

Welcoming

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Date: 16 January 2022

Preacher: Brian King

[0 : 00] Let's pray. Heavenly Father, thank you so much that you are the God who invites us to your feast.

And so Father, as we come to Zion now, as we join with the many angels at this gathering, would you feed us with your word? Would you nourish us and implant it deep in us so that we might be ready to follow you wholeheartedly, undividedly with all our hearts, souls and minds, not just as individuals, but as a church.

We pray all this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Dennis Edwards is an African-American pastor and New Testament scholar. And he once tells a story about a church that he had been taught to serve in.

This church was a predominantly white church. It was very well educated. Many of its members had advanced degrees. And it cided itself on being multiracial.

It boasted of how 6% of their congregation were made up of African-Americans. But Edwards had been taught to a meeting together with other church leaders and some volunteer youth leaders.

[1 : 18] And the youth leaders were there because they had issued an ultimatum. They didn't want to lead the youth group if it included neighborhood kids.

They just wanted the youth group to be for their kids. Now, when they said neighborhood kids, what they really meant was African-American kids. Because at that point, most of the people living in the church neighborhood were black.

In fact, the church had an after-school tutoring program for them. And Edwards pointed out to the people gathered there that if they excluded neighborhood kids, they would be excluding his kids.

Immediately, one person reassured him that, oh, no, no, no. Your kid can still come to the youth group. But Edwards tried to help him see that his son wasn't really the issue.

The issue was that segregating the youth group in this way was problematic. What message would it send to the neighborhood kids if they could go to Tushan but not the youth group?

[2 : 22] Why could they learn about Max but not Jesus? Why was his son the exception? Was it because his father was highly educated?

But his argument didn't win the day. And what they found was so ironic was that this happened while the church proclaimed on its signage that it was a church for all peoples and had recently adopted a mission statement emphasizing reconciliation of people across race, class, and culture.

Their practice contradicted their message. Well, welcome today, especially if you're new or visiting. And just to get you up to speed, we're currently in the middle of a six-week series entitled Church Recept where we're just thinking a little deeper about church.

Usually, we preach through books of the Bible, but every once in a while, we will stop to think more topically, which is what we're doing this month. And so far, we've thought about what church is.

Two weeks ago, we were reminded that church is essentially a people who belong to Jesus and a people who belong to one another. And last week, we kind of fleshed out the definition a little further by seeing that church is also a people who gather together to meet with God and to spur one another on to live for Him.

[3 : 54] That's who we are. That's what church is. And today, we're going to think a little about what church should be like. What church should be like.

And here's the headline for today. A gospel-centered church should be a welcoming church. A church that says the gospel is at the heart of its message should be a church that's full of welcome for everyone.

A gospel-centered church shouldn't be like that church that Dennis Edwards has just described to us. An unwelcoming church would be a contradiction of the gospel.

And to make that clear to us, as I said already, we're going to be looking primarily at James 2, verse 1 to 13 today. We'll also be considering Romans 15, verse 7 towards the end as we begin to think more about what welcoming might look like.

But James 2 is our base. And we'll think about our subject today under three headings. The what of welcoming, the why of welcoming, and the how of welcoming.

[5 : 06] So firstly, the what of welcoming. What does it mean to be a welcoming church? Well, James tells us straight away what it involves, verse 1.

My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism. So there it is in black and white.

What is a mark of a gospel-centered welcoming church? Here's a key indicator. There's no partiality, no prejudice, no discrimination, no favoritism.

And I think we instinctively get this. If you've ever been in a class where someone is obviously the teacher's pet, or in a family where your sibling gets away with just about everything, in a workplace where someone gets promoted purely because they knew or they flattered the right people, then you are familiar with that sense of injustice, of hurt, of the division favoritism can cause.

In fact, down in verse 4, James uses the word evil to describe such actions. That's how strong James feels about this.

[6 : 26] Why so? Because James knows how poisonous partiality is. Let's recall again what church is from previous weeks.

We've been saying that church is one new humanity where ethnic divisions have been overcome by the gospel. In Christ, we have been reborn and remade as children of God, no longer exclusively identified as Jew or Gentile or Chinese or Iban or whatever it is.

And when we gather, we're supposed to be giving the world a glimpse of that final gathering from every tribe and tongue. Again, made possible only because of Jesus.

And so, accordingly, church should be a place of belonging, a place where everyone is welcome. But favoritism destroys all of that.

