

Homelessness: What Does the Bible Say about Hospitality?

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Homelessness is a huge and growing issue in our state, Colorado, and elsewhere throughout the United States. How do we Christians—individually and together—engage this part of the public square? As we consider this issue today, it is important that we examine carefully what the Bible has to say, because it has been much misunderstood and misapplied. As part of the problem, the English translations fail to reveal important aspects of the related texts, e.g., the very significant tenses of the verbs.

As our city—and cities throughout the country, as well as worldwide—wrestle with how to help the homeless people and the city at the same time, what does God’s Word have to say about what he would have us do, and not do? To begin, what are we to do? What can we do, individually and as a church, which the Bible calls the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27, *et al.*)?

1. Matthew 25:31-33 records what will take place when Jesus returns in his second coming. He will separate those who believe in him and are forgiven, from those who do not believe in him and therefore are not forgiven according to God’s Word. In 25:41 and 43, Jesus condemns to hell the unbelievers who reject him and his gracious forgiveness and did not provide hospitality, when he said, “I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me;...” (25:43, NRSV, ESV, Greek: συνηγάγετέ [*sunēgagete* < συνάγω (*sunagō*), to gather together, meet together, receive with kindness, hospitality (verb, second person plural)]) A careful study of the text indicates that the condemned are not believers in Christ, nor do they care about him or his faithful followers. Yet, in 25:34-35, the Lord says to his believers, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you.... For...I was a stranger, and you welcomed me,...” (ESV, NRSV, Greek)
 - a. Clearly, this is a serious matter in Jesus’ eyes. How do we make sure we are in the right group?
 - b. We do so by understanding the meaning of the words and acting accordingly. Specifically, is this text talking about all strangers or certain ones, and what does it mean to be received with kindness, hospitality, welcomed? In our house? As is often the case, in Biblical hermeneutics (the principles of interpretation), the axiom that the Bible is its own best interpreter is seen here as well. To understand this text, we do well to examine Romans 12:13.
2. Consider Romans 12:13.

This passage occurs in what Biblical scholars call one of the Apostle Paul’s three main “gift catalogues,” i.e., listings of the spiritual gifts each believer in Christ has received from our Lord and Savior through the Holy Spirit. Briefly, we read...

- a. Text: “**6...we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us....Be devoted to one another in brotherly love** [φιλαδελφία (*philadelphia*) < φιλέω (*phileō*, love,

affection for, delight in) + ἀδελφός (*adelphos*, brother, fellow Christian)] ¹³**contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.”** (NASB)

The phrase, “according to the grace that is given to us” is equal to an imperative—a command—as are the six phrases including the participles beginning with “in” that follow. The NASB is one of the English versions that most closely follows the Greek in this passage and in most passages.

b. How can you implement these applications of the text?

1) The context of this verse is informative and instructive.

a) Paul is here speaking of the “one body we are in Christ” (12:5), and not just limited to the congregation in Rome. The phrase refers **not** to an ecclesiastical organization **but** to a spiritual organism—not theoretical and structural but relational and personal. The term “in Christ” provides the vertical and horizontal basis for understanding the church: by virtue of our relationship with Christ we are members of his body, the one holy catholic church (as in the original Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, referring to the global outreach God has commanded his covenant people to have in his plan of redeeming and restoring his creation).

b) The Greek words translated, “contributing to the needs of the saints,” are significant.

1- The English word, “contributing” translates the Greek participle, κοινωνοῦντες (*koinōnountes*) < the noun, κοινωνία (*koinōnia*). The noun means fellowship, but here it signifies that very special fellowship, communion in Christ, known and practiced only by his holy followers—the saints (the root meaning of which is holy, i.e., separated from the world to God—for service to him. The verb means to **do** (engaging in) such fellowship building; the noun means to **have** such caring, loving, fellowship.

2- In this verse, that fellowship involves a financial giving to meet the needs of the saints. To practice (the participle is in the present tense (i.e., continuous, durative, ongoing) and the active voice (i.e., we who have the gift of giving do it: we can’t pass this one off to others). Again, this is an imperative, a command, not an option.

c) Similar is the participle which follows: “practicing hospitality.”

1- This participle, “practicing hospitality,” is also a present tense, active voice, imperative. The Greek noun for hospitality literally means “love of strangers.” The word is φιλοξενία (*philoxenia*) < φιλέω (*phileō*, love, affection for, delight in) + ξένος (*xenos*), stranger, foreigner, alien. This verse is one of many that proves the church is **not systemically xenophobic**, not one bit. Xenophobia is the direct opposite of what God’s purpose for his covenant

people is all about, and we see this reality throughout the whole Bible (cf., e.g., Genesis 3:15; 12:1-3; 17:1-5; Matthew 28:18-20; Revelation 7:9).

