

Clearing the Stereotype:
You Christians Are Too Focused On Getting Converts
A Study of Hebrews 13:1-2

Big Idea: Our best for our guests.

Related Scriptures: Luke 10:25-37; John 13:34-35; Romans 12:9-13;
1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8; 1 Peter 4:9; James 2:8-9

Introduction:

1. Here at Moon Valley, we have started off the new year unpacking an important new resolution I think God wants us to make as a church family. Let me briefly recap.

a. On the first Sunday of 2009, I made the biblical case that, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, then Jesus is sending you. He's sending you to seek and save the lost. That's our God-given mission at Moon Valley: to seek and save the lost.

In order to carry out this mission, I offered a very practical assignment for each of us in 2009: ► Seek seven. I encouraged you to ask God to use you to draw seven people a little closer to Christ in 2009. If we think of these seven people as being on a road or a journey that leads to Christ, we're asking God to use us to move them a little farther down that road, a little farther in the right direction.

b. On the second Sunday of 2009, last Sunday, I made the biblical case that a big part of seeking our seven is to ► clear the way of any obstacles on that road to Christ. There are obstacles that stand between our seven and Christ. And we have a responsibility to clear the way if we can.

And the Bible tells us that we ought to do pretty much anything to avoid *being* an obstacle ourselves. Bear any cost. Do whatever it takes. Endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of an unbeliever on the road to Christ.

I introduced some recent research that confirms what many of you already know: The Christian community suffers from an image problem. Our image as messengers is an obstacle that is getting in the way of our message. There is a six-headed stereotype that stands between our seven and Christ. And the six heads are ugly.

► "You Christians are hypocritical."

► "You Christians are too focused on getting converts."

► "You Christians are antihomosexual."

▶ “You Christians are sheltered.”

▶ “You Christians are too political.”

▶ “You Christians are judgmental.”

2. Today, on this third Sunday of 2009, I want to deal with ▶ just one of the six heads. Today, I want to try to help clear the stereotype that says: “You Christians are too focused on getting converts.”

a. Let me read you just a few quotes from unbelievers that reflect this view. These are perceptions that you will likely face if you seek your seven.

One person ▶ says, “Christians are too concerned with converting people. They are insincere. All I ever hear is ‘Get saved!’ I tried that whole ‘Jesus thing’ already. It didn’t work for me before, and I am not interested now.”¹

Another person ▶ says, “A young guy approached me in a subway station once, friendly, full of questions, interested in talking. He seemed really nice . . . We exchanged numbers and said we’d hang out sometime. Next time I heard from him, he invited me to a Bible study, and that was all he wanted to talk about. When I said, ‘No thanks,’ I never heard from him again.”²

Another person describes Christian street-witnessing ▶ this way: “People stalk you and verbally berate you. I’m like, do I know you? Why should I care what you are saying?”³

b. Lurking ▶ behind the perception that we Christians are too focused on getting converts is the idea that we don’t genuinely care about people. We’re just looking for another notch on our conversion belt. We’re just looking to close a deal. We just want some poor sucker to sign up for Christianity so we can feel better about ourselves and pay for our religion. That’s the perception. Indeed, research shows the vast majority of young unbelievers outside the Christian faith believe that we Christians do not genuinely care about them as individuals.⁴

This is an obstacle. We’re not going to get very far in helping our seven along the road to Christ if they believe we don’t really care about them as

¹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 67

² *Ibid.*, 69.

³ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 68.

individuals. If they think we don't care, then, in their eyes, our good news gets downgraded to Jesus shtick.

How do we clear the way?

- c. I believe the answer lies not in some clever PR campaign; but rather, in our returning to the Bible to be and do what God says we ought to be and do as followers of Jesus Christ.

In particular, I think one very small passage of Scripture gives us an enormous opportunity to begin to clear away the perception that we are insincere and too focused on getting converts. It's ► Hebrews 13:1-2. If you have a Bible with you, I invite you to turn there. It's Hebrews 13:1-2. If you don't have a Bible with you, you're fine. I'll be showing the verses on the screen. Here's what the biblical ► text says to us:

^{CSB} Hebrews 13:1 Let brotherly love continue. 2 Don't neglect to show hospitality, for by doing this some have welcomed angels as guests without knowing it.⁵

- I. Let's spend a little time discovering what this means. Then we'll consider how to apply it.
- A. There are two commands in these verses. They fit together. They are complementary. The first command ► is,

^{CSB} Hebrews 13:1 Let brotherly love continue.

