



VIRTUES FOR DISCIPLES

# HOSPITALITY

*Welcoming the Stranger*

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# *Introduction*

**Alive in the Word** brings you resources to deepen your understanding of Scripture, offer meaning for your life today, and help you to pray and act in response to God's word.

Use any volume of **Alive in the Word** in the way best suited to you.

- **For individual learning and reflection**, consider this an invitation to prayerfully journal in response to the questions you find along the way. And be prepared to move from head to heart and then to action.
- **For group learning and reflection**, arrange for three sessions where you will use the material provided as the basis for faith sharing and prayer. You may ask group members to read each chapter in advance and come prepared with questions answered. In this kind of session, plan to be together for about an hour. Or, if your group prefers, read and respond to the questions together without advance preparation. With this approach, it's helpful to plan on spending more time for each group session in order to adequately work through each chapter.

- **For a parish-wide event or use within a larger group,** provide each person with a copy of this volume, and allow time during the event for quiet reading, group discussion and prayer, and then a final commitment by each person to some simple action in response to what he or she learned.

This volume explores the theme of hospitality as one of the **Virtues for Disciples**. Each of us is called to be a disciple, a follower of Christ. The life of a disciple is challenging but it is the most fulfilling way to live. Called by name by the God who created us, we are shaped by the teachings of Christ and continually guided by the Holy Spirit. As we grow more deeply into this identity as disciples of Jesus Christ, we discover the valuable virtues that mark God's people.

# *Duty to Strangers*



*Begin by asking God to assist you in your prayer and study. Then read through the three passages from the Old Testament to consider God's law regarding duty to strangers.*

## **Exodus 22:20**

**<sup>20</sup>You shall not oppress or afflict a resident alien, for you were once aliens residing in the land of Egypt.**

## **Leviticus 19:33-34**

**<sup>33</sup>When an alien resides with you in your land, do not mistreat such a one. <sup>34</sup>You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the LORD, am your God.**

## **Leviticus 23:22**

**<sup>22</sup>When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not be so thorough that you reap the field to its very edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. These things you shall leave for the poor and the alien. I, the LORD, am your God.**

*After a few moments of quiet reflection on the passages, consider the following background information provided in “Setting the Scene.” Occasional questions in this section and following may be used for personal reflection, journaling, or group discussion.*

### *Setting the Scene*

Biblical hospitality is more than setting a lovely table or welcoming a guest with warmth and generosity. It is a reflection of God’s own nature and God’s own actions of welcoming love recounted in numerous ways throughout the Bible. In the past as well as the present, God interacts with people in the particular locations and cultures where we live and sets patterns for how we are to live in response to God’s hospitality.

The ancient Near East was the general location of God’s people from Old Testament times through Jesus’ day and into the earliest generation of Christian communities. Specifically, the area was known variously as Canaan (named for those who occupied the land prior to the arrival of the Hebrews), Israel and Judah (names for the tribal areas after Hebrew settlement), Palestine (a Greek name for the land of the Philistines), and more generally the Holy Land. (See the map on page 40.)

Inhabitants of this land were and are subject to the climate and geographical challenges that come with living in such a vast and largely arid

place. As was typical in such dry places, the people were often nomadic, traveling to find favorable conditions for their cattle, their families, and, if they were fortunate, some meager crops. In antiquity, many people dwelled in simple huts or tents and usually lived together with extended family or clans.

When travel was necessary—for simple trade or attending religious festivals or moving one's family to escape famine or war—it would have been essential to depend on the kindness of strangers. An inn, such as we hear about in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), would have been rare. Simple kindnesses such as providing water for travelers or a loaf of bread were common. And providing humble dwelling in one's home or on one's land would have been common as well. Such acts of hospitality were necessary for survival.

For God's people, the Ten Commandments given to Moses formed the framework of their cultural and religious experience. These basic tenets made it clear that their lives were to be governed by love of God (the first three commands) and love of neighbor (the final seven).

They understood that all of life's interactions should reflect the divine instructions given at Sinai. And so, as they traveled together and then settled in the land of Canaan, their laws expanded to reflect this sensitivity to God's will in every aspect of life.

