

THE PASTORS' PEN

articles from the elders of BBC

Have you ever wondered about the verse that suggests a stranger might be an angel in disguise? Or, at least, the verse that is sometimes interpreted that way? I am speaking of Hebrews 13:2: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.” Remember that the next time you drive past a stranger on the side of the road with a flat tyre! Who knows—it may be an angel with a divine blessing for the first person who will stop and help.

In point of fact, the writer of Hebrews was not suggesting that God might send angels with flat tyres to bear his blessing to you. The writer was more likely referencing historical characters who had “entertained angels”—biblical characters like Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18:1–3), Lot (Genesis 19:1–2), Gideon (Judges 6:11–24), and Manoah (Judges 13:6–20). The writer uses these Old Testament examples to strongly urge his readers to biblical hospitality.

The word “hospitality” is found only a handful of times in the New Testament. The Greek word so translated literally means “love of strangers.” In the handful of instances it is used by New Testament writers, we can learn some important lessons.

The word first appears in Romans 12:13, where Paul urges his audience to “seek to show hospitality.” He issues this command in the specific context of an instruction to “contribute to the needs of the saints.” “Seek” translates a word that literally means “to pursue,” and is most frequently used of a persecutor pursuing opposition against his victim. It is a carefully selected word. Paul was not content for his readers to show hospitality only as opportunity presented itself, but urged them to actively pursue opportunity to show hospitality.

The word is next found in the list of qualifications for elders (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8). This is one of the only two qualifications for elders that are not also explicit qualifications for deacons. (The other is the ability to hospitality is one means to doing what we recently heard about from the pulpit: loving one another.

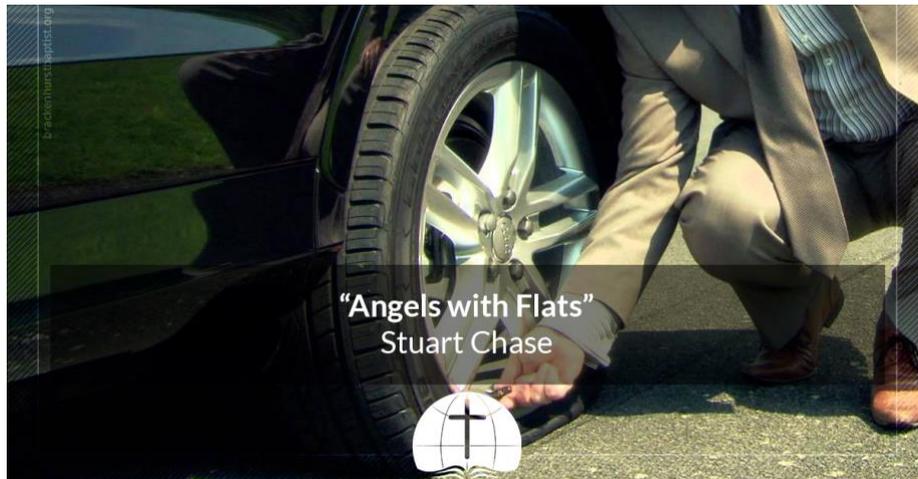
teach [1 Timothy 3:2].) Elders are called to exemplify what all believers are to pursue.

The next use of the word is Hebrews 13:2, referenced above. There, the writer points to the example of Old Testament saints who extended hospitality to “angels unawares” and received God’s blessing for it. Contextually, the emphasis in Hebrews 13:1–3 is more on the exercise of hospitality than the almost incidental entertaining of angels. In the same context, the writer urges continued brotherly love and practical care for believers imprisoned under persecution.

The last explicit New Testament reference to hospitality is 1 Peter 4:9. There, we are exhorted to “show hospitality without grumbling.” This particular context is significant because Peter writes it at a time when “the end of all things is at hand.” It is likely that he is referencing the coming destruction of Jerusalem. Christians across the Roman Empire were facing intense Jewish opposition. Peter encouraged

them that this opposition would soon end. The destruction of the Jewish temple would signal the end of a Jewish-centric religious focus—and that time was “at hand.” It would be the easiest thing in the world for believers to put off hospitality and circle the wagons—“just until things settle down a little.” But it is in the midst of pre-end turmoil that Peter urges them to show hospitality—and to do so without grumbling.

These injunctions to hospitality find their theological root in the Old Testament: “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God” (Leviticus 19:33–34). This is where the love of strangers finds its root in the hearts and lives of God’s people. New Testament hospitality is an extension of this love-your-stranger-neighbour principle. To show



“Angels with Flats”
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But what does this look like on the ground? What shape might biblical hospitality take in the context of Brackenhurst Baptist Church in the 21st century? Let’s make a few observations.

First, it might be helpful to talk about how it looks to love “strangers.” In the context of the first century, “strangers” were often, quite literally, strangers. Travelling preachers and fellow Christians were often dependent on the hospitality of fellow believers. Inns were few and far between and were often unaffordable for travelling believers. It became customary in those days for a local church to send a letter of commendation with a believer that could be given to a willing host to vouch for the stranger.

Similar circumstances might present themselves today. Our church is hosting the annual Sola 5 Conference in early September. Out-of-town delegates may literally be strangers to you, but you have opportunity to love strangers by opening your home. In early August, we are once again hosting the African Preaching Seminar. As earlier this year, there is opportunity for BBC to host 8–10 brothers who are coming to learn about preaching. For the most part, these men will be strangers to you, but there is an opportunity to be a lover of strangers. And when those strangers are servants of God, there is an even stronger injunction to extend hospitality: “Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth” (3 John 5–8). Consider that: Extending hospitality to God’s ministers enables you to have a part in their ministry.

Second, the principle of hospitality can be more broadly applied within the context of BBC—and beyond the overnight housing of believers. Hospitality sometimes looks like opening your home to people for a meal, or a Grace Group, or an early-January home fellowship. While we hope that fellow church members are not literal strangers to you, but that you have at least a passing acquaintance with them, hospitality may look like going out of your way to invite church members who are *not* your friends to join you. You may have a weekend getaway place that you frequently invite your friends to for a Saturday fellowship. Have you thought about extending the invitation to someone who is *not* in your normal circle of friends?

Because we are wired to be self-centred, hospitality is not our default position. Lack of hospitality is the path of least resistance. As John Piper said in a 1985 sermon on Romans 12, “All we have to do is yield to the natural gravity of our self-centered life, and the result will be a life so full of self that there is no room for hospitality. We will forget about it. And we will neglect it.” But we may not neglect it.

Third, hospitality is to be done “without grumbling” (1 Peter 4:9). When you open yourself to hospitality, you naturally invite the possibility of being taken advantage of. This can happen with a complete stranger, but you might even feel taken advantage of by a fellow church member. Perhaps you invite them for a meal and they don’t reciprocate. Or you reach out to them and don’t receive a thank you. Whether the slight comes from a stranger or a fellow church member, the temptation is to grumble. But Peter tells us that hospitality must be extended in an ungrumbling fashion.

Fourth, of course, all of this will only happen if you are deliberate about it. As we have seen, opportunities for hospitality may drop in your lap, but more often than not they must be pursued. This means praying for opportunities to show hospitality, actually inviting people over to show hospitality, and a commitment to continue showing hospitality even when it is not immediately rewarding.

If Jesus depended on the hospitality of others (Matthew 10:9–10), and if the early Christians depended on (and received) the same (Acts 2:44–45; 28:7), let’s not think that the New Testament injunctions bear any less weight for us today as they did back then. “Pursue hospitality” (Romans 12:13, CSB).

