

Practice Hospitality

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[0 : 00] What do you make of foreigners? Do you love them or loathe them? Or are you just plain indifferent? One of the most visible and significant demographic features of the past decade, in fact it's less than a decade, in Scotland has been the huge influx of migrants, particularly from Eastern Europe. Since 2004 alone there have been over 50,000 Poles who have come to work in Scotland. Now it's true that the economic downturn that we're experiencing has slowed down the influx. Indeed there's considerable traffic in the opposite direction now as some prefer to return, be it to Poland or to the countries that they had originally come from.

And that same economic downturn has also served to reveal some, or what we might call a disturbing undercurrent of antagonism to foreigners, especially foreign workers here in our own country.

You'll remember strike action that was taken across the country back in January in protest at the employment of foreign workers by Total in a refinery in West Lincolnshire. And there were wildcat strikes of solidarity across the country, including Scotland protesting at the use of foreign workers.

Then you'll have seen in the news just a few weeks ago, I think it was in June, the very unpleasant, and to put it mildly, attacks on Romanians in Belfast that led to many of them deciding to go home under the barrage of vandalism on their homes and violent attack that they were being subjected to.

And then of course we've seen, particularly in local elections, and more this is a feature south of the border of the increasing appeal of the British National Party in parts of England.

[2 : 24] Another disturbing element in the overall panorama. The fear or dislike or hatred even of foreigners has a name, probably more than one name, but one name that is given to it is xenophobia. And this word xenophobia comes from two Greek words, xenophobia, which has been introduced into the English language, and we know it even as an English word, it means fear. But it can mean more than just fear, it can mean dislike or even hatred. So xenophobia, a fear of foreigners, a dislike of foreigners. What about Aberdeen? What about our own city?

Well, Aberdeen has certainly experienced the influx of many Eastern Europeans in search of work, and indeed in Aberdeen we have folk working from many lands and many countries. And another significant overseas presence is in the form of students at Aberdeen University and at Robert Gordon's University particularly. Of the approximately 28,000 students that there are in both institutions, a combined total, something like 6,500 are from overseas. That's pretty close to one in four students, particularly concentrated in postgraduate courses and degrees.

is all sweetness and light as regards the attitude seen in Aberdeen towards foreigners. There have been what I hope we could call isolated incidents of violence towards foreigners, including, very bizarrely, the English, if we describe them in those terms. You may remember the case, again, it was this year, the first part of this year of a girl, Lady Lucy Newman, who was attacked in the city centre. And seemingly, her great crime was having an English accent and was brutally attacked by a passerby.

Then a few weeks ago, I think this was in July, very, very recently, Jaroslav Janicek from Poland was attacked in what was described by the police, and I quote, a brutal and unprovoked attack with a racist or xenophobic element to it. Now, it would be unfair on the basis of one or two isolated incidents to make this as a huge problem. That wouldn't be right. But nonetheless, it does give a flavor of the kind of things that happen even here in Aberdeen. What is our opinion on these matters? Now, I'm sure everybody here would reject all forms of violence towards foreigners, folk from other countries who have come to live and work amongst us. And I imagine you would all reject any suggestion of being xenophobic. And I'm sure with good cause you could reject any such suggestion. But what should be our attitude to foreigners, to those who come from other lands and live and work amongst us?

It's a curious thing that in the New Testament there is a Greek word that is or that has the literally opposite meaning of xenophobia. We've already mentioned what that word means literally.

[6 : 13] Xenophobia, fear or hatred, dislike of foreigners. Well, there's a word in the Greek New Testament that is its literal opposite. And the word is phyloxyenia. Now, phylo means love and xenia is xenos, xenia, it's the foreigner. So, it's love of foreigners. So, it is literally the opposite of xenophobia.

Xenophobia is fear of or dislike of foreigners. And phyloxyenia means love for foreigners. And we're told in one passage, and that's what we're going to be getting to just in a moment, and it will be, our thoughts will revolve around this one passage, this one text. We're told in one text to do this, practice love for foreigners. Practice love for strangers. Now, in that form, that exhortation is maybe not familiar to us because the Greek word that I've mentioned, phyloxyenia, is translated with a different word in English. So, let's turn to the verse in question in Romans chapter 12 and verse 13. And it's actually just two words. What we want to do this morning is just to focus on two words. And we find them in Romans chapter 12 and verse 13. And we'll read the whole of the verse, but we're actually concerned with the final two words. Romans chapter 12 and verse 13, we read, share with God's people who are in need. And then we're told, practice hospitality.