The phrase, ► "brotherly love" is a translation of a single Greek word that may sound familiar. It's *philadelphia*. It's who the Cardinals are playing today. *Philadelphia* is actually a composite of two words: *philos*, meaning love, and *adelphos*, meaning brothers.⁶ So it's literally love for brothers.

Most often this word is used in the New Testament to describe loving other brothers and sisters in Christ, others who are part of our church family, fellow members of our Christian community.⁷

This verse says that this kind of love ought to ► "continue." The implication is that the original writer believes that his original Christian readers were already engaged in this kind of love toward one another. So let it persist. Keep it up.

⁵ I'm using the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*, a relatively new English version that generally seeks word-for-word translation.

⁶ W.E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, unabridged ed., s.v. "brother" (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing, n.d.).

⁷ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, s.v. "φιλαδέλφια," (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

- B. But in the process of loving the brethren, we are not to neglect a very important thing. This is where the second command comes. Verse ► 2 says,

^{CSB} Hebrews 13:2 Don't neglect to show hospitality . . .

The implication here is that “hospitality” is easy to overlook. We are prone to forget it. It escapes our notice.

But what kind of ► hospitality is in view here? A closer look at the original Greek word for hospitality is enlightening. The word is *philoxenia*. It sounds a lot like the Greek word for brotherly love we considered earlier. And for good reason. This word is also a composite of two words: *philos*, meaning love, and, *xenos*, meaning strangers. So it's literally ► love for strangers. And many English translations put the word “strangers” right in the text.

So our Bible passage presents the very same kind love—*philos*—directed at two different kinds of people. *Philos* for *adelphos*, love for brothers. *Philos* for *xenos*, love for strangers.

Well, who are these strangers? Today, we often use the word, “strangers” to describe those we've never laid eyes on, those we know nothing about. And so, just to be safe, we tell our children, “Don't talk to strangers.”

But that's not exactly the kind of strangers that are in view in our text. The strangers in our text refer to those outside of our Christian community. The strangers are those who are not in our church family. The brothers are inside; the strangers are outside.

As such, the strangers in our text include your seven. You know them.

The point of our text is that we Christians ought to continue to love each other, but we ought not to neglect loving our seven. Keep loving those on the inside, but don't overlook loving those on the outside as well.

True biblical hospitality is not about throwing good parties for your Christian friends. It's about loving your unbelieving neighbors. It's about loving your seven.

- C. And this is no small thing.

1. According to the Bible, this hospitality is so important that the leaders of a local church are required to model it. And if they don't, they're disqualified.

The Bible presents a list of qualifications for the leaders or elders or overseers in a local church. Listen to what's included, beginning in ► 1 Timothy 3:2:

^{CSB} 1 Timothy 3:2 An overseer, therefore, *must be* above reproach, the husband of one wife, self-controlled, sensible, respectable, *hospitable* [emphasis mine]. . .

There it ► is: “hospitable.” It’s the very same word from our text in Hebrews 13:2. Hospitality is so important to God that it’s a requirement for leadership in the church.

You’ve probably heard of church leaders having to step down for reasons of embezzlement or maybe sexual immorality. But when was the last time you heard of any church leader stepping down because he was neglecting to love strangers?

- D. Well, what would loving strangers look like? Our text gives us a glimpse in the last part of ► Verse 2. Verse 2 says,

^{CSB} Hebrews 13:2 Don’t neglect to show hospitality, for by doing this some have welcomed angels as guests without knowing it.

What in the world is this angel business?

This is probable allusion to ► “some” people like Abraham in the Old Testament. According to Genesis 18, Abraham welcomed three strangers as guests. He honored them. He gave them rest. He gave them refreshment. He gave them the finest food he had to offer at significant cost to himself. And it turned out that these three strangers were angels, messengers of God sent to deliver Abraham a favorable message.

Well, ► what’s the point? Is it that we ought to be hospitable to strangers just in case they might turn out to be angels? Is it that we don’t really give a rip about human strangers, but we better be nice to them anyway on the off chance there might be a few angels in disguise mixed in? I suspect not. If that were the case, it would be much more efficient to just ask all strangers a screening question right up front: “Are you an angel?” If not, we could just ignore them and get on with our business.

