

## Romans 12:9-13

### Introduction

At our Church Weekend, last week, we launched our Year of Hospitality. We want to be a church in which we increasingly open our homes and share our lives with one another, and you should have received an infographic with your service sheet that explains how that will work. By launching this Year of Hospitality, we hope soon to be in a position where there will be an act of hospitality going on somewhere in the church family every week of the year.

Many among us are already opening their homes and doing that on a regular basis. But for some, those last few sentences may have filled you with terror. Already, you might be thinking, 'Oh no, Martin. Please don't make me do hospitality.' Or you might already have a sense of guilt bubbling to the surface, because you know that offering hospitality is a good thing to do but, at the moment, you just don't feel able. Or perhaps you're feeling excited, and your mind is already running on ahead and thinking of things you could do.

So, before we all get too far down the road of feeling terrified or guilty or excited, I want to pause and look at the Bible together and spend some time thinking about what this might look like.

Our Bible passage this morning is from the apostle Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome. In chapter 12, he's describing what church life should look like. We're members of one body, he says. We all belong to one another. And in verse 9, he writes this. Let's read it again.

**Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.**

The first thing I want us to note is that hospitality flows from love. That's our first heading.

### Hospitality flows from love

**Love must be sincere**, or genuine, Paul says.

A few weeks ago, I went on the SGP Ministers' Retreat. The speaker was Marcus Honeysett from an organisation called Living Leadership. And one of the big ideas that Marcus said he keeps coming back to is the idea of what's upstream.

Imagine you're standing by a stream. You might be drinking from it. Or bathing in it. Or perhaps, in your imagination, you *are* the stream. It doesn't really matter. The point is that

the quality of the water is wholly dependent on what's upstream. If the source is pure then the water that flows downstream will be pure. But if there's the diseased carcass of a dead sheep at the source, then the water will be polluted. And his point was that what's upstream for the Christian is God's love. When we trace the Christian life back to its source, what we find is love. The Bible keeps telling us that.

Paul says, in Ephesians 2, verse 4: **But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions...**

John says, in 1 John 4, verse 10: **This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.**

Galatians 2, verse 20, says: **The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.**

And the Bible's message is that God's love for the believer spans eternity.

In Ephesians chapter 1, verse 4, Paul says of God: **In love, he predestined us for adoption to sonship...**

And in Romans 8, verse 39, he says: **...neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**

At the cross, Jesus has done all that's necessary to atone for your sins and bring about your adoption into his family. And he's done that because of his love, that spans eternity. If you're a Christian here this morning, you are loved by God. You need to let that fact sink deep down inside you. You are loved. You always have been. And you always will be. If you belong to Jesus, you are more loved than you can possibly dream.

If you wouldn't yet call yourself a Christian, God is reaching out to you in love today. He's calling you to repent and believe in Jesus, and to experience his love for yourself.

Living as a Christian is about learning to live downstream from God's love and letting it continually flow over you. And God's love isn't merely to flow over you and me, it's to flow out from us to others. Jesus says, in John 15, verse 10: **If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.** And in verse 17, he says: **This is my command: love each other.**

You and I are loved by God. That's what's upstream for each of us. God's love flows over us continually. And we're to let flow out from us to one another.

That's what we see in the earliest days of the church. Acts 2 describes the life of the first believers, and in verses 44 to 46 it says this: **All the believers were together and had**

**everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts...**

It's a beautiful picture of the life of the early church. It's a picture of the love that Paul's speaking about at the beginning of this passage in Romans 12. It's love that's sincere or genuine. And it expressed itself in hospitality. **They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts...**

You and I will only have a right attitude to hospitality if it's the result of living our lives downstream from God's love. Hospitality flows from love. God has shown us hospitality by welcoming us into his family, through faith in the cross of his Son. He has done that because of his love. And the more we experience of God's love, the more that love will flow out from us to others.