- 2- The outstanding Greek scholar, R. C. H. Lenski explains another very important part of this text exceptionally well. Notice his insightful translation of διώκοντες [*diōkontes*, translating it “pursuing” instead of “practicing”] and his explanation of its fuller meaning that the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write, that the Spirit intends for us to know. Lenski translates and interprets:

“As for the hospitality—pursuing it!” [Now he explains:] A whole chapter would be needed to set forth this “hospitality” (literally, “love of strangers”) as it was practiced in the early church. The article [τὴν (*tēn*, the), which the English translations mistakenly omit] indicates that it was the regular thing in the case of Christians. Brethren who traveled—think of Paul and his party—others who were persecuted and fled as exiles, some of these being destitute of means, messengers being sent from place to place, were everywhere shown hospitality by fellow Christians. This was a necessity in the world of that day, but it was met with the spirit which considered all Christians as one family (v. 10a), all of them strangers and pilgrims in this world, all of them clinging together as such pilgrims would. Pagans even said that, although they had never seen each other, they treated each other as blood brothers. [What a great witness for Christ Jesus!]

The situation obtaining in our land and in our day is vastly different, and such a field for hospitality is virtually closed to us at present. Yet good opportunities still occur. The accusative [case of the noun, *philoxenia* (hospitality)] is not the object: “Pursuing the hospitality.” This is the accusative of reference which is also called adverbial....

“Given to” hospitality removes the distinctiveness of διώκοντες [*diōkontes* pursuing]. It is of little help to look at διώκοντας [*diōkontas*, persecuting] in the next verse and to ask whether Paul’s mind consciously used the two so closely together on purpose and to remark that, if he did, we should understand neither better. Trust Paul for this striking touch! Who would ordinarily say that a virtue like hospitality is to be *pursued* when this verb is the standard one to indicate *persecuting*? But many needed hospitality because they had been *persecuted*, and in the next breath Paul tells us to bless those *persecuting* us. We understand Paul better when we observe these identical participles. At the thought of many a *persecuted* exile he says to the Romans: You *persecute* (pursue) the due hospitality, that is

the kind of persecution in which you indulge and remember, men may and do *persecute* (pursue) also you so that you may need fellow Christians who *persecute* (pursue) hospitality toward you! So far is this from a chance use of the two words that the very words touch the motives Paul desires to stir into action. Hospitality is literally to be chased after as one hunts an animal and delights to carry the booty home.¹

- d) Now we can understand more accurately and fully what Jesus meant in Matthew 25, where Jesus says, “I was a stranger, and you invited Me in;...” (NASB; Greek, *sunēgagete*, received with kindness, hospitality; ESV, NRSV: welcomed)

Throughout the whole of God’s Word—Genesis through Revelation—it is clear that words and deeds are a unity. That is, words alone are not enough; they must be put into practice. (Cf. Matthew 23; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; John 14:21) Scholars in the field of Biblical literature call this unity of a word and its accompanying action a major motif, i.e., an important recurring theme through all of Scripture.

So, how is this “love of strangers” to be demonstrated in order to be real? The text says, *συνηγάγετε* (*sunēgagete*, you took in) < *συνάγω* (*sunagō*, to gather together). Lenski explains, “In *συνηγάγετε* the σύν [lit., with, together with, besides] conveys the idea of taking the stranger into the family and there giving him lodging.”²

- 1- The next question that arises is, “Which strangers?” The texts are commanding that we pursue hospitality to fellow believers who have needs we can address.
 - a- We do so individually by being observant in order to become aware. Intentionally inquiring and willingly trying to help when we sense need.
 - b- And in my church home we do so corporately, and also individually, e.g., in our Community Assistance Fund and by supporting local, statewide, national, and international ministries, e.g., House of Neighborly Service; Denver Rescue Mission, Harvest Farm; LCMS Urban & Inner-City Mission; LCMS International Mission; Catholic Charities; and Samaritan’s Purse, among a multitude of others.

- 2) Other texts, such as Hebrews 13:2, are further explanations of the above Biblical teaching that we are urged to pursue hospitality—looking for opportunities to help fellow believers in need—in these ways. See also 1 John 3:17, “If anyone has

¹ R. C. H. Lenski, [*The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*](#) (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1936), pp. 772–773.

² R. C. H. Lenski, [*The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*](#) (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), pp. 992–993.

material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” Here again we see the emphasis on making sure the needs of brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus are met in the church.

3. So what do we understand from these texts about the subject of homelessness as we engage the public square for Christ?
 - a. God’s Word is clear: There should be no saint—i.e., a believer in and follower of Jesus Christ—who is homeless; there should be no homelessness in the church.
 - b. Society is another subject.
 - 1) A fine investigative series on the Loveland, Colorado homeless subpopulation was done a few years ago by our local newspaper, and one of the key findings is that the homeless are not a uniform cohort. This sociological reality is being ignored by the one-size-fits-all approach that our Loveland city government has been taking recently.
 - 2) Discernment of important differences is necessary for speaking and acting the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), pertaining to Christians engaging the public square corporately regarding helping the homeless. All human beings bear the image of God, and therefore all—including those we don’t particularly like—must be treated with respect for their bearing God’s image and with love, as the Holy Spirit led the Apostle Paul to define in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