But no, that’s not it. I think the point is that we ought to treat strangers as if they were angels. We should love strangers in the same way that we would love angels. We ought to love our seven with the same warmth, the same concern, the same respect, the same dignity, the same courtesy, the same compassion, the same sacrifice that we would afford an angel.

Sort of raises the bar, doesn’t it?

► ^{CSB} Hebrews 13:1 Let brotherly love continue. 2 Don't neglect to show hospitality, for by doing this some have welcomed angels as guests without knowing it.⁸

- II. Well, how do we apply this at Moon Valley? How does this relate to seeking our seven? What does this have to do with clearing the way, particularly as it relates to the perception that we Christians are too focused on getting converts?

You've probably already connected some of the dots. Imagine if all of us here who claim to be Christians were to love strangers in general and our seven in particular as if they were angels sent from God. What difference would that make? Would they be as likely to say, "You Christians don't really care about me as an individual?" Would they be as likely to think we're just heartless headhunters?

You may say, "I think I get the point, Bob, but loving strangers is a rather vague idea. Exactly how could I do that? What might it look like?"

Our text gives us a clue. Verse ► 2 says,

^{CSB} Hebrews 13:2 . . . some have welcomed angels as guests . . .

This gives us a picture. Loving strangers is ► like welcoming guests. We are the hosts. The strangers, including our seven, are the guests. We love them by being the best hosts we can possibly be. In fact, the big idea of my sermon can be expressed ► this way: Our best for our guests.

There are at least two important places where this idea, our best for our guests, can play out. These aren't the only two. But they're big.

- A. One is ► in your home. If you were to ask me: How can I seek my seven? How can I clear the way for them? How can I begin to break down the stereotype that we Christians are too focused on getting converts? I'd say invite them to your home for dinner for no other reason than to serve them and enjoy their company. To love "strangers." Your home is a great place to demonstrate hospitality.

And here's a tip: Shelve the God talk. Unless and until they know that you care about them, opening up a can of God talk on them right away will just reinforce the ugly stereotype.

Good hosts make their guests feel like they belong. When we say, "Make yourself at home," it's another way of saying, "You belong here." By default, guests start out

⁸ I'm using the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*, a relatively new English version that generally seeks word-for-word translation.

feeling like they don't belong. Good hosts are able to override the default. Hospitality instills a sense of belonging.

What would you do if you had angels coming for dinner? Wouldn't you honor them with your best? Guests are honored by the sacrifices we make for them.

When we have guests coming over to the Kerrey house, there is a sense of anticipation and we work to make things ready. You know. Clean the toilets. Vacuum the dog hair off the couch. Gather up some of the clutter and put it in the room where we keep the door closed. Stuff like that.

And we try to prepare some food that our guests are going to like, providing enough variety so that, if they don't like one thing, they won't starve. And the food is a notch or two up from everyday vittles. We don't serve Fruit Loops® to dinner guests. If it were just me, I'd be good with it, but not for guests. We try to serve the best that our budget, time, and skills will allow.

And when the guests arrive, we do our best to have everything ready. We promptly greet them as warmly as we can. And we are attentive to their wishes. "May I take your coat?" "May I offer you something to drink?" "Please have a seat." "Make yourself at home." All variations on the theme: You belong. You're in the right place. We're glad you're here. You fit right in.

And in our conversation, we're not dictating the direction, but graciously going with the flow. Asking questions. Demonstrating interest. Drawing them out gently. Steering clear of needlessly offensive comments. Enjoying humor. Showing respect and sensitivity. These are all ways of loving strangers.

And we don't let angels do the dishes.

It's amazing how simple hospitality can thaw a chilly relationship. Cathy and I have found that, when we're hospitable with our seven, we don't have to worry so much about awkwardly forcing God talk on them. In the vast majority of cases, when we show hospitality, our guests eventually start asking us questions on their own, when they're ready, when they feel it's safe. And it could take a while. Maybe months. Or even years.

Within the last several weeks, three of our seven started asking questions about our faith—two of Cathy's and one of mine. In every case, the questions came in the context of ongoing relationships where we were just trying to love them in small ways when we could. In every case, we've had these people over for dinner at some point in the past. And, in every case, the questions came shortly after we had recently served them or connected with them in an intentional way. One even said that he felt safe asking me spiritual questions because he knew I wouldn't try to push him or sell him.

