

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, February 14, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

### **1 PETER 4:9-10**

“Practice hospitality to one another without secretly wishing you didn’t have to! Whatever gift each of you may have received, use it in service to one another.”

### **HOSPITALITY HOUSE**

St. Paul, in Romans 12:13, challenges Christians to “practice hospitality,” but I especially like this text in 1 Peter, because the context in which hospitality is mentioned here earns it consideration as a specific “gift.” After St. Peter speaks of hospitality in verse 9, he immediately goes on to say that whatever gift a person has should be faithfully exercised. This link in the apostle’s thinking between “hospitality” and “spiritual gifts” clearly indicates that hospitality is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

I confess that I am intrigued and amused by Peter’s words: “Practice hospitality to one another without secretly wishing you didn’t have to”! You see, many Christians do not have the gift of hospitality. Do you know how you can tell if you have the gift or not? You decide to invite some friends over to your home for dinner, and three nights before they come, you’re lying there in bed, and all of a sudden you feel your wife’s elbow in your ribs, and she says, “Honey, what are we going to feed those people?” And you mumble a few words about “food,” and then go back to sleep! And then the cookbooks come out, and the day the company is coming she brings home huge bags of groceries and mobilizes the family: the husband has the vacuum cleaner going, the kids are running around dusting and straightening things up, and by the time the people arrive, the house is immaculate! The aroma of food is floating through the house, and the sterling silver gleams on the table; and they come in and you have a wonderful time of conversation and fellowship, and a beautiful dinner; and the people, when they’re ready to go, congratulate you on the splendid evening they had, and then they say “Good night,” and leave, and you all collapse! If that happens in your house, you don’t have the gift of hospitality. That’s “entertaining”; it’s not “hospitality.”

On the other hand, if you go to the home of someone who has this gift, it’s a different ballgame altogether. You know they made no special and elaborate preparation for your coming. When you go into that house, there may be a little dust on the mantle, the cushions on the sofa aren’t just right, the morning paper is still on the floor, and a pair of slippers are there that should be upstairs—but you immediately feel at home! You feel that you don’t have to adjust—you belong there. You can even go to the bathroom without asking permission! And wonder of wonders, families with the gift of hospitality are happier with company in their home than they are alone. Now that’s hard for some people to understand who do not have that gift.

The ancient world loved and honored hospitality. Indeed, it was an article of ancient

religion; and over and over again the New Testament insists on this duty of “the open door.” In the ancient world inns were notoriously bad. They tended to be filthy. In one of the plays of Aristophanes, Heracles asks his companion where they will lodge for the night, and the answer is, “Where the fleas are fewest!” Inns also tended to be ruinously expensive. Plato speaks of the innkeeper being like a pirate who holds travelers to ransom. The Greeks instinctively shrank from hospitality given for money. Inn-keeping, to them seemed to be an unnatural occupation. But above all, inns tended to be immoral. It is not without significance that the ancient historian Josephus says that Rahab, the prostitute, who gave lodging to Joshua’s scouts in the city of Jericho, kept an inn. When Theophrastus wrote his character sketch of the “reckless” man, he said that he was fit to keep an inn or run a brothel. He put both occupations on the same level. Inns were virtual disaster areas.

In the ancient world, there was a rather wonderful system of what were called “Guest Friendships.” Throughout the years, families, even when they had lost active touch with each other, had an arrangement whereby at any time needful, they would make accommodation available for each other. Often the members of the families came in the end to be unknown to each other by sight. And so, they identified themselves very ingeniously by means of what were called “tallies.” The stranger, approaching a door and seeking accommodation, would produce one-half of some object; the person in the home would possess the other half of the tally; and if the two halves fitted together, then the host knew that his guest was genuine, and the guest knew that the stranger at whose door he stood was indeed the ancestral friend of his family!

Now this gracious hospitality was very necessary amongst the early Christians. In the early Church wandering preachers, teachers, and evangelists were always on the roads. On the ordinary business of life, Christians had journeys to make. Both their price and their moral atmosphere made the public inns impossible. So, since there were no Howard Johnsons, Holiday Inns, or Hospitality Houses as we know them today, the practice of hospitality was high on the list of priorities for the early believers. Also, there were many Christian slaves who had no homes of their own. It was a great privilege for them to have the right of entry to a Christian home. The whole Church was a little island of Christianity in a pagan world, and it was an untold blessing for Christians to have Christian doors which were always open to them, and Christian homes in which they could fellowship with friends who shared the same precious faith.

The writer to the Hebrews says, “Don’t forget to be kind to strangers, for some who have done this have entertained angels without realizing it” (Hebrews 13:2). He was thinking of that time when three angels, disguised as men, came to the tent of old Abraham and Sarah, to tell them that they would become the parents of Isaac (Genesis 18:1ff).

I’m sure that those early believers were very sensitive to the words of our Lord recorded in Matthew 25:35 and 43, words which He will utter at the Last Judgment, when He will say to those on His right hand, who are bound for eternal bliss, “I was a stranger, and you invited Me into your home”; and when He will say to those on His left hand, bound for eternal condemnation, “I was a stranger, and you refused Me hospitality.”

Not only did the early Christian missionaries need hospitality, but the local churches needed it too. It is hard for us to realize that for the first 300 years of Christianity there was no

such thing as a church building. The church was therefore obliged to meet in the homes of Christians who had big rooms, and who were prepared to offer these rooms for the services of the congregation. This is why we read, for example, in 1 Corinthians 16:19, "Aquila and Priscilla, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord." Without those who were prepared to open their houses, the early Church could not have met for worship at all.