What can you recall from a time when you relied on the hospitality of others or when you were called upon to host a relative stranger?

Love God,  
love neighbor

If we were to count all the laws now found in the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible), we would find over 600 statutes that came to constitute the Law of Moses. Among these laws we find numerous references to treating others in a way that reflects a covenant understanding of God. Specifically, there are many laws about the just treatment of resident aliens—that is, those who are not full members of an Israelite clan or family but who reside with and among them. We will look at three such laws, one from Exodus and two from Leviticus.

*Each of the three passages will be considered separately for a deeper understanding.*

### *Understanding the Scenes Themselves*

#### **Exodus 22:20**

**<sup>20</sup>You shall not oppress or afflict a resident alien, for you were once aliens residing in the land of Egypt.**

What is a “resident alien” in the context of the Bible? In modern times this language refers to a legal status related to formal immigration into a country. Formal and legal processes for immigration or migration in the ancient world, however, would not have existed.

Migrating from one land to another was common and accepted, and there are ample stories of such patterns in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament. Consider just a few examples:

What experiences have you had of feeling like an outsider? (This could occur in a neighborhood or town, a parish or a workplace.)

- Abraham and Sarah and their relatives moved in response to God's call from Haran, in modern-day Turkey, to the land of Canaan, now Israel. They were aliens among the Canaanites but before long a famine swept through the land, and Abraham took his family to Egypt where they were once again aliens (see Gen 12:1-10).
- Jacob and his many family members migrated at a later time from Canaan back to Egypt in order to survive during a famine.



Ironically, it was Jacob's younger son Joseph, earlier sold into slavery by his brothers, who rose to prominence in Egypt and could provide safety and land for his father and his brother's families (see Gen 42-47).

- Even the young David, following murderous threats of King Saul, fled to the land of Moab, an enemy territory, where he found safety for his parents as well (see 1 Sam 22:1-5).
- The book of Ruth tells the story of a family that migrated from Bethlehem at a time of famine into the land of Moab where the sons married Moabite women. Once the famine had lifted years later and the women were left widowed, Naomi returned to her native Bethlehem with one daughter-in-law who would then be the foreigner (see Ruth 1:1-22).

Perhaps the largest migration is recounted in the book of Exodus. The Hebrew slaves, oppressed and abused by the pharaoh of Egypt, were released from their captivity and wandered through the Sinai desert before arriving in the land of the Canaanites. God provided not only a passage to freedom for them, but established them in a land that allowed them to settle into communities, grow crops, and feed cattle. God acted as redeemer and host.

It is this foundational experience of having once been a minority population in a foreign land, having been slaves with few rights, and having been freed by God, that shaped a ragtag group of Hebrews into a people—and eventually into a nation. They experienced anything but hospitality in Egypt, and so their law enshrined that lesson by requiring a certain basic respect for the strangers in their midst.

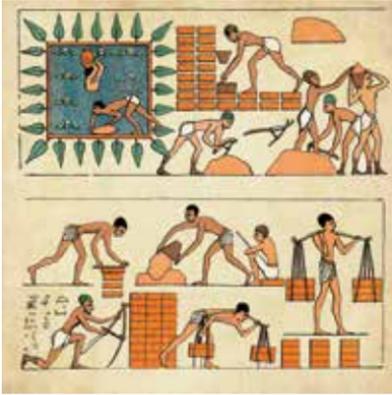
When has a previous experience of some kind served as a life lesson for you?

### Leviticus 19:33-34

<sup>33</sup>When an alien resides with you in your land, do not mistreat such a one. <sup>34</sup>You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than the natives born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself; for you too were once aliens in the land of Egypt. I, the LORD, am your God.

This passage from Leviticus parallels the passage from Exodus 22, with some added features that deserve attention.

The first word in verse 33, “when,” indicates that foreigners, outsiders, aliens will live among God’s people. The presence of foreigners was



not a remote possibility, something that may happen at some point in the future, but a reality of living at that time. Given that reality, God's people were told in verse 33 not to mistreat them.

