

Homelessness: What Does the Bible Say about Christian Hospitality?

Rev. Edward D. Seely, Th.M., Ph.D.

Homelessness is a huge and growing issue here in our state, Colorado, and elsewhere throughout the United States. How do we Christians—individually and together—engage this part of the public square and do so in the light of God’s Word? As we consider this issue, it is necessary 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 do not reveal important aspects of the pertinent passages, e.g., the very significant tenses of the original New Testament Greek verbs the Holy Spirit led the writers to include in their texts.

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?¹ To begin, what are we to do? Remembering that we are called by God to serve him in the church and in the world, we look to him for what we can do, individually and as a church, which the Bible calls the body of Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:12; *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 and follow him and are forgiven, from those who do not believe in and follow him and therefore are not forgiven according to God’s Word. In 25:41 and 43, Jesus says the unbelievers who reject him and his gracious redemption and forgiveness and do not provide hospitality to him, will be condemned to hell. He provides examples including, “I was a stranger, and you did not welcome me;...” (25:43) The word Jesus used in this verse, which Matthew recorded in the original Greek, is συνηγάγετέ (*sunēgagete*, a verb, second person plural) < συνάγω (*sunagō*, to gather together, meet together, receive with kindness, hospitality, welcome [NRSV, ESV], invite in [NIV, NASB], take in [KJV]). A careful study of the text indicates that the condemned are not believers in and followers of 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 [*sunēgagete*] 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 welcomed, taken in, received with kindness, hospitality? In our house? In Biblical hermeneutics (the principles of interpretation), the axiom that the Bible is its own best interpreter and commentator is clearly seen here.

¹ Pertaining to our calling to serve God in the city, and in the other locales in which he has led us to live and work, see, e.g., Jeremiah 29:4-9; note in particular v. 7: “...seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.” Recall also Matthew 5:13-16.

- c. In 25:34-40, we read that when he comes again for the final judgment, King Jesus will bring into his kingdom those “who are blessed by my Father” and who lived by faith, obeying him in several specific ways, thus inheriting the kingdom. Jesus mentions in particular that they welcomed him by giving him something to eat when he was hungry, giving him something to drink when he was thirsty, inviting him in when he was a stranger, giving him clothes when he needed them, looking after him when he was sick, and visiting him in prison.
- 1) In verses 37-39, we are informed that his followers, filled with wonderment, will ask the Lord when they did for him all these acts he mentioned. Then, in verse 40, Jesus says, “whatever you did for the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”
 - 2) The word Jesus used, ἀδελφός (*adelphos*, brother) is the same word he used earlier in Matthew 12:50, when he said, “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother (*adelphos*) and sister and mother.” Very significantly in 25:40, Jesus uses the definite article—*the* least—which is one of the ways in Greek to indicate emphasis: our Lord is emphasizing that he identifies with all who believe in and follow him; they—generically speaking, i.e., including females—are his brothers, *adelphos* being used in the generic sense. They are part of his church, his body. It is important to understand that he is not referring to unbelievers.
 - 3) Therefore, when Jesus is affirming his followers, explaining that when they have done these good deeds for fellow believers, they have also done so to Jesus, and when he condemns those who did not perform these acts of love for his followers, and thus not to Jesus himself, he is not referring to their doing so for all who are homeless. He is talking about fellow believers in and followers of him, people who have been born again, who therefore have a new heart and mind, who—due to their faith in Christ Jesus (Romans 4:23-25)—have been credited with his righteousness. These texts also apply to the matter of immigration, but that is a subject for another paper.
 - 4) Many Christians misunderstand these texts and apply them to having to engage in such hospitality to all people, including non-Christians, who have not experienced the new birth, who do not have the new regenerated nature and the wisdom of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and who are not maturing in sanctification, Christlikeness. (Cf. Ephesians 4:12-24 and ff.) They also lack a Biblical anthropology, including the post-fall realities pertaining to sin. All these realities can and do result in much tragedy that is unnecessary, as will be seen in a sad anecdote at the conclusion of this paper.
 - 5) Here we have another key reason to “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” and to “do this with gentleness and respect.” (1 Peter 3:15) Our daily desire to look for ways to witness for Christ Jesus, to explain the need for him and the present as well as eternal benefits of believing in him, enable people—including those who are homeless—to

enter the Lord's kingdom, including the church² (the body of Christ), with changed lives that will make it possible for us to help them in all the ways they need and thus to do so for Jesus. We do so out of our love for Jesus and for human beings who bear his image (Genesis 1:26-28), all of whom the Lord wants in his kingdom (1 Timothy 2:4), those "from every tribe and language and people and nation." (Revelation 5:9)

