul's great opus on what the Christian life is supposed to look like, in Romans 12, that which the New International Version puts under the title "Love in Action," Paul says "practice hospitality

Here is the big question of my message today: "Is practicing hospitality, that which the biblical definition is "loving (and welcoming) the stranger (the least of these)," just a nice ideal for certain Christians, or for those who have the time, or is it a command, an obligation, for all Christians? (Pause to let people think)

Because if it is more of a command given to us by God, then it is one of our great sins of omission.// Whereas many of our sins are sins of commission, like falling short of God's ideals through sexual sin, lying, gossiping, judging, coveting, jealousy, and on and on, others are sins of omission – not doing what God calls us to do – "practicing biblical hospitality" is one of those.

John Stott, one of the great Christians of the late 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, wrote in his commentary on Romans 12 that "perhaps a better rendering of the word 'practice' – for the action we engage in regard to hospitality – would be the word '**pursue**.' Christians are not to simply practice hospitality, but are instead to 'aspire to' and 'seek out' opportunities to welcome strangers into their homes and lives."

Stott quotes from Origen, a third century Christian:

"We are not just to receive the stranger when he comes to us, but actually to enquire after, to look carefully for, strangers, to pursue them and search them out everywhere, lest perchance somewhere they may sit in the streets or live without a roof over their heads."

But here is the great problem for us today. We are so busy pursuing the "American Dream," that which we talked about a couple of weeks ago, pursuing material wealth and possessions to the point that most couples today, both the husband and the wife, work full time (and then some), and we are so invested in our children's lives as they begin pursuing the "American Dream," even in grade school (with academics, sports, extra curricula activities), there is no extra time to pursue the biblical command of hospitality – seeking out and loving strangers, "the least of these."

Not only do the strangers, "the least of these," lose out, we too lose out. I even have a sense that we will lose out more than "the least of these," for Jesus tells us that our rewards in heaven will be reversed.

Brad Brisco & Lance Ford in their book *Missional Essentials* write:

"Biblical hospitality is an obligation. It is a spiritual discipline and a missional practice. It is the way of Jesus, but it is also a gift to others and ourselves. Both the blessings and difficulties of biblical hospitality are most deeply discovered only as it is pursued

"Pursuing hospitality, along with all the blessings and difficulties that come with it, is at times scary and radical. But it is worth the risk. Unless we find a way to open ourselves to others, we will be the ones to grow more isolated and frightened. If we do not find and practice ways of [biblical] hospitality we will grow increasingly hostile. Hospitality is the answer to hostility. Jesus said to love our neighbors (and our enemies) – hospitality is how we do it."

During my sabbatical at the beginning of the year I met Brad Brisco & Lance Ford in person. I have now had the opportunity to meet Brad a couple of times. What I really appreciate about these so called “contemporary missiologists” is that they are not just writing and speaking about how we are to live out God’s mission for us in the world, they’re trying to live it out in their own communities.

A couple closely connected to them is Alan & Deb Hirsch. A wonderful couple who came to America several years ago from Australia. Besides their accents, what I really appreciate about them is just how immersed they have become in their own communities. For Deb it was working with prostitutes in Los Angeles, and with all kinds of others struggling with sexual issues. She recently published a book entitled *Redeeming Sex*, focusing on God’s ideals for sex.

Brisco & Ford quote from her as she wrote in *Untamed: Reactivating a Missional Form of Discipleship*, about how we in America have become so protective of our own families and our own communities, often building fences around them, both literally and figuratively:

“This is ‘our’ space, and those we may ‘invite’ into that space are carefully chosen based on whether they will upset the delicate status quo, inconvenience us, or pose a threat to our perceived safety. In other words, visitors, especially the strange ones, stress us out. And while this is in some sense culturally understandable, the negative result in terms of our spirituality is that the family has effectively become a pernicious idol – a sphere where the commands of the *Shema* are no longer applied to the whole of life. Culture has once again trumped our social responsibility. In such a situation, missional hospitality is seen as a threat, not as an opportunity to extend the kingdom; so an idol (a sphere of life dissociated from the claims of God) is born.

“It’s not hard to see how this is absolutely disastrous for a missional perspective. Our families and our homes should be places where people can experience a foretaste of heaven, where the church is rightly viewed as a community of the redeemed from all walks of life. Instead, our fears restrict us from letting go of the control and safety we have spent years cultivating.”

So, how do we practice or pursue biblical hospitality:

1. The first and most important step, we need to examine our own lives. We will never be able to practice “biblical hospitality” without some margin or overflow in our lives.// Where have I bought into the American dream that life is about pursuing my own interests, more money, more things, that my own and my family’s interests, comfort, and security, come before everybody else’s?
2. Secondly, we need to look around us and to see what opportunities we have in our own community for practicing “biblical hospitality” - for welcoming and loving the stranger, the “least of these.”

For Brad Brisco, one of the authors of *Missional Essentials*, and his wife Michelle, it was becoming a foster family and the welcoming of dozens of children into their home over the recent years.

It might be looking at the opportunities that Adriel has to offer for us to practice “biblical hospitality” in our own community. Instead of viewing Adriel, as many do in our community, as a burden on the community, as Christians we should view it as opportunity that God has given us to practice biblical hospitality.

Maybe it’s Green Hills and the opportunities that it offers to reach out to “the least of these,” those that are aging and sick, those who have few others to interact with and to check in on.

Or maybe it’s “The Grove,” our new storefront ministry which provides us with the opportunity to pursue and to seek out those living downtown, in our own community, who are struggling – financially, relationally, emotionally, and spiritually. If that isn’t the primary purpose of why we are initiating the ministry then we have yet to discover God’s primary purpose for our lives as Christians. Our primary purpose as Christians is the same as that of Jesus – “to seek and save the lost.”

Why should we pursue biblical hospitality? Because that is what Jesus did for us. The apostle Paul wrote in the great chapter on salvation in Romans 5:

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, when we were strangers, alienated from God, Christ died for us, the ungodly. God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, strangers, alienated from God, Christ died for us.

For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Romans 5:6-8,10-11

Then Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5 that Christ has passed on the baton of reconciliation, that which is really what biblical hospitality is all about, to his followers:

So then from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he (or she) is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. . .He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, for those who were strangers, those who were alienated from God, to be his friends, to be his sons and daughters, that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

“Pursuing biblical hospitality,” loving and welcoming the strangers, “the least of these,” is not an option for Christians, it is an obligation.