The word hospitality there is a translation of that Greek word, phyloxyenia, love for foreigners. So, what's being said here is, practice a love for the stranger. Practice a love for the foreigner, the person who is amongst you, where you live, who has come from afar. Practice, here translated with the word hospitality. Now, we're going to notice a little bit further on that there's a reason why the word phyloxyenia is translated hospitality. We might say, well, would it not have been better to have said love for foreigners? We'll come to that in a moment. What I want to do is I want to consider these two words. Two words, as we have them certainly in English, practice hospitality. Indeed, there are two words in the original. And consider these two words that make up this simple, but I think also revealing and demanding exhortation. And the manner that we're going to consider this demand or this command, this exhortation, practice hospitality, the manner in which we're going to consider it is by asking three questions of the demand. The first question we're going to ask is, why? You know, why should we do this? Okay, it's in the Bible and we're Christians and so we're meant to do what the Bible says. But just explore that a little bit further. Why? Why practice hospitality?

Secondly, how? How are we to do this? And then thirdly, and perhaps more briefly, what now? Thinking of one or two very immediate and practical applications of what I hope we'll discover as we consider this passage or these two words. First of all, then, why practice hospitality? Why practice a love for foreigners or for strangers? Now, there doesn't seem to be an immediate answer to the question in our passage. Now, in fairness, we've only read the one verse. If we'd read the whole chapter, maybe something would have come out and lent itself to be an explanation or an answer to that question, why? But I think even if we were to read the verses before and after, we wouldn't immediately find an answer to the question. Paul is saying, this is what you should do. He's not overly concerned at this point to give a whole rationale for it. He simply says, this is what you should do.

You should practice hospitality. You should practice a love for the stranger. However, there is an answer to the question, why do this, in the chapter? And the fundamental answer to the question is found at the beginning of the chapter in verse 1. In verse 1, we read, therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy. And then we have all that follows. And this is a pivotal point in the letter of Paul to the Romans.

[11 : 02] In the previous 11 chapters, he's been presenting in a very eloquent and magisterial form a great truth concerning the gospel and who God is and what God has done for us and how great is our salvation.

And then in verse 12, he begins to present to his readers the implications of that. And hence, the first word, therefore, in light of all these things, in view of God's mercy, in view of the great love that he has shown to you, in view of the manner in which he has adopted you into his family, in view of the great love that he has adopted you into his family, in view of the great love that he has the question adequately, the question, why practice hospitality, why show love to the stranger, we would need to explore the length and breadth and height and depth of God's mercy. Now, that would no doubt be a wonderful journey of discovery, but perhaps more than we could cope with this morning in the time in the time available to us. So, what we can do under that general umbrella of recognizing that the fundamental reason for doing this, the answer to the question, why practice hospitality, well, it's in view of God's mercy. Recognizing that as the overall umbrella reason, we can ask the question again, but looking for one or two more specific reasons. Why love foreigners? Why love the stranger? Why open your home to those who have come from afar, to those you do not know? And we could maybe answer that question with two statements or two truths. And the first one is this, that God loves the stranger. God loves the foreigner. God's love and mercy extends to the stranger. And this truth is reflected and revealed in different ways in the Bible, but I just want to mention two ways. First of all, this truth is reflected in his law, the law of God as it was given to the people of Israel through

Moses. In that law, it is reflected God's love for the stranger, God's love for the foreigner. But God's love for the foreigner also is demonstrated in his salvation, in his saving work. And let's just notice these two things briefly. First of all, God's love for the foreigner, for the stranger, is reflected in his law. In the Old Testament, Israel was chosen as God's special people, chosen for no merits of their own, but purely on the basis of grace. And all others, all those who did not form part of Israel were Gentiles or foreigners.

And yet, in God's law revealed to Moses, we find repeated indications of God's love for the foreigner. And just to mention a couple of examples, because time wouldn't allow us to do more than that.