2. The focus here, we should keep in mind, is homeless people who are believers in and followers of Jesus Christ. These texts in God's Word do not issue a command to include all who do not believe in God and who want nothing to do with him. However, Christians do help unbelievers in at least three ways.
 - a. We daily keep alert for opportunities to help non-Christians to believe in and follow Jesus Christ and enter the kingdom of God, as described in the above comments. We not only talk about Jesus, but we sincerely and faithfully live according to his commands and repent when we fail to do so. Then we redouble our efforts to do better, in accord with his will, asking for his help to do so. We "walk the talk," and that is a major teaching throughout God's Word. (Cf., e.g., Deuteronomy 27:26; Matthew 5:16; 7:15-23; John 14:21; 1 Peter 2:9-12) As the text in Peter's first letter indicates, pagan people watch us to see if our words are verified by our deeds over time, i.e., with a track record demonstrating we are genuine, "the real deal." Who wants to believe—much less follow—a phony, who is *ipso facto* untrustworthy? Peter here restates Jesus' command to "Let [λαμπάτω (*lampsatō*, let shine, imperative mood, a command that his true followers take seriously)] your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16 NASB) Then we can do much more for them than we can while they are still opposed to God, his kingdom, and his people.
 - b. There are many Christian organizations serving in the name of Jesus Christ that do—by themselves and sometimes in cooperation with secular services—reach out to all people, including unbelievers, and do so in a witness for Christ. That is good, and many times such outreach results in unbelievers becoming believers in Christ. One such ministry that does this type of evangelistic work—and does it excellently—is Samaritan's Purse. It should be noted that these organizations that do their work in the name of Christ Jesus take the needed precautions and are well equipped and trained to manage—proactively and, if necessary reactively—the serious issues that can emerge when bringing the Good News of the Gospel of Christ into secular contexts that include people who are hostile to Christians. As we Christians give money, time, and skills to help these ministries, we are helping homeless people in a witness for Christ Jesus.

² We need to keep in mind that the church and the kingdom of God are not the same. In historic Christian theology, we see that the Bible portrays the church in two dimensions, which are referred to as the visible church and the invisible church. The visible church is all the people we see whose names are on the official membership roster and all who attend worship and other church events, some of whom are not—or not yet—believers in and followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the triune God. The invisible church consists of all who do believe in and obey Jesus Christ as their only Savior and Lord. For more on this subject, see [Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology—With a Focus on Its Very Practical Dimensions, Including Answers to Our Great Questions of Life—for Now and Eternity \(PowerPoint\)](#).

- c. Many countries, especially those whose cultures have been impacted and shaped by a Christian influence, have established government agencies to help homeless people and others in poverty in numerous manners. These agencies are typically funded by taxes, to which Christian citizens and residents contribute and function sometimes in other ways.

These services are good, and therefore are from God (James 1:17), but they are not all that is required of us who are God's children pertaining to fellow believers in Christ who are homeless. The Christian organizations who reach out to all poor people—including homeless people—are primarily evangelistic ministries focused on outreach to unbelievers. That, too, is a calling of the Lord, and is good, but more is needed.

- 3. To understand what God's Word is requiring of his faithful followers in Christ, and in particular to understand the text in Matthew 25:31-46, it is helpful to also examine Romans 12:13. The Apostle Paul urges the church to, "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." (ESV)

This passage occurs in the context of what Biblical scholars call one of Paul's three main "gift catalogues," i.e., listings of the spiritual gifts, of which each believer in Christ has received at least one from our Lord and Savior through the Holy Spirit. Paul here mentions seven of the gifts the Holy Spirit gives to members of the church. Other gifts are identified elsewhere in the New Testament.³