“Do not mistreat” sets up parameters, a set of guidelines to prevent the kind of situations that Israel's ancestors found themselves in when in Egypt.

One could argue whether certain actions were in fact mistreatment. But “treat them no differently than the natives born among you” (v. 34) indicates there are no parameters. There are no limits or conditions. Treating others like family requires love.

We hear a familiar ring to “love the alien as yourself” in the New Testament. When Jesus is asked to identify the greatest commandment (Matt 22:34-40), he responds by saying “love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” And then he equates this with a second command to “love your neighbor as yourself.” In Luke's version, the scholar of the law, hoping to identify his neighbor, questions Jesus further. Jesus replies with the now well-known parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). The neighbor is the one in need *and* the neighbor is the foreigner who offers compassionate help, who provided the necessary means for the man who had been robbed to re-

How would you describe the difference between banning mistreatment and requiring love? Does it challenge you in any way to know that God's law requires such love?

Who is our “neighbor” today? Who are we being asked to love in practical ways?

cover. Through his care and financial assistance, the Samaritan offered a much-needed hospitality.

### Leviticus 23:22

<sup>22</sup>When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not be so thorough that you reap the field to its very edge, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. These things you shall leave for the poor and the alien. I, the LORD, am your God.

Leviticus 23 outlines the provisions that must be made available to those who are in need. Gleaning was a way of providing food for those on the margins of society—those who were orphaned and widowed, those who were aliens living among the population. It was a sacred obligation to assure that food was on the table.

In our world today, especially in developed countries where massive machinery does most of the harvesting, it is hard to imagine what might be left on a grapevine or a stalk of wheat or barley, or how fruit could still be available after the trees have been so thoroughly shaken in the grips of steel machinery. In the ancient world, and even throughout much of the developing world today, harvesting consisted of manual labor, and it took weeks for workers to make their way through fields and orchards, picking crops as they ripened and then going back through as





Many of us are not in the business of farming. Nonetheless, how could we cultivate an attitude of sharing from the best we have to offer?

more became ready to harvest. It was after the first harvest that those in need were allowed to “glean” what was still on the vine or the stock or the tree.

The most famous biblical illustration of gleaning is found in the book of Ruth. Naomi, widowed in Moab, returns home to her native Bethlehem with her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth. With no male family members still living, Naomi has to rely on the hospitality of extended family or landowners. Ruth, also without male family members—and an alien in Bethlehem—must rely on Naomi and her connections in order for the two women to survive. A distant relative, a landowner by the name of Boaz, allowed the younger Ruth to glean the fields (see Ruth 2), and he went out of his way to assure that her harvest was ample for the two women and that she was safe among his workers.

Boaz offered Ruth, an alien, the hospitality guaranteed by God’s law, and eventually he married her and produced an heir who would be the grandfather of King David (Ruth 4:13-22).

## *Praying the Word / Sacred Reading*

*Allow the words of the three passages of Scripture above to lead you into prayer. What responses to God's Word do you want to make? How do you feel challenged, threatened, affirmed, or energized? Bring these responses to God and listen for God to speak to your heart.*

*You may want to pray with the words of this prayer:*

O God, liberator of those oppressed and forgotten,  
help us to see in those who are outsiders among us  
the opportunity to offer the sustenance of food and shelter  
and the gift of familial love.

O God, revealer of truth,  
pull back whatever blinders prevent us from seeing our own "strangeness,"  
our own need and lack of belonging,  
so that we can open ourselves  
to your welcome and loving embrace.

O God, breaker of barriers,  
be with us as we reach across the differences that could divide us,  
so that our commitment is unity,  
our preference is hospitality,  
and our desire is to love as you love, to welcome as you welcome.

## *Living the Word*

*Investigate national or local organizations that help to provide food, housing, and skills training to those who are in need of assistance. You may want to search the Internet using keywords such as gleaning, housing, and practical hospitality. These organizations in some ways embody the hospitality of God and the hospitality that we are called to exhibit in our lives as Christians. How might you become involved?*