

Stranger God: Meeting Jesus in Disguise

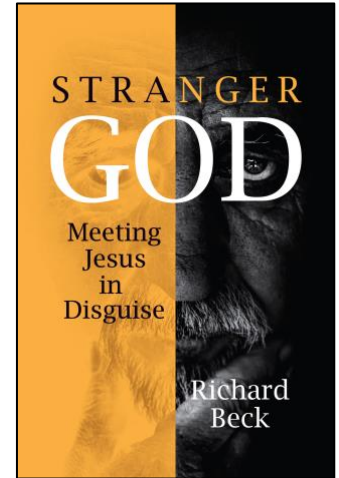
Discussion Guide

Overview:

Dear Readers and Discussion Leaders,

This discussion guide is for groups who have some shared interest in the practices of hospitality and who are reading *Stranger God* together. I expect this guide will mainly be used by classes, small groups, or reading groups associated with churches or faith-based organizations. However, the topics and the discussions prompted by the book and this guide are applicable to a wide variety of organizations—and even for individuals reading on their own. Please feel free to adapt or adjust the wording of any question to fit your context.

I wrote many of the questions and discussion prompts to facilitate a lot of storytelling. I hope your group embraces the storytelling. I think sharing and listening to stories is a practice of hospitality. So share your stories, and listen well to each other. God will show up. I also hope many of the questions and prompts promote rich and deep discussions about how we might better “welcome each other as Christ welcomed us” (Romans 15:7).



If I have any overarching goals for the book and this discussion guide, they are these:

First, when we think about hospitality, we tend to think of one of two things: having people over for dinner or volunteering with a ministry or service organization. To be sure, hospitality takes place in those locations. But I’d like us to explore hospitality as a 24/7 experience, as something that begins in our hearts and can be practiced every second of every day, even with those closest to us at home and at work.

Second, I’d like readers of the book and those using this discussion guide to spend some time mapping the emotional terrain of their hearts. If we want to become more hospitable, we have to start by shining a light into those darker corners where hospitality isn’t quite as easy or natural. When I look in the mirror, I’m not as welcoming, kind, or loving as I could be. I expect you feel the same when you look in the mirror. As uncomfortable as it may be, let *Stranger God* and this discussion guide bring you to that place of honesty. The journey of hospitality begins right there.

Third, and this is my big agenda, I’d like for you to start thinking of hospitality less as an event you put on (like a dinner or a block party) or service you perform (like volunteering at a food bank) and more as *an intentional, daily, habit-forming practice*. I’d like for you to think of hospitality as *a spiritual discipline that is teaching you how to love*. A practice you can do anytime, anywhere, with the person standing right in front of you.

To help with this, some of the chapters have “Hospitality Homework” associated with them, little practices your group can try for a week and report back on. These homework assignments might be the most formative experiences you’ll have with the book and each other. So, let me encourage you to take them on. These practices changed my life. And my final prayer is that they will soon lead you to a meeting with our stranger God.

Blessings on your journey!

—Richard

Introduction: Welcoming the Stranger God

1. Have you ever entertained angels unawares, receiving grace and blessing from an unexpected person? Share your story.
2. How would you define “hospitality”? Does hospitality come easily to you, or is it a struggle? Why?
3. Who is or has been a role model of hospitality in your life, someone you admire for how they welcomed others? Share some stories about them and why they inspire you.
4. The chapter (p. 9) contrasts the biblical word for hospitality *philoxenia* (the love of strangers) with the word *xenophobia* (the fear of strangers). Discuss how our fear of strangers undercuts hospitality in our personal lives, churches, neighborhoods, workplaces, nation, and world.

Part 1: Entertaining Angels

Chapter 1: Jesus in Disguise

1. The chapter shares many stories from the Bible where God or Jesus come as a stranger, in disguise, unrecognized, or seeking welcome (pp. 20–26). Can you think of any other stories like these in the Bible? Share these.
2. From page 27: “We don’t show hospitality to *be like* Jesus. We show hospitality to *welcome* Jesus.”
 - Discuss what goes wrong with hospitality when we see ourselves as saving, rescuing, or fixing other people. Share examples of when you’ve seen this happen.
 - Discuss how our views and practices of hospitality would change if we were the ones who were being saved by strangers. Share stories when you’ve experienced this.
3. A series of questions are asked on page 26: “Our response to the call of hospitality is to answer some simple questions: Who are people on the periphery of my life? Who is that person at the far boundaries of my care and attention? Who is being ignored in my workplace and church? Who is marginalized in my neighborhood and nation? Who would Jesus grab to place at the center of my attention?”
 - Take some time to prayerfully ponder these questions, letting faces and names of specific people (or groups of people) come into your heart and mind. As you pray and ponder, write down this list of names as they come to you. Share some of your list with the group.