- a. **"...we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us...."** (Romans 12:6 NRSV) The gifts of the Holy Spirit are special abilities that some Christians have by God's grace that enable them to serve the Lord and his church in extraordinary ways. Some of the gifts are extra dimensions of certain ways of ministering to others that all Christians are expected to do, e.g., in this chapter, service (12:7; cf. 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:1,12,13); exhort (12:8 ESV; cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 3:13); contributing generously (12:8; cf. 2 Corinthians 9:11-13); showing mercy (12:8; cf. 2 Corinthians 9:7)

Then, in 12:9-10 the Holy Spirit leads Paul to reveal the Lord's will as to the motivation and use of the gifts: love. "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰Love one another with brotherly affection." The outstanding New Testament Greek scholar, R. C. H. Lenski, explains an important distinction between the two main Greek words for love in the Bible that Paul uses in these two verses.

In the twelfth chapter of First Corinthians Paul discusses the charismata [the Greek word for gifts, e.g., in 1 Corinthians 12:4 as in Romans 12:6]. In the thirteenth chapter he speaks of ἀγάπη [*agapē*], "love." So after discussing the sevenfold charismatic activity he now points to the ἀγάπη. The article refers to "the love" which, as the essential and the supreme

³ For a discussion of the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the church, see [Essential Christianity: Historic Christian Systematic Theology—With a Focus on Its Very Practical Dimensions, Including Answers to Our Great Questions of Life—for Now and Eternity \(PowerPoint\)](#).

fruit of justifying faith, is and must be found in every believer. Regarding the word itself see [Romans] 1:7. It is far more than *φιλία* (*philia*), the love of affection; it is the love that comprehends and according to that comprehension purposes to do all it can for its object. With this “love” [*agapē*] God loved the world, with this love we are to love our enemies. “The love” with its article = the whole of it, every bit that one has.⁴

- b. In Romans 12:10 Paul also includes, “**Be devoted to one another in brotherly love**” [*φιλαδελφία* (*philadelphia*) < *φιλέω* (*phileō*, love, affection for, delight in) + *ἀδελφός* (*adelphos*, brother, fellow Christian)].... We are to exhibit both the highest form of love, the cognitively careful and behavioral *agapē* love and also the affectionate *philia* love. Both of these forms of love motivate and manifest the result of “**contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.**” (Romans 12:13 NASB)

The phrase, “according to the grace that is given to us” (12:6 NASB) is equal to an imperative—a command—as are the six phrases including the participles beginning with “in” that follow. God does not at all give us these gifts with the expectation that we won’t use them; just the opposite: our gifts are equipping us to accomplish God’s calling of us, our vocation (< Latin: *vocāre*, to call). The NASB is one of the English versions that most closely follows the original Greek in this passage and in most passages. The Biblical word for church, *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesiā*, comes from *ἐκ* [*ek*, out of] + *καλέω* [*kaleō*, call]), means those whom God has regenerated and called to himself **out of** the worldly orientation away from him, through whom he will work to accomplish his redemptive purpose in Jesus Christ in order to restore his creation in accord with his plan.

- c. How can you and I implement these applications of the text?

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

- a) Paul here reveals that “we, who are many, are one body in Christ” (Romans 12:5 NASB), 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 covenantal and relational. 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 and apostolic church” (as in the original Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds, referring to the global outreach God has commanded his covenant people to do in his plan of redeeming and restoring his creation in and through Christ Jesus in accord with his Word the Holy Spirit inspired the apostles to write).
- b) The Greek words—translated “contributing to the needs of the saints” (Romans 12:13 NASB)—are significant.

⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, [*The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*](#) (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1936), pp. 765–766.

- 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, ἁγίων (*hagiōn*) < ἅγιος (*hagios*), holy, i.e., separated from the world’s unholy values and practices, separated to God, who in his Holy Spirit dwells within us (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19)—for service to him in the church and in the world. 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. “Practicing hospitality” (NASB); the participle is in the present tense, i.e., continuous, durative, ongoing. Also, it is in 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 participle is in a series with six others stemming from the phrase, “according to the grace that is given to us” (12:6), which is equal to an imperative, thus indicating that our financial giving to meet the needs of the saints is a command, not an option. It is part of obeying the previous command in 12:2 to “be transformed” (μεταμορφοῦσθε [*metamorphousthe*], a verb in the imperative mood), which connects the following with the conjunction, γὰρ (*gar*, for) in the beginning of 12:3.

