

“Alien Hospitality

Introduction: You don’t have to be involved in the realm of athletics to know that the concept of coaching has become quite popular in recent years. In areas ranging from business, to education, to homemaking, “coaches” have emerged who see it as their role to help a client, as one website put it, see what it going on right now in your life, identify your obstacles and challenges, and choose a course of action to help accomplish your goal(s). Much of coaching, as I’ve experienced it, is about how you equip and motivate an individual, or a group of people, dealing with all of the things along the way that can distract them or distance them from their goal.

Now, for the last few months, we have been listening to a man named Moses speak to and interact with a group of people called Israel. There are a number of ways Moses is identified in the Bible: as a hothead, the Prince of Egypt, a lawgiver, and a leader. One thing I don’t think I’ve ever heard him described as is a coach. Yet, Moses certainly fits that role. He has been called by God to equip and to motivate the Israelites to “break camp,” enter the Promised Land, and live out God’s goal for them to be a light to the nations, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, participating in God’s kingdom work in the world

To that end, Moses has equipped them, as we have seen, with God’s guiding commands and decrees. And he has helped them identify potential obstacles and challenges ranging from forgetfulness to idolatry. This morning we want to focus on how Coach Moses seeks to motivate this people. In particular, how does he motivate them to extend hospitality—God’s radical welcome and grace—to strangers, to the “aliens” they would be living among, not meaning people from outer space but those who are very different from them, people who don’t look like them, think like them, or act like them, people they wouldn’t ordinarily choose to hang with?

Our vision statement as well calls us to extend the hospitality of Jesus. What is to motivate us? As we will see, for us as well as for the Israelites, our radical love for others must be grounded in God’s radical love for us. Moses sums it up in this way: “And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt” (v. 19).

I. The Lord’s Call – A Beautiful Chord

A. Let’s begin by hearing again God’s call on his people:

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good? [vv. 12-13]

They are called to fear, walk, love, serve, and observe. It is a call to live with wholehearted devotion, willing obedience, reverential worship, and loving service. Importantly, it is to be their vocation to take part, as obedient, wise, and loving stewards, in helping to establish, and reigning over, God’s kingdom on earth.

B. We might say that these five verbs are kind of like a rich musical chord. Each note has its own distinct tone, but together they express a beautiful harmonic sound that is to delight the player, but also, as it sounds, ring out with the beauty of God to others. When put into practice, these five verbs will bring shape to this community of people. It will help them become equipped to be a “holy nation,” a people distinct from the world and those around them, while also being a “kingdom of priests,” a people deeply involved in the world and the lives of others.

If this is how they are to be equipped, what is to be their motivation? Why would they, why would we, want to try and sound out this beautiful chord to others? In particular, why would we want to become deeply involved in the lives of others, especially those who are “alien” or very different from us? It all hinges upon understanding how amazingly gracious God has been to us.

II. The Lord’s Grace – The Ground of Alien Love

A. Again, Moses puts it this way: “And you are to love those who are aliens, for you yourselves were aliens in Egypt” (v. 19). One famous high school cross country coach in Illinois gives his runners each day what he calls his “thought for the day.” Well, we might consider this statement to be Moses’ thought for life! The radical love of God’s people for others was to be grounded in God’s radical love for them. Moses knew that unless these people understood and had experienced this radical grace, this alien hospitality that God had for them, they would struggle extending it to others.

B. Moses emphasizes this point by reminding them, as we’ve heard him do before, that the God of creation, the God to whom everything in heaven and earth belonged, had chosen them above all others. He had set his affection on them, and performed great and awesome wonders on their behalf, rescuing them from slavery in Egypt, where they had been living as aliens. He did so not because of who they were or what they had done, but simply because of who he is. Now, a significant part of who he is, Moses explains, is that he is God who cares very much for, and executes justice on behalf of, the little people, the fatherless, the widow, and the alien.

Illustration: There’s a wonderful phrase that illustrates this: “He shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.” This refers to a Hebrew idiom that literally says, “He does not lift up the face.” It is language from the courtroom. It described the common, and very unjust, practice of a judge lifting up the accused’s face so that he or she could be identified before judgment was passed. This identity, and particularly the person’s social status, would affect the judge’s decision.