So, as a way of loving “strangers,” think about inviting your seven for dinner. Maybe not all at once. But invite them.

Your home is a place where you can give your best for your guests.

- B. The second important place where the big idea, “our best for our guests,” can play out is ► in your *church* home. Is Moon Valley your church home? If someone were to ask you, where do you go to church, would you say Moon Valley?

If so, think about something with me. Just about every Sunday morning we have guests that come for the first time to Moon Valley. And think about it, if we are all seeking our seven, we’re going to have more and more guests coming soon. God is going to bring some of our sevens.

Now, if this is *your* church home, and there are guests coming to *your* church home, what does that make you? You are a host. That’s right. A host. We’re all hosts. That’s how our guests view us. So our choice is not whether to *be* a host; we already are, whether we like it or not. Our choice is whether to be a good host—one who makes guests feel like they belong.

So how are we doing as hosts at our church home, Moon Valley, on Sunday mornings? How’s our hospitality? With all due respect and gratefulness to some people who have been trying faithfully and valiantly, overall, I’d say we are neglecting hospitality.

Our ► text speaks right to us:

^{CSB} Hebrews 13:1 Let brotherly love continue. 2 Don’t neglect to show hospitality . . .

We’re pretty good at the first part—the brotherly love part. And that should continue. There are some extraordinary signs of love and support and compassion and closeness within this church family. On the inside.

But remember, hospitality is not an inside job. It’s about the outsiders, our guests. Do we make our guests feel like they belong?

Steve and Ruth Wilson are our resident missionaries to the Latino community. They moved down from Washington and have been with us for only a few months. When they first visited Moon Valley, only a few of us on staff knew them, so they were the perfect guinea pigs: insiders disguised as outsiders. Mystery shoppers. They could show up on Sunday morning looking like guests and tell us how they were treated.

And here’s our report card: They felt ignored. They felt disregarded. They did not feel welcomed as honored guests. It’s as if we invited them over to our church home and

then acted as if they weren't even here. What message does that send? You don't belong.

We talked about this at a recent elder meeting, and one of the elders said, "Come to think of it, when we first came to Moon Valley about seven years ago, we felt invisible, too. Nobody said a word to us. Nobody noticed us." Ouch. It's one thing to give people some space; it's another to give them a cold shoulder.

And it's ironic. We can *think* we're a friendly church because there is such a warm supportiveness among those we know, maybe especially among those in our Life Group. But the thing is, our selective demonstrations of brotherly love on Sunday mornings can actually make guests feel even worse. Think about it. How would you feel if you came to somebody's home as a guest, and the hosts were very warm and friendly to their other friends, but not to you? It would remove all doubt: You don't belong. It would almost be better if the hosts ignored everybody. That way you wouldn't feel so left out.

If we're going to seek our seven, things have got to change around here on Sunday morning. We can no longer neglect hospitality.

Studies have been conducted among first-time church visitors to determine the point at which they decide whether or not they will return for a second visit. Turns out that most first-time visitors make up their minds within the first seven to ten minutes of arrival. They drive into our parking lot looking for an answer to a question: Is this a place where I might belong? And their question gets an answer within the first ten minutes. For too many, the answer is no.

So if you're thinking that someday you might invite some of your seven to come to church with the hope that God may use my teaching to draw them toward Christ, that's nice. But if we don't become more hospitable, the teaching won't matter. It'll be too late. They will have already made up their minds. Hosts are every bit as important as preachers. Probably more so.

And this is not about numbers; it's about people. It's about how most people come to Christ. They belong before they believe. I see it in the Bible, and I see it in this church, and I see it in my own Life Group. People belong before they believe. I'm not talking about formal church membership. I'm talking about how people feel. I'm talking about how people move along the road to Christ.

You see, for your seven, the road to Christ ► has three milestones: belong, believe, and become. These are things your seven will experience, generally in order. It's what they will feel. It's what will happen to them. I belong. I believe. I am becoming.

First they belong. They check us out before they check Christ out. They come to community before they come to Christ. Will they accept me? Do I belong? Are these

people for real? Do I want to be with them? Do I fit in here? Does this community feel right? I belong.