In Leviticus chapter 19 and verse 34, what do we read? Leviticus 19 verse 34, the alien living with you. The word alien conjures up images of ET and all kinds of funny images that's in our mind, but literally it simply means the stranger or the foreigner. The foreigner, the stranger living with you must be treated as one of your native born. Love him as yourself.

[15 : 19] For you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God. Love him as yourself. And as we listen to these words, they bring to mind the words of Jesus. To love our neighbor as ourself. To love your enemy as yourself.

And of course, it shouldn't surprise us that it reminds us of the words of Jesus, because when Jesus brought his teaching, his teaching was steeped in the Old Testament and in the law of God. And he taught that to his hearers. But then we have the passage that we read in Deuteronomy also, in Deuteronomy chapter 10. And you'll forgive me if on these occasions when I mention these passages, really we're going to limit ourselves to reading them without much comment in order to give time for what we want to say just in a moment. But in Deuteronomy chapter 10, and we can read verses 17 to 19.

We'd already read the whole passage, but just having identified the reason why we've chosen this passage, let's just read it again. Deuteronomy chapter 10 from verse 17. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the alien or the stranger and the foreigner, giving him food and clothing. And you are to love those who are aliens or strangers or foreigners, for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt. And so there are two verses that we are quoting, but really if we were to have an exhaustive list of all the occasions when God in the Old Testament and particularly in the law that reveals his character, if we were to look at all of them, the list would be a very long one. So God loves the stranger. Why are we to practice hospitality?

Why are we to show love to the foreigner? Because God loves the stranger. God loves foreigners. And this is reflected in his law. But not only is it reflected in his law, it's demonstrated in his salvation.

Indeed, we can personalize this and say it's reflected or demonstrated in your salvation, Christian friend. If you are a Christian, if you are trusting in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, if you have experienced forgiveness of sins and been adopted into the family of God, then you have experienced God's love for the stranger, God's love for the foreigner. Let's read what Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians and chapter 2 and verses 11 to 13. Ephesians chapter 2 and verse 11. Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth, foreigners by birth, and called uncircumcised by those who call themselves the circumcision, that done in the body by the hands of men, remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now, in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. Paul says you were foreigners, and yet you were objects of the love of God. You were far away from God's kingdom, from the nation of God, from the people of God, and yet you were brought near by Jesus. Why? Because

[18 : 58] God demonstrates His love for the stranger, demonstrates His love for the foreigner in His salvation that He offers and makes available to all. And of course, this drawing in of the foreigner into God's people is simply in fulfillment of the promises of the covenant that God made with Abraham. Not only that Abraham would be blessed, but that in Abraham all nations of the world would be blessed, and particularly in Abraham's seed, who we know to be Jesus Christ. So, in answer to our first question, why practice hospitality? Why show love for the stranger, for the foreigner? Well, because God loves the stranger. God loves the foreigner. But another answer to the question, why practice hospitality? Why show love to the foreigner? Is the following answer, because we love God. If we are Christians, we love God.

We recognize that God loves the stranger, but we love God. And to put it this way, His friends are our friends. This is in fact something that ties in with a covenant responsibility. We who are in covenant with God, have a covenant duty to be friends with His friends. His friends are our friends. And if He loves the stranger, if He welcomes the stranger, if His arms are open to receive the stranger, then we who love God must equally open our arms to such, because we love Him, and we are in covenant with Him. We want to please Him. We want to be like Him. Indeed, this is the great work that God is doing in us, transforming us, transforming us into the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ. And we want to be like Him, and we are being made like Him. We want to serve Him. And we do all of these things. We please Him.