Chapter 2: The Circle of Our Affections

1. “Our social world is an emotional ecosystem” (pp. 36–38). Make a list of all the feelings that create obstacles for hospitality. Share which two to three feelings you most struggle with.
2. Make a list of some people you encounter in a typical day who are not in your moral circle, people with whom kindness is hard (pp. 40–43). Share why you struggle with these particular people.
3. The chapter describes a scene where a stressed-out server in a restaurant is treated unkindly because she’s a stranger (pp. 41–43).
 - Make a list of three other situations where we encounter people as “strangers.”
 - Describe how your interactions would change in these situations if you welcomed these people into your moral circle (i.e., treated them as a family member or dear friend).
4. Reflect on the story in Acts 6 where the early church “expanded the moral circle” by caring for the widows of the Hellenistic believers (p. 44). Share other examples from the Bible where the moral circle was expanded to include those who were excluded or marginalized.

Chapter 3: Yes, And

1. In extending the will to embrace, “order is everything.” For example, in Mark 1 Jesus touches the leper *before* purification (pp. 49–52).

- How well does your community extend the “will to embrace”? Are your members able to share with each other authentically and transparently? Do strangers feel welcome to come as they are? Why or why not?
 - How can your community improve in extending the “will to embrace” to each other, your neighbors, and the world?
2. Do you think the recommendation to “love the sinner, but hate the sin” is good advice (pp. 52–55)? Why or why not?
 3. Discuss why it is so hard to extend the “will to embrace” on social media (p. 53).
 4. The principle of “Yes, and” suggests that hospitality can have limits and boundaries, especially when we have concerns about safety (pp. 58–62).
 - Share examples of how the “will to embrace” can coexist with creating a safe community.
 - Share examples of how a concern for safety has undermined the “will to embrace” in a community.
 - Discuss how we can manage the tension between hospitality and safety.
 5. The principle of “Yes, and” suggests that hospitality must also make room for truth (pp. 58–62).
 - Discuss how we can balance hospitality and telling the truth.
 - How is the “will to embrace” different from niceness and politeness, especially when we have to speak and listen to hard truths?

Part 2: The Emotional Battlefield

Chapter 4: Hitler’s Sweater and Cooties for Grown Ups

1. The Hitler’s sweater experiment (pp. 66–68) illustrates how we treat sin as a virus, causing us to push sinners away as a source of moral contamination. Share stories of how you’ve seen this purity psychology at work in churches and other communities.
2. The Dixie Cup experiment (pp. 70–72):
 - Confession time: Would you drink your spit out of a Dixie Cup? Go around the group and share how disgusting this would be for you, on a scale of 1 (= not disgusting at all) to 10 (= extremely disgusting).
 - Your answers about the Dixie Cup reflect what psychologists call “disgust sensitivity,” how each of us differ in what we find disgusting. Describe examples in your life where your disgust sensitivity affects how welcoming or unwelcoming you are to certain people.
3. Discuss the example of Saint Francis and the leper (pp. 76–78).
 - Who would be the “lepers” you struggle to embrace?
 - Who are the “lepers” your community struggles to embrace?
 - Given the answers above, what would “kissing the leper” (extending the “will to embrace”) look like?

Chapter 5: Our Dirty Little Secret

1. Share examples of how death is a “pornographic” topic in our society, a topic people don’t like to discuss or be reminded of (pp. 80–82).
2. Describe the “culture of honor” in your community (p. 79–80). That is, who gets elevated, recognized, applauded, and praised? Who gets the spotlight and microphone? Who receives less attention?
3. Reflect on Paul’s command to show “special honor” (1 Corinthians 12:22–25) to the parts of the body that lack it (pp. 83–88).

- How well does your community show “special honor” to people who lack honor in American society?
 - If they weren’t mentioned specifically, think about the elderly, the disabled, minority groups, the unemployed, the less talented, and the mentally ill. How can your community improve in showing “special honor” to these individuals?
4. Reflect on the connection between experience and empathy (pp. 88–90). Share a story from your life where your compassion has been expanded because you’ve gone through a similar experience.

Chapter 6: The Murderer in Our Heart

1. Where in your life do you struggle the most with feelings of superiority and smugness (pp. 95–98)? If you were going to make an “idiot list,” who would be on your list?
2. Jesus taught that contempt is “affectional murder,” killing people in our hearts (p. 96–98). If that’s true, share how many people you’ve “killed” this week.
3. A “wall of hostility” separated the people Paul lists in Galatians 3:28—male/female, Jew/Greek, and slave/free (pp. 98–102). Expand this list, sharing other pairs where you see a “wall of hostility” at work.
4. Discuss how grace as a “social revolution” (pp. 98–102)—breaking down walls of hostility—changes how we might speak about, witness to, and proclaim the “good news” of the gospel.

Chapter 7: Build That Wall!