Where it exists, it says to some people, you don't really belong. You're not welcome here. And it communicates that this one new humanity isn't really one after all, but still divided along the same lines as before.

[7 : 49] And if that's what it communicates, then it's diminishing the gospel of Jesus Christ. It seems to suggest, to use James' own words earlier in chapter 1, that Christianity is really just worthless religion.

It's no different from the world. Instead of magnifying Jesus, it discredits him. So that's why James has to tackle this.

He needs to state clearly that faith in Jesus Christ and favoritism is not compatible. After all, what is favoritism?

The Greek word literally means to receive someone according to their faith. It's to allow the externals to have the final say in your evaluation of someone.

The word prejudice is similar. It contains the idea of pre-judging somebody according to how you see their ethnicity or their ability or their social category.

[9 : 01] And that is not something Jesus ever did. Not once does Jesus ever show prejudice or favoritism of this sort.

Indeed, the most distinctive thing that Jesus ever did, dying on the cross, was the very opposite of this. After all, did he not say to the person hanging on the cross next to him, a convicted terrorist no less, that he would follow Jesus into paradise?

Jesus was welcoming even the guilty, perhaps especially the guilty. His cross is for everyone who repents.

And if Jesus didn't show favoritism, no surprise, James says that believers in Jesus shouldn't either. And to help make it concrete, James tells a story.

Verse 2. Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in.

[10 : 13] If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, here's a good seat for you. But say to the poor man, you stand there or sit on the floor by my feet.

Have you not discriminated amongst yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? So here's the scenario. A group of Christians are gathered together like how we're gathered right now.

One guy comes in. He's wearing something that showcases his status, he's rich, he's attractive, he looks like someone who could bring benefit to the church.

And everyone rushes to talk to him. They tell him, here's the place of honor. They do everything to welcome him to make sure he stays.

Meanwhile, there's another guy. He's scruffy, quite, quite dirty, in fact. Someone who looks like a burden to the church. And everyone says to themselves, I'm not talking to that person.

[11 : 19] Let someone else talk to the new guy. And when someone finally does, it's to tell him, sit at the back and to the side, please. Oh, and don't go near the guy with the gold ring.

And by the way, you don't need a seat. The floor will do. And so what has happened is preferential treatment is given. One guy is welcome.

The other isn't. Simply on the basis of appearance. Now, that might be compatible with Greco-Roman culture, which operated on an honor-shame system and gave honor to people with high status.

while letting those with low status wallow in shame. But James tells us, this is not compatible with faith in Jesus Christ.

And this, of course, is not just a first-century issue. Last year, I read of a very famous church. If I told you the name, many of you would know it. Which included celebrity attendees.

[12 : 30] Now, at this church, there is a reserved seating section for VIPs at the front of the church. They have special access backstage, which includes access to some lavish catering.

Meanwhile, the volunteers who prepare the food and clean the kitchen are barely an afterthought. And you have to wonder if the church has forgotten James 2, verse 1 to 4.

But of course, it's easy to point fingers at others when God wants us to examine ourselves. So, what about us?

Perhaps we find it a little hard to identify with the specific scenario that James paints. We are pretty sure that KEC doesn't welcome only the rich. And anyway, no one ever wants the good seats in the front.

But it's helpful to know that the word favoritism in verse 1 is actually in the plural and so can be translated acts of favoritism.

[13 : 35] After all, there are many different ways we can show partiality. That's the way that James just described by giving preferential treatment to the affluent.

But let me just quickly spell out some other ways. and I've adopted the following list all beginning with the letter A from the Pastor Tony Merida. Now, we could choose to be more or less welcoming based on achievement.

We like those who have shown themselves successful in their career or who are considered experts in a particular area while ignoring those who seem to have made a mess of their lives whom we consider uneducated or just not accomplished in any way.

We could choose to be more or less welcoming based on affinity. That is, we are warm and inclusive towards those who share our natural interests whether that's music or photography or something else but cool towards those who don't.

We could choose to be more or less welcoming based on age and this cuts both ways. Older ones could naturally think that they are the ones with all the good ideas while being condescending to the younger ones.

[15 : 03] Meanwhile, younger ones could too quickly reject the older ones for being too old-fashioned too out of touch without considering their years of experience.

And we could choose to be more or less welcoming based on ancestry. When two people visit church but one of them happens to be the son of someone from an established church family while the other is a nobody it's easy to go and chat to the former rather than the latter and I've seen that happen before.