We become like Him. We serve Him. We do all of these things when we practice hospitality, when we show love to the foreigner, to the stranger in our midst. So, there we have an answer to that first question that we've posed. Why practice hospitality? Why show love to the stranger? But moving on to the second question that we want to consider, and it's this. How are we to practice hospitality? The verse we're considering, it's very brief, it's two words, practice hospitality. Very well, but how are we to do this? How are we to show love to the foreigner or the stranger? Well, a brief, and it will have to be brief, exploration of these two words will give us, I think, a pretty good answer to the question, how are we to do this? First of all, the word hospitality. I've already explained and mentioned that literally it means love for the stranger. Philocenia, love for the stranger. And we have been stressing that literal meaning of the word. Indeed, the whole sermon revolves around that literal meaning of the word. And yet it is clear that the word came to be used for a particular expression of love for the foreigner or stranger, namely hospitality. That is why the translation is a very good one. I'm not saying that it should say there, practice love for the stranger. What has happened is that this ethical imperative that was laid upon God's people to welcome the stranger and to show love to the foreigner, this love that was required of them, found this particular expression in the exercise, in the offering of hospitality. And so this word, which literally means love for the stranger, came to mean more specifically hospitality. This was the manner in which you could show love to the stranger. Hence, it's helpful in answering our question, how are we to show love to the stranger? Well, in this way, by showing hospitality. Well, what is hospitality? Well, it's the opening up of your home to the foreigner or stranger, to feed, to befriend, to provide shelter and protection. Your home is a gift you have received from God to be used for the blessing of others. The Christian's home is not his castle. The Christian's home is his hostel, but a hostel where you don't pay and where you can offer love and hospitality to those in need to have come from afar. How are we to practice hospitality? Well, here, this word gives us a clear indication of one way in which we can show love for the stranger. But the other word in this demand is also worth just exploring a little. We're told, practice hospitality. Now again, here the word that Paul uses is a revealing one. Because the word that Paul uses isn't a word that would ordinarily be translated by the word practice. Because the Greek word that Paul uses literally means to pursue. And I think I'm right in saying that in some versions of the Bible they opt for that more literal translation. So, what Paul is saying is pursue hospitality. In fact, the word, the Greek word can be used to give the meaning in English to persecute. Now, the idea there is of something very rigorous, of something that involves great effort. The idea is of something that is proactive. Pursue hospitality. This isn't a passive thing.

This is something that we rigorously and proactively are to do. This is what Paul is saying. The challenge is to eagerly practice hospitality. Not wait for a situation to present itself. It's not that someday somebody's going to knock on our door and say, hello, I'm from, I don't know, Burkina Faso. I want a cup of tea. And you're going to say, oh, I'm a Christian. Come on in. I'm into hospitality. The Bible says I should do that kind of thing. You see, that's just, it's not going to happen. You've got to pursue hospitality.

You've got to seek out opportunity. You've got to proactively discover ways in which you can reach and show hospitality and love to the stranger in your midst. In this city, the thousands of students coming from Africa and Asia and across the world who will make Aberdeen their home for a year or two or three or four. And those who come to work and indeed settle in our city. What Paul is saying to us and what God is saying to us in this verse is pursue hospitality, eagerly practice hospitality.

[26 : 06] Now, while I'm saying that this word practice doesn't do full justice to what Paul is saying, because the word that Paul uses is more rigorous, pursue, actively practice. Nonetheless, the word practice does have its merits. And one particular merit that we would stress is that the word does point to that which is a regular and permanent activity. You know, if you practice something, that's something that you regularly do, you ordinarily do. It's not something that you occasionally do if you practice something. And so, the word does have that merit in stressing to us that this imperative, this demand that we are presented with as Christians is something that should be part of our life, a regular and permanent activity, and not simply an occasional or symbolic gesture from time to time. How are we to practice hospitality? How are we to show love for the stranger or the foreigner? Well, here this passage gives us one way. In fact, we might argue that this is presented as the principal way, the opening up of your home. No doubt we could maybe think of other ways in which we could show love and concern for the stranger. This isn't the only way, but it does seem to be presented as a principal way in which we can fulfill this demand that is presented to us.

So, there we have some thoughts in answer to that second question. How are we to practice hospitality or love for the stranger? Finally, the third question that I had mentioned that I was going to try and answer is, what now? We are commanded to practice hospitality. We are commanded to pursue love for the foreigner and stranger. As Christians, it's not enough not to be xenophobic. You know, we began by considering this problem, this social problem, and its expression in our midst. It's not enough for us to say, well, I reject that. It's not enough for us to say, well, I would never do that.

It's not enough for us to say, well, I'm not a racist. It's not enough for us to say, I would never insult somebody from another country. It's not enough not to do these things. As Christians, we are not principally defined by what we are not, but by what we are. Our identity is essentially determined by what we do rather than by what we don't do. This, of course, is a great problem sometimes as Christians. We define ourselves by what we don't do. Well, I don't do this. I don't go to this place.