1. Putting partisan politics aside, discuss how fear affects the hospitality of a nation. Share historical and recent examples (pp. 103–8).
2. Hebrews 2:14–15 describes fear as “the power of the devil” (pp. 106–8). How have you seen fear undermine love, compassion, and hospitality in your own life, in the church, in your neighborhood, in our nation, and in the world?
3. Discuss how our fear causes us to scapegoat strangers, blaming them for what’s going wrong (p. 108). Share examples of this.
4. Discuss the relationship between love and risk (pp. 108–11).
 - Does love always involve some degree of risk? Can love ever be 100 percent safe? Why or why not?
 - Revisiting chapter 3, how can we balance the risk of love with our concerns over safety?
 - At what point does our concern over safety begin to undermine our ability to love? How can you tell when that’s starting to happen?

Chapter 8: Heart Triggers

1. This chapter walks through a list of “heart triggers,” places where we struggle to extend hospitality (pp. 115–26):
 - Politics
 - Habits (e.g., smokers, drinkers)
 - Lifestyle choices (e.g., gun owners, vegans)
 - Hygiene
 - Appearance (e.g., clothing, tattoos, piercings)
 - Disabilities
 - Demographics (e.g., Muslims, ethnic minorities, LGBTQ, immigrants, refugees)
 - Poor social skills
 - Criminal history

- Sins and moral failures (i.e., any behavior defined by yourself or community as sinful, unjust, or oppressive)
 - Personal history (e.g., grievances, grudges, bad experiences with individuals)
2. Looking at the list, what are your biggest “heart triggers,” places where you struggle to extend hospitality? Is there any one area where you are particularly struggling at this time in your life?
 3. What would you add to the list of “heart triggers,” and what additional examples can you give that aren’t mentioned in the chapter?

Chapter 9: Jesus, You Are Making Me Tired

1. Discuss your reactions when pastors or people talk about being a “radical,” “all in,” “110 percent,” “sold out” follower of Jesus (pp. 129–30). Do you feel guilty, exhausted, or inspired?
2. On a scale from 0 percent to 100 percent, how stressed or maxed-out are you right now in life (pp. 130–32)? Share your answers with the group.
3. Do you have any fears about what a lifestyle of hospitality would do in disrupting your life? What are those fears?
4. How does your view of hospitality change if it’s no longer something to add to your to-do list but “openness to unexpected and surprising friendships” (pp. 134–35)?

Part 3: “I Shall Be Love”

Chapter 10: Searching for the Science of Love

1. Share if you’ve ever seen hospitality or welcoming initiatives struggle to get off the ground or gain momentum (pp. 140–44). Why do you think hospitality and welcoming efforts struggle? What do you think the solution might be?
2. Discuss how your community struggles or excels in extending hospitality. What are you doing well? What are you struggling with?
3. The chapter argues that hospitality begins not with a policy, program, ministry, or service project but as a daily, habit-forming practice (pp. 140–44). Discuss what such a daily, habit-forming practice might look like.
4. In *Story of a Soul*, Thérèse describes her “Little Way” as a “science of love” (p. 150). If your community was going to teach a class on the “science of love,” what should be the first lessons, experiments, and experiences for the students?

Chapter 11: The Heart of the Church

1. Have you ever had a struggle similar to Thérèse’s, where you felt guilty about not doing more for God in your life (pp. 151–53)? Share that story.
2. Pick a random moment from your day when you are with people—at home, at work, or out in the world. (Bonus points if you pick an irritating or boring moment with others.) Share these moments with the group and describe what doing “a little thing with great love” would look like in that moment (pp. 157–62).
3. **Hospitality Homework:** Commit to doing “a little thing with great love” this week. Be specific! Come back and share your experience with the group.

Chapter 12: The Elevator to Jesus

1. Make a list of activities people engage in when they want to improve and invest in their relationship with God. Circle activities on this list that involve improving and investing in our relationships with other people. Reflect on how and why these lists overlap, or fail to (pp. 163–68).
2. Discuss our temptation to “over-spiritualize” our relationship with God by ignoring “the social and interpersonal aspects of our relationship with God” (pp. 164–68).
3. Following Thérèse’s practice, where in your life can you start offering a kind word to make a sad soul bloom (pp. 168–72)?
4. Share a story where you’ve felt an irritation similar to Thérèse’s experience with the sister making the clicking sound (pp. 172–75). Describe how wrestling with irritation and practicing patience in moments like these are practices of hospitality.
5. **Hospitality Homework:** Commit to “seeking out” someone this week to share a kind word or a smile. Be specific! Come back and share your experience with the group.