But James is clear don't let your decisions or attitudes be based on external appearances.

After all if we stop to think about it we know how deceiving appearances can be hunted. From nature we know caterpillars turn into butterflies but looking at the caterpillar you would never have guess.

or I think about one of my friends who is a white man who was a missionary in China for a long time and looking at him you could never imagine it but he can speak fluent Mandarin with a perfect Beijing accent.

[16 : 27] I've seen him surprised more than one Chinese person. And above all look at Jesus. here is the man of sorrows whom Isaiah says had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him nothing in his appearance that we should desire him and yet as Isaiah also says your eyes will see the king in his beauty because this is the one who died for our sin.

And so if even the king of kings our savior looks weak and disfigured well don't treat people differently based on mere externals.

Welcome everyone. But just to be clear before we move on to the next point let me just briefly also mention what obeying this command doesn't mean.

James doesn't mean we now discriminate against rich people as if we practice reverse favoritism that would be to defeat the purpose. Throughout the scripture we have some examples of some rich believers Abraham had plenty of cattle and crops Joseph of Arimathea who took Jesus' body away was a rich man Lydia who hosted the church in Philippi was a wealthy businesswoman and they were not condemned for their wealth per se.

Neither does James mean that there are no standards and anything goes. We have passages like 1 Corinthians 5 about church discipline which shows us that we do have to treat people who claim to be Christian and yet are unrepentant in different ways.

[18 : 33] We have passages like 1 Timothy 3 which tells us that not everyone can be an elder or a deacon but that certain criteria must be met.

And if someone doesn't meet that criteria it is not favoritism to deny them that role. It's just being biblical. But let's move on to our second heading.

So secondly the why of welcoming. James now gives us several reasons why we aren't to show favoritism but to welcome everyone.

And the first reason is right there in verse 5 because God welcomes the unwelcome because God welcomes the unwelcome. Let me read verse 5.

Listen my dear brothers and sisters has God not chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?

[19 : 39] Church James says consider Jesus while he was here on earth. Think for example of that episode where Jesus is at a dinner party put on by a Pharisee and a woman who lived a sinful life came in and wept his feet with her tears and pours out perfume on him.

And the host and the other guests are shocked wondering how and when they can get rid of this woman in the quickest possible way. But how does Jesus treat this uninvited guest with honor and compassion and abundant grace.

In that single incident, Jesus gives us a glimpse into his kingdom where the sinful are welcome, the conventional standards of honor and shame are thrown out.

Forgiveness and love become the new standard and the woman is treated according to how God sees her, not how the world sees her.

Or consider who made up the very first followers of Jesus. We have uncultured fishermen, we have a despised tax collector, and we certainly don't have the elites, the upper crust of society.

[21 : 09] Indeed, 1 Corinthians 1 verse 26 to 31 reminds us that not many in the early church were wise, or influential, or of noble birth, according to the world's standards.

And that's the point, James says. Has God not chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world?

Has He not chosen those like that woman who know themselves to be spiritually poor in themselves? and know that they cannot turn to themselves but only to God over and over again?

Has He not welcome whom the world has not welcomed? And are not such people actually rich in faith?

They might look like nobodies in the eyes of the world but see them through God's eyes of grace and you will see a different picture.

[22 : 17] And praise God that His eyes are different to us. You see as we look around us we know that there are many of us who might be brilliant in our field accomplished in our work applauded by many.

We are gifted bunch. But if we have truly met God we would know that we don't have what He ultimately requires of us.

We discover that whatever our external appearances whatever our abilities our accomplishments we are nothing more than empty and broken sinners.

But it's exactly when we were running on empty that God came and took on flesh and welcomed us.

And so if our welcoming is selective James says it contradicts God's vision of grace. It obscures what his kingdom is like.

[23 : 22] It obscures what God is like. And in fact it makes us like the world. For while God welcomes the unwelcome the world doesn't.

And that's what verses 6 and 7 are all about. James says do you know what you're doing when you fail to welcome as God does? You're being like the world.

God doesn't dishonor the poor but they do. For the world despises the poor in spirit. After all look at how they treat you. They use their influence with the courts to secure favorable verdicts against you.

They charge you exorbitant rates, the ones that you cannot control, to try to ruin you. And by that, verse 7, they show that they don't really welcome the God we worship.

They blaspheme the noble name of him to whom we belong. They mocked the way of Jesus. And so James asked his readers, why would you go out of your way to honor those who dishonor God?