I am sure that you have noticed that the main part of the word "hospitality" is "hospital." We have discovered how ancient travelers, whether pilgrims or businessmen, fared very badly when they ventured beyond their home territory. So, by the fifth century A.D. Christian leaders established a series of international guest houses, and these havens of refuge for travelers were called "hospices" (from the Latin word, "hospites," which means "guests"). Usually they were attached to a local church, and the monks who served the church also cared for the travelers. With the coming of the Crusades, the importance of the hospice increased greatly. The Crusaders and other travelers found the Christian hospices the only reputable guest houses available. Soon after the Crusades, most of the hospices began to specialize in the care of the poor, the sick, the crippled, the insane, and the dying. In an age when there were no hospitals as we know them today, the Church and its clergy and lay helpers performed a magnificent service in ministering to the helpless. So, although the "hospice" or "hospital" came to restrict its function to the care and treatment of the sick and the handicapped, do remember that originally it was a house of refuge for travelers.

William Tyndale, who in 1526 completed the first translation of the Bible into English from the original Hebrew and Greek, and who, on October 6, 1536, was strangled at the stake, and his body then burned to ashes, uses a magnificent word for "hospitable." The word he uses has, unfortunately, disappeared from the English language. Tyndale says that a Christian should have a "harborous" disposition. "Harborous"! Isn't that a descriptive word if there ever was one? It derives, of course, from the word "harbor," which, nautically, means "a place of safety for vessels in stormy weather. But remember that Webster also defines "harbor" as "shelter, lodging; a station for rest and entertainment; a place of security and comfort; a refuge."

Tell me, do you have a "harborous" disposition? As a Christian, is your home a true harbor, a station for rest and hospitality, a place of comfort for travelers?

I have always been fascinated by that Old Testament story we read this morning (2 Kings 4:8-10), about a godly husband and wife who gave a magnificent demonstration of the gift of hospitality by actually adding a room to their home, a room which was reserved for the use of the prophet Elisha whenever he passed that way. They furnished it with a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp—nothing lavish or fancy—but a room adequately equipped to enable him to sleep and study and pray. Let me say with regard to hospitality, that it is not magnitude of menu nor excellence of entertainment that matters, but rather the warm feeling of being accepted and wanted and loved for Jesus' sake. So many people, especially young people in a new, strange, and forbidding environment, have felt the call and the claims of Christ upon their lives through the warmth of friendship they have experienced in a Christian home which has been thrown open to them.

The plain fact of the matter is that we still live in a world where there are many who are far from home, many who are strangers in a strange place, many who live in conditions where it is hard to be a Christian. The door of the Christian home, and the welcome of the Christian heart, should be open to all such.

Perhaps the need for hospitality for traveling Christian workers does not exist to the same extent today. Excellent motels can be found almost anywhere, and they are often preferred by evangelists, missionaries, and Bible teachers for study purposes and for privacy. But great blessing can come to homes that invite God's servants for food and fellowship.

Here in the nation's capital we have an ideal opportunity to practice hospitality. For example, there are any number of young adults coming to Washington to work for the federal government or for private industry. Many of them are single, recently graduated from college, living, perhaps, in a ninth-floor apartment, somewhat traumatized by the cultural shock they encounter; and they often feel lonely and insecure. One girl told me that she was propositioned several times during the first week she was in her new job on Capitol Hill. And I believe that one of our finest ministries here at Faith should be one of genuine, outgoing friendship and encouragement to these young people. Let us welcome them, treating them with dignity and respect, accepting them for what they are, and showing them warm Christian friendship, and opening our church, our hearts, and our homes to them.

Young people in the military also profit from hospitality. I well remember the joy and privilege it was for us back in Britain during the grim years of World War II to have American and Canadian servicemen to our home and church. We often felt we gained far more from their friendship than they did from ours. We have kept in touch with many of them over the years, count them among our dear friends, and have, in turn, been royally entertained in their homes; although, let me remind you that no genuinely hospitable person uses his or her gift with the hope of receiving a return invitation. In fact, our Lord, in Luke 14:12, says that we are especially to invite to our homes those who cannot repay.

Let me mention just one other challenge to hospitality, and I speak now especially to the older women in the congregation. There are a number of young wives and mothers in our midst with young children, and these mothers live far away from their own mothers. They miss the advice, help, and encouragement their mothers could give them. I remember how much my wife was helped by her mother in the early years of our marriage when our first two children were small and her parents lived near at hand. When we came from Ireland to Canada, Valerie was five and Alan was nine months old, and I knew that their mother was somewhat apprehensive about how she would cope with a whole new way of life in a strange country, with a young family. However, two ladies in particular in our congregation stepped in at once, and made her feel absolutely at home, and they took upon themselves the role of a mother to her. Now what I'm leading up to is this—with these young mothers in our midst who are far away from their own mothers, how would some of you older ladies like to play the part of surrogate mothers to these young women? Of course, I realize that this term "surrogate mother" has a bad connotation today, and rightly so, but here is the opportunity for you to be a godly surrogate mother. Many of you have grown children of your own, and you could relate in a most helpful way too many of our young mothers, extending to them the hospitality of your home, or babysitting their children

an afternoon a week to let them out to do needed shopping, or to take a class in something that interests them. Indeed, some of these younger women have said to me from time to time that they would very much appreciate the opportunity to fellowship in this way with older women who could counsel and encourage them in the awesome task of raising their children for the Lord.

So, if you believe that you possess this gift of hospitality, then begin to develop and use it within the covenant community here at Faith. Let us always be known as a loving, caring congregation. Remember, we pass this way but once; let us then make the most of our opportunities for the glory of Christ, and for the blessing of the lives we can touch from day to day.

Our text says, "Practice hospitality to one another without secretly wishing you didn't have to!" Let it be spontaneous, born out of our gratitude for Christ's love to us; and let it be the practical expression of our desire to emulate the loving concern of the Master Whom we love and seek to serve.

**AMEN.**