Nevertheless, not all human beings’ values and behavior is to be affirmed, much less rewarded, which facilitates their continuing the counterproductive behavior. For example, the most realistic and helpful corporate ministries for homeless will not group those engaging in substance abuse and criminal behavior with normal individuals, couples, and families. Nor will they include biological males who have all their genitalia and 15 times the testosterone that any biological female will ever have—no matter what hormones she is taking—to use female only restrooms, locker rooms, and bedrooms.³

- a) An example of the results of a church acting apart from its Biblical anthropology, which includes the reality that human sin is serious and continuous, occurred when it decided to open its facilities to homeless people without distinguishing differences, without vetting, and allowing homeless people to stay the night without first separating out those who will harm others and destroy property. Consequently, church congregations have seen—and had to pay for—much damage in restrooms, including fixtures being ripped off the walls and toilets being jammed, and damage to worship-related features in the sanctuary. As a result, these congregations have had to discontinue their services to the homeless,

³ See the documents on homosexuality/LGBTQ+ at <https://fromacorntoak12.com/current-issues/> and related subjects on other pages of that Website. See also <https://seelyedward.academia.edu/research>.

thus harming the homeless who would never do such evil and who need the church's help. Thus, we clearly see the lack of wisdom that results from the failure to function according to the realistic Biblical anthropology.

That observation, of course, leads to a resolution of the matter. In the light of the Bible's teaching, churches should not give up on helping the homeless; just discern who are fellow believers in Christ Jesus—to whom the Holy Spirit has given the new birth (e.g., John 3:3; 1 Corinthians 12:3)—and who will receive well the assistance the church offers. Some individual congregations can construct several ways to help the homeless people. Other congregations, who want to help but can't do it alone, can and do work with other congregations to provide a significant ministry for people who have no home.

Also, a church congregation, especially one who has members with specific gifts, skills, occupations, and professional education in the related areas involved, may decide to reach out—very carefully—to certain non-Christians as a witness for the Lord and only Savior, Christ Jesus. This effort should be exceedingly well-planned, monitored, and supervised. Those non-Christians being considered must be carefully vetted to discern the ones who will be receptive to needed requirements and cooperate with the church that is trying in many ways to help them. Sometimes the vetting can occur by one or more church members who know a non-Christian who has become homeless and needs help. A special committee should be appointed to do the screening and oversight of this ministry, and the committee should include members who are mature in Christ, wise, and who have education and/or experience in these matters.

Very importantly, the church should develop a Biblical rationale and explanation for why and how they select some to be included in this ministry. The rationale should include the Biblical anthropology and additional reasons cited above and why the church is only able to help others by referring them to professional or governmental authorities for what they need. A well-meaning church cannot endanger members who want to help in this ministry or open the church to harmful and damaging behavior by unvetted and unqualified homeless people.

The decision to work with some but not others is not prejudicial. It is wise.

- b) It is also essential for effective ministry for the Lord. Another example of a church trying to help all people with no distinguishing of difference occurred in a local congregation my wife and I and our family living in this community joined. One of the ministries our congregation provides is a Community Assistance Fund, which offers assistance to members and others in the city who need financial and other help. Recently, our church had to revise that ministry it has been doing for many years to do the funding instead through a professional Christian ministry elsewhere in the city, where community people, nonmembers seeking help, would go and meet with professionals who are specially educated for such work. Why? Because our staff members were being harassed and mistreated in other ways, and

were not trained to function in such situations. As a result, homeless people and others in the area of our church, now have to travel all the way across the city (from the NW sector to the SE sector) to receive the help they need.

- 3) Moreover, the failure to understand and act in accord with the Bible can be fatal, physically as well as spiritually, for example in situations in which hospitality is attempted without regard to the most realistic understanding of human nature as revealed in Biblical anthropology. God's Word is not commanding that we bring every person into our home. There is a 180 degree difference between regenerate (born again) believers in Christ, whose hearts and minds have been changed by the Holy Spirit who now dwells within them—and unregenerate people, who have not experienced this spiritual rebirth, and don't want to have anything to do with the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ, and who are vulnerable to demonic influence and even possession. This news item illustrates the profound difference:
 - In Connecticut, the *Hartford Currant* reported that Tyree Smith was sleeping on the second-floor porch of a building when a man, 43-year-old Angel Gonzalez, invited him to the third floor to bring him in out of the cold winter day. Smith later admitted that he then beat the man with an ax so severely that he was able to remove an eye from his victim's head along with pieces of brain matter and a piece of his skull. He then went to a cemetery and cannibalized the eyeball—which he said tasted like an oyster—and some of Mr. Gonzalez's brain.⁴
- 4) Yes, as we try to obey God's Word in our day-to-day lives, including as we engage the public square, we must do so in the light of Jesus Christ, to whom the whole Bible points and explains. Doing so has saved not just one life but countless lives. Let us pray for our triune God's wisdom and guidance as we discuss and act on this matter before us.

⁴ Staff, "Cannibal Who Killed Man With An Axe And Ate His Brain And Eyeball Has Been Granted Conditional Release," [Truth](#), 2/22/25 (Accessed 2/24/2025)