Very significantly, the root of *metamorphousthe* is μορφή (*morphē*), which, as Lenski explains is “the essential form which fully expresses the essence or real being.”⁵ Further, this command to be transformed is in the present tense, clearly indicating that it is durative, continuous, a life-long endeavor in our sanctification process. Also, the verb is in the middle voice, indicating we’re accepting responsibility for obeying the command and engaged in a matter that concerns and belongs to us (the meaning of the Greek middle voice—not active which would mean we’re doing it to another, and not passive which would mean we’re being acted upon, but middle indicating we’re doing it to and for ourselves—with God’s help of course), in our growth in sanctification, recognizing we are responsible to do it and will have to give account for doing so.

c) Similar is the participle which follows: “practicing hospitality.” (12:13 NASB)

- 1- This participle, “practicing hospitality,” is also in the present tense, active voice. 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

⁵ Lenski, [*The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*](#), p. 749. For more of his commentary on this key verse, see the Appendix to this paper.

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.⁶

- 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, in the Lord’s view words alone are not enough; they must be put into practice. (Cf. Matthew 7; 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.”⁷

1- The next question that arises is, “Which strangers?”

- a- The texts are commanding that we pursue hospitality to fellow believers who have needs we can address. We do so individually by being observant in order to become aware. Intentionally inquiring and willingly trying to help when we sense need.
- b- Other Bible passages indicate helping both those in the covenant community, the church, and those outside the church, the helping of whom can be a witness for Jesus Christ—as we are called and equipped to do by the Holy Spirit in and through the body of Christ, the church—but with the deed we need to indicate we are doing so as a Christian, so it is seen as coming from Christ and not just a humanitarian act.

⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, [*The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*](#) (Columbus, Ohio: Lutheran Book Concern, 1936), pp. 772–773.

⁷ R. C. H. Lenski, [*The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*](#) (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), pp. 992–993.

- 1] See, e.g., God's command through Paul, "He who has been stealing must steal no longer [the verb is in the imperative mood], but must work [also an imperative], doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need." (Ephesians 4:28) The context of the passage is the Christian church in Ephesus, who Paul explains in verse 25 are "all members of one body," so Lenski is most likely correct in his interpretation of this verse, that Paul has in mind a Christian who was stealing before his conversion, and is now in danger of reverting back to his or her pre-conversion thievery. The context of this command to no longer steal but do honest work in order to "have something to share with those in need," indicates that the sharing of one in need is a needy church member.
- 2] At the same time, we observe in verse 25 that Paul uses the word, neighbor (πλησίον [*plēsion*]), here referring to a fellow Christian in the church at Ephesus. We also notice that *plēsion* is used to refer to our relationship with people who are not in God's covenant. When he was asked to define who a neighbor is, Jesus told a story to answer that question. In so doing, he used *plēsion*, which in the context of the parable, specifically refers to a non-covenant person, a good Samaritan, as a neighbor (Luke 10:36), and in verse 37 Jesus commanded (ποίει [*poiei*], "do") that we should "Go and do likewise." The mood of the verb is an imperative, thus clearly a command, and the verb is in the Greek present tense, meaning that the command is durative, ongoing, continuous. The verb is also in the active voice, meaning that we—not someone else—are responsible to obey the command to demonstrate love (the *agape* form of love defined by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7) to such neighbors who are not, or at least not yet, part of the church.

To give two brief illustrations of how I have tried to do, to obey, this command, I offer the following, neither of which are as monumental as what the good Samaritan did, but which may be helpful examples of what we all can do. When serving a church in Michigan, I received a phone call at 3:00 AM from a young man with a familiar story commonly used by nefarious scoundrels to bilk money for drugs out of unsuspecting people. The story was that he was in Grand Rapids on his way through to Traverse City to visit his dying mother, and could I please give him money to get to see her before she died. Knowing that it was most likely a ruse, but unable to be sure, I agreed to meet him at a gas station in 15 minutes. I filled up his tank—observing his obvious disappointment with a bit of anger—and offered an informed witness for the Lord in the process. If he weren't really going to visit his mother, my money wasn't able to be used for drug purchasing, and a Christian was responding to a possible—unlikely but possible—human need and "speaking the [Gospel of Jesus Christ] truth in love." (Cf.

