

Loving Strangers in spite of Danger

Hebrews 13:1-6 (NIV)

¹ Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. ² Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. ³ Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering. ⁴ Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. ⁵ Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." ⁶ So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?"

I bet some of you remember a time before cell phones and smart watches when as a kid your parents would let you go out and play in the neighborhood without supervision and you were just told to come back when it was dark. Then sometime in the 1960s when people were thinking of the safety of children, the phrase was coined: "Stranger Danger!" This slogan reminded kids to avoid strangers: not take candy from them, don't get into their vehicles, straight up don't go anywhere with them. Instead, run away saying something like, "Stranger danger!" And you know what? It was pretty good advice. This campaign more than likely saved many lives as children were not lured away by strangers who wanted to do them harm.

Has "stranger danger" – the avoidance and fear of strangers - become an unconscious thought habit of ours? Even back in the first century A.D., it affected the Hebrew Christians. They lived in a world that was hostile to their faith in Jesus. Many Jews riled people up against the Christians, made them unfavorable to have around. In Rome, Emperor Nero publicly maligned Christians as the ones responsible for setting fire to Rome (even though it was actually Nero's fault). He went so far as to turn some of them into human torches, lighting them on fire while they were still alive to be streetlamps in Rome.

In a time and place like that, Christians had to practice a bit of "stranger danger" to stay alive. They were cautious about inviting people to worship services. For someone new to come to church, a confirmed Christian would have to physically sponsor a non-Christian, go with them, to be with them at all times, to vouch for them that they weren't a spy seeking to destroy them so that these Christian home groups would not be arrested or killed.

This is why it was pretty hard hitting for the author of this letter to encourage Christians: "Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers." (verse 2a) That word, "hospitality," is defined in the English dictionary as simply being genial or cordial when receiving guests, but it doesn't specify who the guests are. The Greek word does. The word that is translated as hospitality is the combination of two words: "phileo" and "zenos." "Phileo" is a verb meaning to love someone like a friend or a close family member – not a romantic love or an acquaintance love. The word "zenos" is a noun that means "unknown, foreigner, alien, stranger." The hospitality being encouraged and commanded of Christians here is the "loving of strangers."

That is hard! We don't know strangers. We don't know what they're like. We don't know how they'll respond. We don't know if they'll get along with us, let alone treat us well. These are the things that make them strange to us. We also don't know if they'll hurt us or not. Honestly, because we know that all people are sinners, it's a guarantee that in one way or another eventually they will hurt us. They might insult us or even punch us in the face! Because they might do this, we put up the "stranger danger" sign, avoid them, and shield ourselves from getting hurt by strangers.

Putting up the "stranger danger" sign may spare us from danger, but it comes with different cost. Avoiding strangers means that we turn inward. We look to ourselves and the people we already know to be the "safe" ones. We'll use our God-given wealth only for known people. While we think we are protecting ourselves, we also turn to selfishness and favoritism.

At the same time, avoiding strangers does not eliminate danger for our lives. Sadly, 93% of juveniles who have experienced abuse were abused by people they knew, many from those that they considered "safe." Familiarity, friendship, did not stop the danger or the hurt, nor will it. So, if we hold up the "stranger danger" sign and live by it, we still don't avoid danger and hurt because we are all sinners and hurt people, including those we know, even those we love most dearly.

What would happen if we looked at every person with a "stranger danger" attitude that would cause us to avoid them? Pretty much everyone we know at one time was a stranger to us - your spouse, your best friend - regardless of whether you met them at 6 or 60. There was a danger to get to know that unknown, strange person. You didn't know if you would get along with them, if they would care about you or love you. You didn't know whether or not they would harm you, and, since getting to know them, they probably

have. Yet, if you had never talked to that stranger, never shown them love, you never would have had that relationship that means so much to you today, that has gotten you through the good times as well as the bad. Getting to know that stranger was worth it.

Now, think about this in terms of what we are as Christians. Should we avoid the people who could potentially bring us harm and never talk to them? What if Jesus had avoided those who put him in danger? What if he avoided all the Pharisees and teachers of the law? What if he never spoke to Judas? Maybe he would have avoided the pain and suffering that they caused them. Maybe he would have avoided the cross. But if he had avoided all danger, we would still be stuck in our sins just as much as those dangerous people who rejected Jesus and caused him pain. We wouldn't be saved. No one would be saved. The dangers of forever hell would become our reality.

God be praised that he did not avoid danger. Instead, he took the risk and told people exactly why he was here. He was here for you and for me. He came to take on the danger of our sin, to face it head on, to pay the price of the eternal fires of hell so that he could rescue us from them and make us his family. He took on the danger of our sins so that we would not be strangers to him. He did this even for the people who were a danger to him.

Knowing this, can we in good conscience practice a strict "stranger danger" and never talk with people we don't know? If we avoided all strangers because of the danger they posed to us, how would more people come to know about Jesus and the danger he faced for us? How would anyone know how rich God has made us – how, like we talked last week, he not only gave us all of our wealth but also gave us the riches of the forgiveness of sins, the perfect, godly life of Jesus, and the inheritance of a forever perfect dwelling with God in heaven? How would anyone know the things that God has done for them? If Christians never talked to strangers, the good news, the gospel, would eventually be lost as all Christians died off. Everyone would be lost to hell, cast away from God and anything good for forever. That includes us. Christians would have avoided us as strangers and never shared the Gospel with us. We would be lost. There is more danger when we as Christians do not talk to strangers.

With strangers, we don't know who we don't know. That also means that we don't know who knows that God has lived perfectly for them, died on the cross to take away their sins, and wants to rescue them from this world of danger to the eternal safety of heaven. There's a whole world of strangers around us, probably even some people who are strangers to you here in this building right now. There are dangers in extending love to them. They may reject your love, abuse it, hurt you. But knowing how Christ took on the danger of our sins so that we would not be strangers to him, how will you respond to love the strangers around you, to show hospitality?

As you consider that, I want you to remember those here who once were strangers to you. I want you to count how rich God has made your life because of these relationships – whether it was you who showed hospitality, or it was a hospitality shown to you. There was a danger in loving strangers, but it was worth it – not just for the friendships and the love you now have, but also for the fact that you have people who once were strangers who are now your brothers and sisters in Christ, a family bound for the eternal rescue from all danger to God in heaven.

How will you extend this hospitality to others? Will you go up to someone here today and bravely extend your hand to someone you don't know, even knowing that they might reject it? When you hear the cashier or a classmate stressing out about life, will you offer to pray for them right then and there? When picking up the kids from school, will you park your car, get out, and introduce yourself to another parent? Will you choose to pay inside the gas station instead of paying at the pump just so that you can interact with a stranger in the hopes of sharing the God who rescues you from every danger?

There is danger in talking with strangers, but God has promised great and powerful actions for us to combat the "stranger danger." God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." And we know that he won't because he already took on the danger for us. Nothing can defeat him or stop his promises. So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?" (verses 5b-6)

With God powerfully on our side, we accept the danger that comes with showing love to strangers, extending hospitality. We seek to show love to those we don't know so that they can turn from being a stranger to being a brother or sister in Christ. God help us to be rich in hospitality, loving strangers in spite of the danger. Amen.