[24 : 40] Why not honor Jesus instead and welcome whom he welcomes? Because God welcomes the unwelcome.

Here's a second reason. we welcome because otherwise it's a failure of love. Because otherwise it's a failure of love.

That's what verses 8-11 are all about. When Jesus was here on earth, he taught that the entire law found in the Old Testament could be summarized in these two sentences.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, strength, soul, and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. And so when we do that, verse 8, we are doing right.

But, verse 9, when you show favoritism, you are breaking the law. and we begin to see the seriousness of the matter. You see, we might think to ourselves, sure, I'm loving my neighbor.

[25 : 47] But who is your neighbor, James asks, echoing Jesus? Only that man with the gold ring and fine clothes? If it's only him, and not the poor man in fealty clothes, then I'm sorry to break the news to you.

You've violated God's command, verse 10. For whoever keeps the whole law, and yet stumbles at just one point, is guilty of breaking all of it.

How so? Well, imagine that right now in this hall, there is absolute silence. You can't hear anything. But suddenly, there is a piercing scream.

The silence is broken. And all of it is broken. When that scream came, you don't say, oh, part of that silence is broken. It's all or nothing.

And it's the same with God's law. Regardless of which part of God's law is broken, when it's broken, all of it is broken.

[27 : 01] We can't choose which ones to follow and which ones to ignore. There is no picking and choosing. And the reason for that is because behind all these various laws lies just one lawgiver.

Notice in verse 11, it is he who said. And so the various laws are not just assembled randomly by chance. They are the product of God's mind and will.

And just imagine standing before a judge and telling him, I know I murdered your son, but it's all right, at least I didn't commit adultery with his wife. Now, that would sound ridiculous, wouldn't it?

but that's the point of verse 11. When one law is broken, all of it is broken. And the failure to love at this one point is a failure of love on all points.

when we show favoritism, welcoming only selected people, we have failed to love our neighbor, no matter how much love we show to the selected few.

[28 : 21] And so we welcome all, for otherwise, it is a failure of love. So we have the what of welcoming, and the why of welcoming, and now we come to our third heading for today, the how of welcoming.

How then should we welcome? Well, so far we've been thinking about welcoming from a more negative point of view, that is, we've been thinking in terms of what welcoming shouldn't look like.

Don't show favoritism. But for the remainder of our time, we'll think about it more positively, that is, in terms of what welcoming should look like. Look at verse 12.

Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom. In other words, to put it simply, speak and act as those who have the word of the gospel implanted in us, those who have the law written on our hearts by the spirit.

Speak and act as those who know the lawgiver and are liberated to do his will. But how? Well, here I'm going to take a bit of liberty and let me take you away from James 2 for a moment and I want us to briefly consider Romans 15 verse 7 which I take to be Paul's way of saying more or less the same thing as James 2 verse 12 to 13.

[29 : 59] So Paul says, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God. That's from the ESV translation.

We heard it in our second Bible reading. You see, very quickly, what is the context of Romans 15? Well, starting in Romans 14, we learned that there were two groups of Christians who were at odds with one another.

One group still observed traditional Jewish practices by avoiding certain foods and observing certain special days, while the other did not.

And so both groups had contempt for one another, thinking of each other as being more unspiritual. And we're going to see a similar situation in 1 Corinthians 8, which I will preach on when we resume our 1 Corinthians series.

But Paul's priority here is not so much to resolve this particular dispute doctrinally, although he does say that there is a right and a wrong side, but to guide them pastorally.

[31 : 08] Look at Romans 15, verse 5 to 6. It's on your order of service. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And so that's Paul's aim. And to do that, Paul now says to both groups, welcome one another.

Now you would have noticed that I used the ESV translation rather than the NIV here, which says accept one another. Why did I do that? Was I just trying to shoehorn the passage to fit my sermon team?

Not quite. You see, it's because when we hear the word accept, it could still sound like something that we do grudgingly. You know the kind of thing where we say, oh well, I accept it, but I don't have to like it.

But whole actually means something stronger here, which is why I've gone with the ESV. He doesn't just mean grudgingly acknowledge one another. He doesn't even just mean be nice to one another.

[32 : 29] If that is all there is, then we don't need the gospel to do that. People who don't have the law written on their hearts, who don't have the Holy Spirit living in them, do that all the time.

Now, the word translated welcome here has the idea of taking the person aside, of receiving him into your arms, of embracing him wholly.