Ephesians 4:15) I purchased the right to be heard, a brief witness to Christ Jesus, but one the Holy Spirit can build on and use as he will.

Another time, I was in a grocery store in Colorado about suppertime, and an obviously poor man approached me with a baked chicken and asked me if I could purchase it so he and his family could have it for supper in their car out in the parking lot. Aware that he may not have a family out in his car in the parking lot, but also aware that he knew I could easily check that out, I sensed in talking with him that his request was likely legit. So I agreed and asked him if he would also like some vegetables or beverage to go along with the chicken. He said he didn't need them, only the chicken, so I just had the cashier add his chicken to my groceries. While having such conversations, it is important to try to talk about how we are doing this in Christ's name. If the circumstance only allows for a few words, consider such a parting comment as, "May the Lord Jesus Christ continue to bless you."

- 2- And in my church home we do so corporately, and also individually, e.g., in our monthly Community Assistance Fund offerings 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. LCMS means Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.
- 2) Other texts, such as Hebrews 13:1-2, "Let abide [an imperative verb] brotherly love; do not forget [another imperative verb] hospitality [*φιλοξενία* (*philoxenia*, hospitality, literally brotherly love of strangers)]," 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 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.
4. 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. Christians and Christian families who have sufficient room, can and should help fellow believers, who are struggling financially and who need a place to stay for a time, to either be guests in their home or—together with other Christian families—provide for a room in a local inn, while daily offering assistance in other ways possible, e.g., finding a job. Of course, individual Christians, e.g., a widow, widower, or other unmarried person living by him or herself, must exercise caution as to whom he or she invites into his or her home,

including—but not limited to—taking into account community restrictions, as in HOA regulations, and as in abstaining “from all appearance of evil.” (1 Thessalonians 5:22 KJV) Neighbors observe and talk.

b. Society, as briefly discussed above, 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 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 in accord with God’s Word. 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 are to be affirmed, much less rewarded, which facilitates continuing their counterproductive behavior. For example, the most realistic and helpful corporate ministries for homeless people 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.⁸

- 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, 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

⁸ See the documents on homosexuality/LGBTQ+ at <https://fromacorntooak12.com/current-issues/> and related subjects on other pages of that Website. See also <https://seelyedward.academia.edu/research>.

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 work with nearby 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 who are maturing in sanctification—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.⁹
- 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, whom the whole Bible points to, reveals, 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.

⁹ 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)

Appendix
Excerpts from R. C. H. Lenski Commentary on Romans 12:2
[*The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*](#), pp. 749–753.

And be not outwardly conformed to this world age but be inwardly transformed by the renewing of the mind so that you test out what the will of God is, the thing (really) good and well-pleasing and complete.¹⁰

The two imperatives are opposites not only in regard to their prepositional prefixes but also in the root words themselves. This difference is lost when we translate: “be not conformed but be transformed,” for the English root word “form” is the same. Σχήμα [*Schēma*] is outward conformation, fashion; but μορφή [*morphē*] is the essential form which fully expresses the essence or real being. We have the latter in “metamorphosis.” We can do no better in English than to follow Field (M.-M. 613): “be not outwardly conformed but be inwardly transformed.”

The Greek “eon” = a great stretch of time but one that is marked and characterized and thus made a unit by what transpires in it, “world” in this sense, namely when “this eon” is referred to, *dieser Zeitlauf*. This eon is “wicked,” Gal. 1:4; its god is the devil, 2 Cor. 4:4; it is the eon of this cosmos. It is contrasted with “the eon about to come” which the Parousia [Greek: coming, presence; in the New Testament specifically Jesus’ second coming] ushers in, the eon of eternal blessedness, of the new earth.

Not even outwardly are we to adopt the fashion of the eon in which we now live, the ways of the world. The present imperative [Greek: do not fashion yourselves to conform] asks us to shun this conformity during the entire course of our lives. Even in outward fashion the Christian is to be different, separate from the world. Our visible conversation and life as men see us are to show that their ways are not our ways; our conversation (citizenship) is in heaven, Phil. 3:20. We are only pilgrims here and not citizens. Since we expect to go to heaven, our conduct here reflects that fact and is unlike that of men who seek their all in this eon.