But the Lord, supreme in justice as well as power, does not play favorites. Although he had chosen Israel, it was all by grace and for grace. It was not at the exclusion of others but so that these very same Israelites would be the ambassadors of his grace. God rescues us not from the world but for it. Therefore, evidence of who this amazing God is would be seen by the way they live for the world, particularly by the way they treated the alien, the stranger.

III. The Challenge of Loving Aliens

A. Now, what is radical here, and why I have called it “alien hospitality,” is that it is one thing to love those who are just like us and with whom we have commonality. It is a far different thing to love those who are totally unlike us. So, when we read in 1 Peter 4:9, “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling,” we can shrug our shoulders and say, “Sure, I guess I can do that. I can receive this person from my team into my home, or see if they need meal. I can possibly muster up a cash donation to meet their needs, or even, if they wrong me, probably forgive them. But then we read at the beginning of Hebrews 13: “Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers...” Here, we suddenly find ourselves on a different playing field. What does it mean to love and receive and care for those who are on a different team? How do I show hospitality to the co-worker who laughs at my belief in Jesus, or to the transgendered kid in my class, or to the person of a different color, or religion who has just moved in next door? How do we think about showing hospitality to the refugees pouring out of Syria, or those migrants and their families living within our borders who have no legal status?

Illustration: Concerning the latter, as I have read some of the arguments on the immigration issue by those who would like to either throw all these people out, or somehow prevent any more from sneaking in, I’ve been struck by how they, especially from some Christians perspective, are grounded in highly legalized logic. They say, the Bible gives the state the role of forming public

policy and the authority of upholding the law. They say that Christians are called to be law abiding citizens and anyone who lives within our borders must obey our nation's laws. They say that if we don't think a law is just we should work to change it. All of that is true. But there is very little in these arguments about showing compassion. There is very little about how we might consider extending grace. There is very little reflection about how we all were once immigrants, too. And so, although one source declares that while there is a whole lot of movement of people groups throughout the OT, no clear immigration policy is spelled out, we certainly can't read quickly by Dt. 10:19: "And you are to love those who are strangers, for you yourselves were strangers in Egypt." Public policy certainly needs to be worked out. But as we do so, we need to always keep in mind that the radical love of God's people for the alien is to be grounded in that same God's radical love for us.

B. What might help us to take this all more deeply into our heart and soul? How might we be aliens who love other aliens with a radical, alien hospitality? Two things come to mind.

1. We need to know that when we love the stranger that, remarkably, we are loving God. The passage from Hebrews 13 goes on to refer to having shown hospitality to strangers to having shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. This cites an event recorded in Genesis 18 in which Abraham and Sarah received and showed hospitality to three visitors, refreshing them with water, food, and a place to rest. Abraham and Sarah didn't know who these strangers were, but the text begins with the information that it was the LORD who was appearing and speaking to them in these strangers. Couple this with Jesus' comment that when we see a stranger and provide food, drink, or clothing, or when we invite him in or visit her in prison or the hospital, we are showing hospitality to Jesus himself (Ma. 25:31-46). As we extend hospitality to others, we are extending it to God.

Could we see the presence of God in the other, that just might help us to love them, as alien as they might be to us?

2. We can take this alien love more deeply into our hearts by circumcising our hearts and relaxing our stiff necks (v. 16). What do these mixed bodily metaphors refer to?! They refer to a disposition, a repentant and therefore more softened and sensitive attitude toward God. It is a disposition that ponders the amazing fact that while we were still sinners, as Paul writes in Romans 5:8, while we were still alienated from God, Christ died for us, he extended to us his gracious and undeserved hospitality. Part of the good news is that we are not loved by God because we were lovely, but in spite of our unloveliness, so that he can make us lovely again. If this is how God demonstrates his love for us, how much more can we give of ourselves to others.

We are loved by a God who is bringing his kingdom to bear on earth as it is in heaven. Let us ponder how deep his love is for us, so that we may be motivated to say to him: "Take my life, Lord, and use me love others as you have loved me."