

Turning the Stranger Into Family

Every week at my small group, I pray the same prayer: “God, thank you for friends who’ve become family.”

There is no doubt that to me, after 16 years and being a thousand miles from home, my church is my family. The amount of people I could call in the middle of the night if I had an emergency is long. The number of people who drove six hours in the heavy rain to see me get married is almost the same number of people who come to an average Sunday service. I share no blood with any of those people, but we share something even deeper in unity of Spirit.

I’m sure many Christians all over the world could say the same things. Which is appropriate, since the Bible absolutely teaches us that Christians are family. God is our Father and we are brothers and sisters in our faith. It’s beautiful, Psalm 133:1 says, when we live like we are.

Yet the Bible gets specific in how we are to practice this in a way that is extremely counterintuitive. Hebrews 13:2 states it this way: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

Similarly, Job claims, “I have never turned away a stranger, but have opened my doors to everyone.” Jesus makes it personal when he says, “I was a stranger and you invited me in.”

I want to point out two things that are crucial to understanding and contextualizing these verses in 2018 America. First, the word “stranger” every time means someone from a different country who lives among you. That can be easily seen in both the Hebrew and Greek words used as well as how “stranger” was defined in Israelite law (Exodus 23:9,

Leviticus 24:22). This group was often mentioned with the orphan, widow and poor as people to whom great compassion should be shown (Deuteronomy 24:17). God knew something back then that we can still see today: when you are a new immigrant, primarily because you have fewer resources, you are extremely prone to be a victim of injustice.

Secondly, all of them teach that we are to have strangers (and especially fellow Christians) in our homes. The word for “hospitality” in Hebrews 13:2 literally means love of strangers while the word for “entertain” literally means to receive a stranger as a guest. And the ideas of “inviting in” and “open doors” are specific as well. Having someone in your home is an intimate event in any culture that I have experience with. It is an act reserved for family and closest friends.

I say this is counterintuitive for obvious reasons. The very fact people from other countries have been historically and biblically called things with negative connotations in American English now like “stranger” and “alien” in some way proves that parts of our culture bend against treating immigrants (a more modern and less demeaning word) like family. As I have written before, we often tend to do church in a homogeneous way, where we are similar in culture and even in our coded language and preferences in things like music. And my guess would be that we are even more limited in whom we share our homes with than whom we share our church with, since there is research that indicates that only a tiny percentage of people have other races and ethnicities as a part of their circle of friends, and especially their inner circle friends[1. Christopher Ingraham, *Washington Post*, August 25, 2014. Information accessed at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/three-quarters-of-whites-dont-have-any-non-white-friends>]. Yet biblically we are to share our homes for meals (and whenever possible, more intimate and longterm events than that), with Christians who look and act

quite differently than we do.

This is an issue of the Gospel. In Ephesians 2, I find it impossible to separate salvation by grace through faith with how we accept immigrant brothers and sisters. In political discourse, it is completely understandable that we use words like "Immigrant" to describe those who have moved here from other countries. But Paul taught in Ephesians 2 in the church this terminology is obsolete. The Hebrews had many laws that commanded them to treat the stranger among them with love and compassion, like Leviticus 19:9-10 and 19:33-34. But in Ephesians 2:19 Paul says to Christian Gentiles, "So then *you are no longer strangers and aliens*, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household." So I tell the immigrant believers in my church, "The world may call you an 'immigrant' but at Northwest, we call you 'family'." And unless I truly treat people like family, which includes having them in my home, then I'm just a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.

In his sledgehammer book, *Generous Justice*, Tim Keller drives home the point about eating with the stranger as being a Gospel issue by referencing Paul's confrontation with Peter in Galatians. Peter had stopped eating with Gentiles out of fear of man and Paul rebuked him that he "was not acting in line with the Gospel[2. Tim Keller, *Generous Justice*, 124]." The Gospel has never ended with man's reconciliation to God. It has always included people groups' reconciliation to each other, as evidenced by Ephesians 2 and also by nearly 20 different languages present for the beginning of the Christian church. How can we be truly reconciled from a distance? We must invite them in. As Hebrews taught. As Job lived. As Jesus said we should treat him.

So my question for you today is: Are you acting in line with the Gospel? Are you practicing Hebrews 13:2 hospitality? Let me be plain that this is not a series of question with a political angle. I'm not writing this only to conservative

white Christians. The truth of the Bible transcends that. I ask them to all Christians who read this. Because the familial nature of Christianity, and our Gospel, demand it.