

Singular Hospitality

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Everyone agreed: The doors to preaching the gospel in Asia clearly seemed to be closed to the small band of missionaries. Then there was this unusual night vision that Paul had of a man begging them to come to Macedonia. The confirmation came in the wind-assisted crossing that provided smooth sailing right into the port near Philippi, a leading Roman city in that province.

But now to find out there is no synagogue in Philippi?! Not even ten male Jews in this significant city to form the quorum of a synagogue? Perhaps if any Jews existed, they would be praying by the riverside, like the Jews did in the days of the exile in Babylon.

As might be expected with the lack of a synagogue, there was only a small group of women praying that day by the river. But these were women the Lord had prepared. The first convert in the group—the first convert in all of Europe, to be exact—was a woman named Lydia. She was a successful businesswoman, trading in the luxury item of purple cloth. Upon her conversion, she insisted that Paul and his apostolic missionaries share her home and receive her hospitality, evidence of her faithfulness to the Lord (Acts 16:15).

It appears Lydia was also a single woman, head of a household consisting mainly of servants. It was probably in her house that the first church in Philippi began to meet. Perhaps it was in her house that the church gathered to take up a collection to send Paul as he endured house arrest in Rome. Maybe they were there to hear the letter from Paul that contained his effusive thanks for their generosity, and wherein he shared his secret for being content in any and every circumstance. It's hard to know what precisely happened in Lydia's home, except for this fact—her first act of ministry as a believer was to offer her home and hospitality.

Keepers at Home

Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled (Titus 2:3–5).

It's easy to understand the Titus 2 command to be "working at home" (or "keepers at home" in the King James Bible) as focusing on the quality of home life in the context of marriage and family. But I don't think Paul intended only for the married women to display the fruits of sound doctrine in their lives through being keepers of the home.

The Greek word that Paul uses here is *oikourgous*, which is a compound word meaning "homeworker." Paul is charging older women to teach younger women that among the "good things" that keep God's Word from being blasphemed is tending to the home. The implication is that there is valuable work to be done through and in the home. As Proverbs 14:1 emphasizes, wise women build their homes, but foolish ones tear theirs down.

There is no qualification there regarding marital status. Women in all seasons of life can either be wise or foolish about the work that is done in their homes. Why? Home is where we care for those who live with us and where we can reach out to care for the needs of others—the saints and the lost alike. As single women, we may or may not have people living with us to care for, but we typically have an abundance of opportunities to care for others in our homes in a way that promotes the glory of God.

What Would Martha Do?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul makes it clear that all believers are to invite others into their homes through the practice of hospitality (Rom. 12:13). He also instructs Timothy that showing hospitality is one of the many good deeds that should characterize women who are on the list of widows supported by the church (1 Tim. 5:10). Is Paul expecting that impoverished widows entertain lavishly? Of course not.

I believe that our modern thinking of hospitality has been improperly shaped through entertainment mavens such as Martha Stewart. It's not a matter of what would Martha do when guests come, but rather what did Martha miss when guests were in her home? In this, I'm pitting our modern Martha against the biblical Martha, but I think it's safe to say both are better known for the tasks of entertaining rather than the heart of hospitality. We're not to open our homes to show off our possessions or culinary skills but to draw others into what God is doing among His people.

Years ago, a love for the home and hospitality wouldn't have been characteristic of me. I viewed my home as a crash pad for my possessions, a transitory abode until "something better" came along. My cooking was lovingly (and correctly!) mocked by my family as "fish wads and pudding lumps." Though I made periodic attempts to pull off the lavish dinner party, I was usually wiped out by the effort.

But when I became a Christian, I observed the way the women in my church invested in their homes and I allowed them to disciple me in these womanly ways. I began to balance the public and private spheres of my life by tending to my home. Now that I own a house, I've intentionally designed and furnished it for hospitality (even preparing for children who drop by). To my great delight, I've seen the Lord bless many ministry opportunities there.

Though it takes a lot of effort to work all day as a single woman and then rush home to clean and cook for guests, it's well worth it. In case I need a reminder, I've preserved those moments in a photo album of guests, along with the command from Romans 12:13 to practice hospitality.

As single women, Lydia's example is a good one to emulate. She was obviously prepared to offer her home for hospitality but probably never suspected that from her home an entire continent eventually would be affected by the gospel.

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