Part 4: Practicing Hospitality

Chapter 13: Seeing

1. Reflecting on the evangelical Texas soccer moms welcoming Abeer to their playgroup (pp. 179–81), share a story where you’ve seen surprising hospitality extended toward others.
2. Share your own “This is Water” moment (pp. 184–87), “a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell-type” situation where you struggled to tap into “love, compassion, and the subsurface unity of all things.”
3. In the chapter, an example was used of passengers being unkind to an airline ticketing agent after a flight got canceled (pp. 187–90). Share a story from your life where you’ve seen something similar happen. Describe how you could practice kindness in moments like these.
4. In the chapter, seeing others is described as a practice of kindness (pp. 187–90). Read Galatians 5:22–23, Paul’s list of the fruit of the Spirit. In addition to kindness, how many of these fruits can also be described as practices of hospitality?
5. **Hospitality Homework:** Commit to practicing kindness this week when you find yourself in a “This is Water” moment. Come back and share your experience with the group.

Chapter 14: Stopping

1. Share how your level of hurry and busyness hurts your ability to see others and extend them hospitality (pp. 191–93). Give an example from this week.
2. Who are the people most likely to interrupt you any given day? How can you practice becoming more interruptible with them (pp. 194–98)?
3. If slow is the speed of love, what are three things you could do to slow your life down (pp. 194)?
4. **Hospitality Homework:** Commit to being more interruptible in some part of your life this week. Be specific! Come back and share your experiences with the group.

Chapter 15: Approaching

1. Reflecting on Richard’s story with Kristi (pp. 199–201), share an experience of making a surprising friendship and how it blessed your life.
2. Share how your life would change if you adopted the “no detour rule” (pp. 202–4).
3. When you are on “social autopilot,” what’s your typical social routine (at church, at a gathering, etc.)? Describe how that routine would change if you were to disengage your social autopilot (pp. 204–6).
4. **Hospitality Homework:** Disengage your social autopilot for a week, or adopt the “no detour rule.” Come back and share your experiences with the group.

Part 5: How to Save the World

Chapter 16: Love Locally

1. Expressions of compassion on social media (e.g., sharing on Facebook, sharing a hashtag) have been described as a form of “slacktivism” (i.e., activism for slackers), a way to feel like we are loving people with little to no face-to-face investment or sacrifice. Do you agree or disagree? Discuss how social media can be used effectively, and how it can distract us from loving people face-to-face in our local community (pp. 211–16).
2. Have you ever experienced “compassion fatigue” from social media (pp. 213)? Share this experience with the group.
3. “Care globally, love locally” (pp. 214–16).
 - Where is your community loving locally? How can your community invest more in loving your neighbors?
 - Where are you loving locally? How can you invest more in loving your neighbors?
4. Social psychologists have shown that “contact breeds compassion” (pp. 216–18).
 - How diverse are your friendships? Ethnically, socioeconomically, and politically?
 - How diverse is your community? Ethnically, socioeconomically, and politically?
 - How and where can you and your community start “making contact” to open yourself to more diverse friendships?
5. **Hospitality Homework:** Identify and commit to a place where you can “love locally” and/or “make contact” with a more diverse group of people. Come back and share where you’ve made a commitment to go. If possible, follow up with each other at a later date to share experiences.

Chapter 17: Blest Be the (Weak) Tie that Binds

1. How does hospitality change if we focus more on *with* rather than *for* (pp. 222–25)?
2. Make a list of the ministries at your church or organization that serve or welcome your local community.
 - Which label best describes each of these ministries: A ministry that is working *for* people? Or a ministry aimed at being *with* people? Phrased differently, is the ministry aimed at *helping* people or cultivating *friendships* (pp. 222–25)?
 - How can your community create more “being with” experiences in its ministries and outreach?
3. Read Acts 2:42–47 and 4:32–37. How does your community compare to the church in Acts? Share some initial steps your community can take to move closer to the *koinonia* of the early church (pp. 225–27).
4. Share a story of how your social network rescued you at some point of your life (pp. 227–33).
5. Share a story about giving the “gift of connection,” how you could not help directly but were able to make a connection that could (pp. 233–36).
6. **Hospitality Homework:** Make a commitment to “being with” someone this week. Bonus points for picking someone outside your family or current friendship group. Come back and share your experiences with the group.

Conclusion: The Kindness Revolution

1. Share stories you encountered that made you think, “That is exactly the sort of thing Jesus would have done.” Discuss what these stories have in common and why we are so attracted to them (pp. 237–41).
2. Discuss how kindness can be easier than love, but also how kindness can be harder (p. 239–40).
3. Share where in your life you struggle most with kindness (p. 240).

4. Discuss this claim (p. 240): “I think a year of practicing kindness would revolutionize the Christian witness in the world.” How might a “kindness revolution” become a tool for witnessing and evangelizing the world?
5. Would your church be willing to be a part of the “kindness revolution” for an entire year?
6. **Hospitality Homework:** Commit to being part of the “kindness revolution” for a week. Come back and share your experiences with the group.