There is danger that the Christian may adopt at least some of the world’s ways, run with worldly men (1 Pet. 4:4), especially when they mock us if we do not. Christians sometimes imagine that they can do this without injury to themselves, can remain unspotted from the world amid worldly, unchristian associations, amid worldly and questionable pleasures. To howl a bit with the wolves, to do as the Romans do because we are in Rome, to avoid the abuse of the world and not to lose all this tainted pleasure and advantage while still holding fast to Christ, does not seem so wrong. The resultant casualties are many and exceedingly sad.

As is the case in so many instances in Holy Writ, the opposite is far more than an opposite: not even outward conformity—no less than constant inward transformation. This is what presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice and thus as our reasonable [service or worship] means. What we do with our bodies and our whole bodily life is to be the evidence of a constant inner metamorphosis, one that is accomplished “by the renewing of the mind so that you test out what

¹⁰ R. C. H. Lenski, [*The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*](#), p. 745.

the will of God is,” test out “the thing (really) good and well-pleasing and complete,” making our mind conform to this divine newness and rejecting everything else as being spurious. Here there is the same concentrated richness of thought as in v. 1. The inner transformation begins at the moment of our justification and is to advance throughout life until God completes it in death.

The dative of means states that this transformation is effected “by the renewing of the mind.” In 6:4 we have “newness of life,” the condition; here we have “the renewing,” the process. The *καινός* [*kainos*] occurring in both terms is “new” as the opposite of “old” in our old man. And *νοῦς* [*nous*] is “mind” as “the organ of moral thinking and knowing” (C. K. 764) and thus matches *λογικός* [*logikos*, spiritual, reasonable, rational] used in v. 1. The Christian’s inward transformation is effected when his moral mentality becomes renewed, (the very mentality itself, so that it no longer thinks, understands, and judges as it once did but so that it cannot do so because it is in a process of renewal that advances steadily. The Christian minds the things of the spirit, a thing he never did before, and ceases minding the things of the flesh, a thing he always did before (8:5, 6); as a son of God he is led by the Spirit of God in his very mind (8:14). His use of the body shows it. [EDS: This paragraph is a good summary of progressive sanctification.]

Εἰς τό [*Eis to*, for the] with the infinitive, as so often (3:26; 4:11, twice; 4:18), states the result, namely what the mind does in consequence: “so that you keep testing out (durative) what the will of God is,” as men test out coins or metal by accepting the genuine and rejecting and throwing out the spurious. The renewed mind is ever bent on finding out and following God’s will, what God wants of us; it has utterly ceased its old disregard of God’s will, its old folly of contenting itself with its own will.

We do not regard the three following words as adjectives: “the good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (our versions). The second is “well-pleasing” and, as in v. 1, means “well-pleasing *to God*” and hence cannot modify “the will *of God*.” The third means “complete,” and the implication of an “incomplete” will of God is distressing. These adjectives are substantivized, are treated as a unit (one article), and form an apposition: test out the will of God, (namely test out) “the thing (really) good,” etc. For God ever wills τὸ ἀγαθόν [*to agathon*], “the thing morally good and beneficial,” and never anything that is not good. And this thing is the one “well-pleasing” to him; he says so in his Word which we use as our criterion in making our test. And thus also this good and well-pleasing thing is “complete,” easily distinguished from the reductions to which even Christians at times subject the will of God by claiming he does not will this or that. Worldly tendencies in the church excuse themselves in this way.

This threefold designation is an apposition: “what is the will, namely what is this thing that is at once good, pleasing to God, and complete.” The renewed mind of the Christian ever seeks to prove this in life. We cannot, then, make “the good thing,” etc., the criterion, the touchstone for our testing out what God’s will is. We never say that only what is in our judgment good is God’s will; or what we think is well-pleasing to him; or what we consider morally and spiritually complete. No; testing out what God wants is discovering the thing that is good for us, pleasing to him, complete in itself. And what God’s will is, namely this thing which he wills, we discover from his Word and from that alone, and we subject all our own conceptions of what is good, etc., wholly to that Word. Every test made without the Word is deceptive and wrong.