Then, God willing, they believe. They get past some of the obstacles we Christians have put in their way, and as a result, the gospel message they keep hearing gradually gets upgraded from the Jesus shtick to the good news of God's amazing grace. The gospel of grace percolates in their hearts until the light comes on. And they find themselves believing! Forgiven! New! Alive! I believe.

And having believed, then they become. They become more and more like Christ as they follow Him. It's a process that never ends. I am becoming.

That's how we're viewing the disciplemaking process, the road to Christ: belong, believe, become. And as we've evaluated ourselves at Moon Valley, we've come to a conclusion. We got a bad belong. We do not make it easy for guests to feel like they belong. We're neglecting hospitality. We're keeping outsiders on the outs.

At Moon Valley, we want to create an extraordinary environment of grace, humility, warmth, attentiveness, and personal acceptance in which guests feel that they are welcome among us, that they are treated as equals, that they matter to us, and that they can safely consider the next step toward Christ with us, regardless of their background.

That is what has prompted the sermons I'm preaching these days. That is what has prompted me to ditch the first part of our worship services so that I can stand out front and welcome people. That is what is prompting me now to ask you to join me in becoming extraordinary hosts—hosts who give our best for our guests.

In order to become extraordinary hosts, we're going to need to be both spontaneous and structured. Let me explain.

We need spontaneous hosts. Spontaneous hosts are those who simply adopt the mindset of an extraordinary host and improvise accordingly.

As a spontaneous host, you think, "This is my family, this is my house, we've got guests coming, and it's my responsibility to make them feel like they belong." And then you match your behavior to your mindset.

It's early Sunday and you think, "Hmm. Is it good for our church guests to show up to my church home before I do? I'd never let that happen to my guests at my house. It's rude." So you get to church a little earlier.

You see someone you don't know and you think, "Hmm. I don't really know if this person is a guest or not, but I'll warmly welcome him and introduce myself anyway. What's the worst that could happen? Accidentally love a brother instead of a stranger?"

After that, you look over at the Connection Café and you think, “Hmm. That’s not just a coffee dispensing area for me to grab and go; that’s a great place to hang out a little and connect with people. Maybe I could love a stranger there.”

A little later you make a quick trip to the bathroom and somebody has made a mess. You think, “Hmm. This is my church home. What will my guests think? I better tidy up.”

It’s not a to-do list. It’s a to-be mission. To be a host. A host with a mindset: Our best for our guests.

And we not only need spontaneous hosts, we also need structured hosts. In fact, on any given Sunday, every one of us in this church family ought to be either a spontaneous host or a structured one.

Structured hosts are those who will have specific, planned, intentional, coordinated, scheduled responsibilities in hospitality on some Sunday mornings. They are the top-gun hosts. They are the dream-team hosts. They are the ones dedicated to making the first ten minutes a ten.

You don’t know exactly what that means yet, do you? Neither to I. But I’ve got a bunch of ideas. And I’ve been praying. This is so important to me that I want to personally head up a group of people who want be the structured hosts with me.

Here’s how it will work. First you tell me if you’re interested. You tell me if want to know more about what it might mean for you to be a structured host. And you tell me by using the little Connection Card on your chair. Just write your name. Write your contact information. And write a big number 10. Ten for making the first ten minutes a ten. Then put the Connection Card in the tall wooden box between the double doors as you leave.

Putting a 10 on the Connection Card will not commit you to anything, nor will it subject you to any sales pressure. It just means that you’re going to get an invitation to find out more. Someone will contact you with a proposed meeting time and place. It’ll be a meeting where I present a specific plan for Sunday morning hospitality, complete with job descriptions and schedules and everything you need to decide whether and where you want to participate. If you come to the meeting and discover that nothing about being a structured host lights your fire, no problem. Maybe you’re a better spontaneous host. God speed.

How many structured hosts could we use? I’ll take anything God provides. But I’d like to start with a hundred. I’m dead serious. A hundred. Ten tens. I could put a hundred of you to work in a heartbeat. Not all at once. But on a schedule, where the

load on any one person is neither burdensome nor endless. A clear and doable job description with a clear start and a clear end.

It's as simple as this: Put a 10 on the Card and I'll take from there. It's all about our best for our guests.

^{CSB} Hebrews 13:2 Don't neglect to show hospitality . . .

Are you with me?