But perhaps for some of us there might be that feeling of guilt bubbling up again. So, before we move on, it's important to acknowledge that there are seasons of hospitality. Here's how Karen Mains describes it in the introduction to a revised edition of her book *Open Heart, Open Home*. She's reflecting on lessons she's learned in the twenty years since the book was first published, and she says this:

One of the lessons I've learned is that there are seasons for hospitality. Sometimes the doors to our lives are open. We have time, energy, and a community with which we are building covenant relationships. In other seasons the doors are closed. Pain or grief or the burden of responsibilities can turn the key in the lock. The terrible pressure of living can often draw the bolt. *Karen Mains; Open Heart, Open Home.*

There are seasons of hospitality. We need to acknowledge that, if we're to avoid being burdened by guilt. Sometimes we can't even think about offering hospitality. Sometimes it's simply beyond us and we need to be the ones who receive hospitality from others, even if it's only for a season. And that's okay. That's what it means to be part of a loving church family, in which we love and *are* loved, in which we offer and receive hospitality.

And that brings us onto our second point: Hospitality flows from love, and it is inherently personal. That's our next heading: Hospitality is inherently personal.

### **Hospitality is inherently personal**

The language Paul uses in Romans 12 is highly personal. **Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves... Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.**

When we love one another, we take an interest in each other's lives. And we treat one another as individuals. Here's what another author, Carolyn Lacey, says in her book *Extraordinary Hospitality*. She says:

For Jesus, welcome was personal. He didn't adopt a "one size fits all" approach. He treated everyone as an individual – with specific needs and desires. He responded in unique ways to the unique people he encountered. As we seek to reflect him in his welcome, we can do the same. *Carolyn Lacey; Extraordinary Hospitality.*

Offering hospitality doesn't always mean inviting people to a dinner for six. We might do that. And some will love it. But not everyone will feel at ease coming to a dinner for six.

If hospitality comes from the overflow of God's love in our lives, then involves meeting people's individual needs in some way. It's about loving people. And that means tailoring the hospitality we offer to those we invite. Of course, we aren't all-knowing as Jesus is. We don't always know the needs that people have, and that shouldn't stop us from offering hospitality. But we can put some thought into it. And we can ask questions. We can ask people what they would most enjoy if we were to spend some time together. Everyone's different.

For someone going through a hard time, the kind of hospitality they need might simply be an invitation to come round for a cup of tea and a chat. Carolyn Lacey shares this story.

I remember an occasion when my husband and I invited a woman who was going through a difficult time to join us for dinner. I pulled out all the stops to prepare a beautiful meal that I thought would show comfort and care for this woman. But as the conversation inevitably turned towards her circumstances, she pushed her food half-heartedly round the plate – fighting her lack of appetite so she wouldn't appear ungrateful. Although we assured her it was fine to leave the meal uneaten, we could sense her discomfort.

I realise now that, while my intentions were good, I had focused more on what I wanted to do for this woman than on what she really needed from me. A simple mug of tea and a box of tissues would have been far more appropriate. *Carolyn Lacey; Extraordinary Hospitality.*

We're all different.

Someone who's single might appreciate an invitation to come and be part of family life, perhaps going for a walk and sharing a family meal. In that situation, hospitality can become two-way. Not only is that person welcomed into family life, but they might also

begin to *contribute* to family life. Sam Allberry writes this in his book *7 Myths about Singleness*.

There are some families I am particularly close to. One or two of these, with younger kids, will frequently ask if I'd like to be involved in the bedtime routine, anything from brushing the children's teeth to reading them a bedtime story and praying with them. It's great fun. A friend's little daughter often asks me to do this whether I've volunteered or not. Now, not every single person is the same as I. Some will find rolling up their sleeves and getting stuck into the rhythms of someone else's family only serves to remind them that they don't have one of their own. But it's a slice of family life I enjoy being part of.

Another family I spend a lot of time with was recently heading into what they knew would be a particularly crazy week, so I offered to help out and do the school run for them for a few days. I figured it would be one less thing for them to have to organize.

"We couldn't ask you to do that!"

"You didn't – I offered," I replied.

For them it is a daily chore. But for me it is a novelty to do this for a few days. I never get to do a school run. *Sam Allberry; 7 Myths about Singleness*

Again, we're all different.