You know, I don't get drunk. I don't go to nightclubs or whatever. Maybe you do. I don't know. But, you know, we historically, traditionally defined ourselves in that way, what we don't do.

But, of course, as Christians, that's not our principal identity. Our principal identity is what we do do. It's not enough to say, well, I would never insult a foreigner. I would never be a racist. I would never do these things. No, what God is saying, well, that's fine. Of course, I can't imagine you we do that. But what I'm saying is that there are things you must positively do. You must pursue hospitality. You must actively seek out to help and to succor and to welcome and to befriend.

[29 : 42] Well, what can we do? How can we practice hospitality? How can we show love to the stranger and foreigner in our city? Well, I just want to mention two very concrete opportunities.

And with that, we'll draw things to a close. First of all, as we understand that word, *xenos*, as being not simply foreigner in the sense of somebody who has come from another country, though it has that meaning, but also it has the meaning of stranger. So, that person who has come from elsewhere. And so, I think it's legitimate to include those who have maybe come from other parts of our own country and who are coming to Aberdeen for the first time. And in that regard, here in the congregation, we have a particular opportunity and responsibility. We are at the start or about to be at the start of a new academic year. And we'll have many coming to participate in our congregation from other parts of Scotland and perhaps beyond. And one concrete opportunity to do what we're being told to do here, to practice hospitality, is a hospitality scheme that we have for those who come and live amongst us. And we need host families. We need people who will say, yes, I'm willing to participate. And mention is made of that in the newsletter. And we need folks to sign up for that so that when folks do arrive, the students arrive in the next week or two weeks, we can immediately allocate them to homes that would be willing to open their home, to invite them for lunch and to show them kindness and consideration. So, that's one very concrete way in which you can do what God is saying we ought to do as Christians. That student scheme, particularly for those who are our own students who will be part of the congregation. That's one way. You can do that online, by the way, if that's easier. But there are more details in, I think, in the newsletter of how you can sign up for that. But a second way that I also want to highlight is an overseas student's friendship scheme that is run in partnership with Friends International. Now, Friends International is a Christian organization that is dedicated to providing a welcome for those who come from overseas, particularly students, to study in Britain. And they are able to make contact with many.

Perhaps we have difficulty in making contact with people. Somebody might say, well, I'd like to do that, but I don't know anybody. Well, this is a way in which the contact is made by others. But they work in partnership with churches, and particularly families within churches who would be willing to offer hospitality to an overseas student that's coming from Africa or Asia or whatever, and who is willing and who would like to have that connection with a family, in this case in Aberdeen. So, that is another concrete way in which you can practice hospitality. Now, I have the forms. Very conveniently, this is like Blue Peter. I have the forms here ready. And if you want to be involved in this way, then just ask me for one of these forms. And myself, Ian Meredith, can also give you some pointing in the right direction.

And what you need to do is just fill in the form, and you can give it back to me, and we can send them in a pack to the folks at Friends International. So, that is another concrete way in which you can show hospitality. And this is, you know, this hospitality that would be shown, it's not conditional. It's not, oh, well, if you come to church, we'll show you hospitality. No, this is for somebody who would like to participate in a family, and we give them the opportunity to do so.

Now, in that context, we will have the opportunity to share our faith, and it will grant us opportunity, and no doubt, to show that the love that we have is not our own, but is a love that has been given to us.

[33 : 51] And doors, no doubt, may be open. But it's not, that's not the point. There's not some condition attached. It's simply the showing of love and care for those who are far from home, and perhaps very lonely, and who would appreciate that opportunity. So, there are two concrete opportunities to do what we are told we are to do in view of God's mercy, practice hospitality.

In closing, I'd invite you to cast your eyes forward to a glorious day that is fast approaching, when we will all stand before Jesus on that glorious and indeed dreadful day of judgment.

And on that day, how sweet to our ears will be these words, Come, you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. How sweet to our ears these words will sound as they are addressed to us by Jesus. And to whom will these words be addressed?

Well, to those of whom Jesus can say, I was a stranger, and you invited me in. To such, these words will be addressed. Let us pray.

Let us pray.