And Paul says that's what a gospel shaped welcome should look like. A worldly welcome welcomes those with whom we agree.

We welcome those who say, oh, you look exactly like us, you think exactly like us, you are exactly like us. But the gospel welcome says to a brother or sister in Christ, look, I know over these secondary matters we have some disagreements and we should discuss them, we're not saying that brush them under the carpet, but I can still receive you and say we are one in Christ.

When Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, what did he highlight? The fact that the Good Samaritan is different from the man that he helps and different from the people listening to the story.

[34 : 03] Why did Jesus tell the story in that way? Because he wanted to show that the best demonstration of the gospel is when you welcome those who are not like you.

The love of God is seen most clearly when it is displayed to someone who is different from you. That's the welcome of the gospel.

It isn't about you having to put on a fake smile. It isn't about you having to change your personality as if to be more extroverted is the same as being more welcoming.

No. It's more about your posture towards the other. Is your honest desire to help the other person experience the love of Jesus more?

Then you've got welcoming right. So how does that work out in church practically? Rebecca McLachlan is a Christian apologist and she once talked about her three rules of engagement at church.

[35 : 14] Here they are on the screen. an alone person in our gathering is an emergency. Friends can wait. Introduce a newcomer to someone else.

Let's all be missionaries at church today. And do you see how she tries to put welcoming into practice? She's thinking I can talk to my friends anytime and I don't have to view my time here at church as simply more social time.

Instead my mindset should be how can I welcome those who especially need the welcome? Here is another rule that you can put into practice.

Think of this as a rule of five and a rule of ten. Here is the rule of five. For at least the first five minutes I will not talk to anyone who is in my usual social circle but do my best to approach those who look like they need encouragement.

And here is the rule of ten. If there's someone within ten feet of me who needs a welcome, maybe a newcomer or someone like that, I will do that.

[36 : 25] I will wait for someone else. And of course this is a mindset that can be applied outside a church gathering as well. The big question is how can I welcome someone as Christ would.

And do you see how welcoming is everyone's job? Because Romans 15 verse 7 is not directed to the usher or to the pastor, it's directed to every Christian.

According to many church surveys, most churches think that they are more welcoming than they really are. And the reason for that is simple. The church members often think they are very friendly because they are friendly towards one another.

But the visitors and guests who come in don't experience that because the church members are friendly only towards their own. Well, let's not be that church. And I know we can be a welcoming church.

I've just been watching one of our long-time church members over the past month, someone who's been here for many decades, and I've already seen her welcome some of our newer Lunbawang students who came in December.

[37 : 38] We spoke to the Filipino guests that we had recently, who made an effort to know one of the guys who have just started coming. Thank you for that. And when we welcome like Jesus did, remember, we demonstrate the power of the gospel.

Welcome others as Christ has welcomed you. let's finish by meditating on Jesus again. Think about what Jesus knows about us.

He knows that we have not loved him or loved others as we should. He knows in fact that at various points we have hated what he said and refused to go along with it.

He knows when we have told him before, get out of this area of my life. You're not welcome here. But what did he do? Stay at the distance?

No. He drew near and he pulled you into his embrace and we know that because Jesus chose to go the whole way for you and I, he walked the way of the cross.

[38 : 57] And so to return to James 2, mercy triumph over judgment. We have been shown mercy where we deserve no mercy.

We have been welcome when we deserve no welcome. And as Jesus put you and I into his arms, he said, Church, you belong to me.

You are accountable to me. And you belong to one another. you have to encourage one another on to love and good deeds. So go and do likewise.

Because should you be unwelcoming in the way that James talks about, then you show that you haven't understood the gospel in the first place. In which case, verse 12, judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.

So today, let's start thinking. How can we welcome one another as Christ has welcomed us in order that God be glorified?

[40 : 11] And let's begin to pray that we start doing that this very second. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, we pray, Lord, that we would be receptive to your words this morning.

We pray that your Holy Spirit will cut us to our hearts if indeed that's what you intend to do. And I pray that you will continue to shape and mold us to be a church that continually wants to love one another and welcome one another, to bear with one another's burdens, and to forgive one another where we have hurt each other.

So, Father, as we come in 2022 and we think about, afresh about how we can have a church reset, we pray again that you would reset our attitudes and form us into how you want us to be.

Father, as we comment into your hands and as we do so, we thank you again for your grace shown in the love and in the cross of Jesus Christ. And it is in his name we pray.

Amen.