For parents who have spent the week cooking for and clearing up after their children, the thought of relaxing and being cooked for would provide a welcome break. But for some, perhaps the thought of sitting around a table and talking all evening sounds too intense. Dinner parties really aren't their thing. But perhaps an invitation to come to an evening of board games would be more welcome. Perhaps someone's feeling sad. They want to be in the company of others. But they don't want to talk. Perhaps an invitation to a film night would be appreciated. Someone else might not like going out in the evening. But an invitation to lunch would be lovely. You get the point. There's no "one size fits all" with hospitality. It thrives on flexibility. It might even mean making room for planned spontaneity.

James Clarke told me that he remembers a couple at his old church who regularly prepared extra when they planned their Sunday meal. They did that so they could be spontaneous and invite people home after the service – perhaps a visitor to the church, a new family that had turned up, or someone who was just at a loose end.

Hospitality is inherently personal. It flows from love. And it flourishes when it's flexible and individually tailored to people's needs. And finally, hospitality deepens our family ties. That's our third heading.

### Hospitality deepens our family ties

Romans 12 begins with an appeal to brothers and sisters in the faith. It's language that we're very familiar with if we've been around church for a while. But we shouldn't miss the force of it.

Jesus redefined what family is, beyond biological ties. Mark 3, verse 31 onwards says this: **Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting round him, and they told him, 'Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.'**

**'Who are my mother and my brothers?' he asked.**

**Then he looked at those seated in a circle round him and said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.'**

When we come to Jesus, we are incorporated into a new family, a family of believers. We become brothers and sisters to one another. And we need to learn to live as a family. That doesn't mean that we should turn our backs on our relatives. Jesus isn't saying that. But it does mean that we should open our hearts and share our lives with those who share our faith. And hospitality helps us do that. We can only learn to be brothers and sisters in more than name only as we get to know each other and talk together about our lives and our faith.

Sharing hospitality is one of the most basic things we can do that enables us to do that. James Clarke said something helpful about hospitality at our Church Weekend. He said that the food isn't really very important. The food is just an excuse for getting people together. Claire Kidby said something similar. She said that she keeps the food simple. She puts a chilli in the slow cooker before she comes to church, and then it's ready when she returns. That way, she can focus on spending time with her guests.

It really doesn't matter what we're eating, or if we're eating at all. It doesn't matter whether hospitality happens in the garden, the sitting room, the dining room, or even in the car. They're all places where we can spend time together and learn to be family. It's when we're together like that, sharing a meal or a cup of coffee or a walk in the park, that we begin to talk honestly about our lives and our faith. It gives us time to talk about Jesus together, to share our struggles and our joys together, and to encourage one another in our faith.

Hospitality is one of the tools that God has given us to deepen our family ties. So, before I finish, here are three simple tips.

Firstly, if you've invited people round to your home, don't get stressed about tidying up beforehand. It's nice to welcome people to a home they can relax in, but it doesn't need to be immaculate. Just be yourself.

Secondly, don't get stressed about what you eat, if that's what you're doing. There's nothing wrong with buying a ready meal from the supermarket and putting it in the oven. Remember what James said. The food is just an excuse for getting people together.

And thirdly, if your guests offer to bring something, say yes. People often feel more relaxed if they can contribute something. And if they want to help clear up at the end, then let them. You'll be amazed how friendships develop when two people are standing at the kitchen sink washing up together.

### Conclusion

Well, I hope this has helped. Hospitality should be enjoyable. It's just one way in which we express our love for one another. It's inherently personal. And it enables us to deepen the family ties between us. We'll think about it a little bit more next week. But please do think and pray about getting involved with our Year of Hospitality. And sign up through the website.

Let me pray.

Loving Father, please help us to be a family in which we are learning to be brothers and sisters in more than name only. Though we recognise that there are seasons of hospitality, please help us to be a church in which we open our homes and share our lives, because your love flows out from us to others. Help us to share with those in need, to welcome visitors, and to love one another as you love us. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.