



“The Path to Become Welcoming”

Philippians 2:3

Idea: A welcoming church looks beyond themselves and goes to the people.

Intro: John and Ella moved to town with their three children. He does not attend church, but with the move Ella was determined to get her children, all under the age of seven, back in church after two years of not attending.

She passed a church sign and noted it in her mind as a place to visit the next Sunday. She looked up the church on the website, found the time for the worship service, and planned to visit.

The website indicated the service started at 10:15. It actually started at 10:00. The time of the service was changed seven months earlier, but no one thought to change it on the website. So when Ella arrived at 10:05, she was five minutes late, not ten minutes early.

By the way, it started raining as she drove to church. She could not find any signs for guest parking, so she parked some

distance from the church entrance. And she still moved forward in the rain with three young kids in tow.

Since she was late, she really didn't have anyone to follow into the church facility. So she went to the obvious front entrance...only to find the door was locked. Two of the children were crying and all of them were soaking wet, but Ella was determined. She finally found the right door.

By this time there were no greeters. There was also no signage to tell Ella where to take her children. Exasperated, but determined, she made three wrong turns in hallways but finally found the children's area.

She missed the first twenty minutes of the service, and she had trouble focusing for obvious reasons. Ella, however, still completed a guest card and turned it in when the offering plate came by. She was curious if anyone would really contact her. No one did. She was not surprised.

I think we can all agree that the church Ella visited was not a welcoming church. I think we can also all agree that a church must be welcoming. What does it take for a church to be welcoming? It takes people with a welcoming disposition.

How would you feel if I came to you after the service and said, "Hey, I need you to be a parking lot greeter next Sunday morning."? Many of you would respond like Steve.

Steve had a severe case of introversion. It was so extreme that he made the typical introvert look like an extrovert. He struggled to look people in the eye and couldn't carry on a conversation with a stranger.

The small church where Steve was a member was growing. They were running about twenty-five people, and everyone was busy serving in some way except for Steve.

He was a new Christian and was being disciplined by the pastor. During one of their D-group times, the pastor asked Steve to be a greeter on Sunday mornings, pointing out how good he would be at the job.

As you can imagine, Steve reacted as if he were in a horror movie. His response was swift: "No!" Actually, he added a profane word to his rejection. God was still working on his sanctification.

The pastor was not surprised. In fact he would have been surprised otherwise. But he still needed a greeter at the church, and he was desperate.

One day the pastor went to pick Steve up at the body shop where he worked on cars. They typically met during Steve's lunch break for discipleship, and the pastor usually picked him up.

On this occasion the pastor noticed something about Steve as he was engaged in conversation with a lady about the repairs she needed on her car. The lady was really concerned about the cost, but Steve was able to calm her nerves and told her how she could get by with a few affordable repairs.

When Steve got in the car, the pastor stared at Steve and smiled for a minute. "What?" he asked. "You dog; you do just fine interacting with people. I saw how you handled that lady. She went from upset to calm in just a few minutes. You are now officially our greeter at church."

Steve responded with a few flavored words, but he was curious. "Look, being a greeter just means being your friendly self, just like you were with that lady. You don't have to become someone your not. Just pretend like you are at the body shop about to have a conversation with a customer."

What is true for Steve is true for us. Being welcoming is simply being friendly. It is not hard, but it is often neglected.

Inquiry: We are in a series on biblical hospitality that we're simply calling "Welcome." The meta-narrative of Scripture is that God has invited and welcomed sinful strangers into a redemptive relationship with Himself. Jesus said, "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*" (Matt 11:28). The word "all" in the Greek (πᾶς) means all. In the Lord all are welcome. It is here that we learn a great truth.

Biblical Truth: We are to welcome the stranger because God in Jesus Christ has welcomed us as strangers.

Our God is a welcoming God. He embraces the stranger with arms wide open. As born-again children in the family of God, as His image bearers in this dark world, we too are to welcome the stranger because the Lord has welcomed us. We have learned this month that you are welcome, all are welcome, and what it looks like to be welcoming. Today, as we finish out this series, I want to show you the path to become welcoming...the how.

Read Philippians 2:3.

Philippians is often referred to as the epistle of joy because of how often it suggests rejoicing. One would expect that Paul's life was perfect and without difficulties, but that was not the case at all. Paul was a prisoner in Rome when he penned this letter. He had faced many hardships in his life and ministry, yet he had joy. He was able to rejoice despite his circumstances.

Paul wanted the Philippian believers to experience the joy of the Lord, and he explained that it partly comes through service. Paul called the Philippians to a life of humble service to Christ and others. He called them to follow the example of Jesus who humbled Himself and served humanity. The Lord is a welcoming Savior because He looked beyond Himself and came to us. We learn from Christ that a welcoming church

looks beyond themselves and goes to the people. I want to share with you the path to become welcoming.

1. Grasp the Importance

Would you ever return to a place where you did not feel welcome? It doesn't matter if it is a restaurant, a department store, or a church, customer service is paramount. Outside of their superior chicken, I believe the one thing that sets Chick-fil-A apart from their competitors is their customer service. From the moment you walk in the door, you feel wanted and welcome in a Chick-fil-A. This feeling is extremely important because what takes place in the first few minutes will largely determine whether or not you will return.

The same is true in the local church. What takes place in the first ten minutes when a first-time guest arrives at our church will largely determine whether he or she returns.

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility *count others more significant than yourselves.*” – Phil 2:3

In other words don't think about yourself. That is what Paul says in verse 4, and this is the example of Christ in verses 5-8.

How many times are you guilty of focusing on yourself, your preferences, and your agenda? How many times do you neglect the people God is bringing to you because you are so focused on yourself that you can't see them? How often as a church do guests see us as unwelcoming because we overlook them?

Illust: I know of a family who attended a church for a long time but never truly felt welcome. Instead their

experience was that many of the members looked through them to their friends as they entered the worship center each Sunday.

You and I must grasp the importance of becoming a welcoming Christian and thus a welcoming church. Each of us individually play a critical role. The path to becoming a welcoming Christian and church is to grasp how eternally important it is to be welcoming.

2. Develop Proper Priorities

3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. – Phil 2:3-4

What are your priorities as a Christian? What are our priorities as a church?

I believe our priorities, as individual believers, should be worship, the Word, and witness. We should be daily and weekly worshipping the Lord. We should be studying and learning from God's Word. And we should be telling others about the goodness we have found in Jesus.

Those priorities are the same for the church corporately. We should be *going* to others with the gospel, fulfilling the Great Commission. Likewise, we should be focused on *groups*. We should want people to experience God in our corporate worship and in small groups. Therefore, we should also be focused on *guests*.

Our priorities as Christians must never be fixed on our personal preferences. Instead, we must always show deference toward others. In many ways we shouldn't be focused on what the worship center looks like, what

songs we sing, or how we feel. Instead, your focus should be on Christ and how you can welcome those who need Christ.

The path to becoming a welcoming Christian and church involves developing the proper priorities.

3. Commit to Serve

“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but *in humility count others more significant than yourselves.*”
– Phil 2:3

To be humble means to put others ahead of yourself...to serve them. Paul powerfully describes the role of a servant in Philippians 2, where he explains that becoming a servant means following the example of Christ. His humility and service took Him to the cross.

The path to becoming a welcoming Christian and church means you must commit to serve others. How do you measure up? Are you just a recipient of grace, or are you also extender of that grace? Are you nothing more than a spectator at church, or are you a servant who participates in the mission?

Every Christian should have a place of service. Every member should see himself or herself as a minister in the church.

4. Remember to Change

Relationships and ministries can often grow stale. It is easy to fall into ruts and routines, and when we do so, we take our relationships and ministries for granted. Therefore, it is imperative that we intentionally freshen things up on occasion.

A welcoming Christian and church seeks to connect with an ever-changing culture. Every generation struggles to understand the next one. Grandparents are always scratching their heads as they seek to understand their grandchildren. And the grandchildren, though they love their grandparents, often times see them as archaic and disconnected from reality. This too happens in the church.

The Millennials, born between 1980 and 2000, represent the largest population in America's history. Over 78 million younger adults could be in our churches, but fewer than one out of five actually do attend church (15.6 million).

Research, though, is showing a growing receptivity to the gospel and church within this generation. Millennials may be apathetic about our congregations and our message, but they are hardly antagonistic. As many in this generation become parents, their priorities are changing. They are seeking something more than what they have been satisfied with for most of their lives.

Therefore, rather than walling ourselves off from a growing secular culture and rather than continuing to isolate ourselves from younger generations, we must as welcoming Christians and as a church open up to them. We don't open up or alter the message of the gospel, but we should open up our ministerial approach. We must always strive to connect with each and every generation and with lost as well as churched people.

What we cannot do is retreat and wall ourselves off. Change is inevitable. For that reason, let's count others as more significant than ourselves and be willing to always keep our ministry fresh and relevant.

Conclusion: Remember a welcoming church looks beyond themselves and goes to the people. How can you personally do that? Here are some practical steps to take:

- Smile
Perhaps the easiest thing you can do is simply smile. Why do so many Christians walk around looking like they drank vinegar for breakfast? Man, you are a child of the King! You have been brought from death to life! Your eternity is in heaven! You have a song to sing, a Savior to praise, and a message to tell! That is something to smile and be happy about!

If you're happy and you know it, then your face will surely show it.

- Speak to others.
We live in a culture where we no longer speak to people. We walk around with our faces buried in a tablet or phone. We are self-absorbed and engrossed in ourselves. Refuse to live like that. Speak to people. When you come to church speak to people. Get here early and talk to people. Make it a priority to speak and develop relationships with people you don't know before and after the service each week.
- Show genuine concern.
As you get to know others, care about what is going on in their lives. Remember, hospitality is the love of strangers. Loving a stranger means that you care for and meet their needs. Pray for them. Follow up with them during the week. Seek to meet the need.
- Invite others to your home.
As a Christian culture we are neglecting one of the greatest tools God has given us...our homes. When and where did Jesus do most of His most intimate ministry? It was often around a meal in a home.

Christians let us use our home for gospel ministry. Some of the greatest ministry you'll ever be a part of might be around your dining table or in your living room. Invite people over for lunch after church, dinner during the week, and for fellowship on Saturdays. Don't worry about being fancy. It's okay to use paper plates. It's okay to be informal. Stop worrying about what your guests may think. They don't care. They'll be excited just to be invited and welcomed.

And while you're inviting guests to your home, invite them to your house of worship. Invite them to be your guest at church.

Roll out the red carpet and welcome people into your lives and into our church because Jesus has rolled it out for you. His blood was shed on the cross for you. Through it you are welcomed to God the Father.

How do you need to respond today? Do you need to trust Christ as Lord and Savior? Do you need to repent of sin because you are not welcoming? Do you need to repent of sin because you have been focused on the wrong things? Jesus stands today with His arms wide open ready to receive you. Why don't you come to Him?