

Series: The Welcoming Church	Reference: Ephesians 5:15-16	Title: Pay Attention	Date: 09.01.2019
Website Writeup: Paying attention, being welcoming to others opens the way for the Gospel to flourish - who needs attention around you? Live as wise people out of the purpose to which God's called His people!			

COLOR CHANGES IN TEXT INDICATE SLIDE CHANGES

Would you consider yourself to have a welcoming home? Do people feel comfortable, cared for & loved visiting your house? Does your welcome mat really say 'Welcome'? Or, might it just as well say 'Leave', or 'Oh, you again?', or "Beware of the dog" when you don't even have a dog? Or, does your hospitality come with strings attached, as if your welcome mat might say, "If you forgot the wine & pizza, turn around!"?

Indonesians pride themselves on being welcoming. Go to the poorest house in the neighborhood & they'll bring out all they have to serve you. They want their guests to feel welcome. Once, another missionary family went to a neighbors home near my house for a visit when they first moved in. They were a large family. Not fat, just large. Both husband & wife were tall sizable people with two big voracious boys with appetites matching sumo wrestlers.

They showed up at this home, and the Indonesian family began to bring out food. My friends, not fully cultured in Indonesian etiquette as of yet, emptied plate after plate of food. Not realizing that it was polite to eat some, then leave a little on your plate to communicate you were done. And with the limitations of Indonesian income, it's better not to eat too much. But this Indonesian family just kept bringing it out, and my friends kept eating! The Americans thought it may not be polite to refuse, and they could more than handle anything you put in front of them, so they ate until all the food was gone.

It's literally a shame for Indonesians not to do all they can to make a guest feel welcome, and what this American family had not known, until they left the house & walked past the back yard, was that this family had planned a wedding that day for their child - these Americans had just eaten all the wedding food within their short visit! That Indonesian family's probably sitting around their house today saying, "Remember those giant Americans who came over & ate all our wedding food!?" Hopefully, they're laughing.

Welcoming & being welcomed...an art on both sides maybe, and sometimes we have to learn appropriate boundaries. I remember visiting one family in Ardmore. I was ushered into a stark & impeccable room. It became clear I was not allowed in any other part of the house. The conversation was awkward & stilted, I didn't feel welcomed...didn't stay long.

I've been in many of your homes & have always felt welcomed. Many of your houses are not that impeccable, mind you, which is not a criticism, I like a home which feels lived

in! I know that when I go to the Kulp's, the House's, or the Thomas' homes, that I may have to dodge a flying toy. Conversation is often interrupted by a screaming child. Often I hear, "Hold on Jason! GRADY, why did you throw that at your sister? Say you're sorry!" Or, "Blaine, let go of Addy's hair!" I might have to navigate a maze of toys on the floor - but that's all fun. I know to be a good guest at the Wong's home, I take off my shoes at the door. I know Donna will offer me a cappuccino. I know Todd Halls house is gluten friendly! I love visiting your homes, and always feel welcomed in them, you guys are good at it.

Church should be a welcoming place. My brother-in-law, Steady, is from Africa. Zambia to be precise. When he first attended his church here in rural PA a man came up to him after the service & said, "Don't you people have your own place to go?" That wasn't welcoming! The story ends well though. Steady didn't scream 'racist', I forget exactly how he responded, but knowing him, he probably embraced the guy with a loud laugh & said something to the effect of, "Nope, but by that comment, I know I'm in the exact place I should be! God bless you brother!" They became friends until that old man died. Steady's gospel response led that guy through his racism & out the other side!

Six:Eight seeks to be welcoming. Not overbearing, but welcoming, and for very good reason which we begin to look at today.

Ephesians 5:15-16, ¹⁵ *Be very careful, then, how you live - not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.*

The days do feel evil. You can't open your mouth without be accused of some heinous cultural faux pax. Everyone's being labeled either a racist, homophobe or islamaphobe! The Christian church is being undermined & divided over politics, social justice & issues of sexuality. And, whatever happened to all the armed disgruntled postal workers? They used to be the people we'd watch out for, but now it's kids shooting kids at schools! It's mind-numbing.

And all the while amidst our craziness...**God acts strategically & sovereignly to reach people.** A strategic God sending people on mission *on purpose* to draw others to Himself, with an intentional plan to accomplish His mission. We studied all that in our last series. At the center of His plan is us, the local church & individual Believer - all called to live out His great commission, His last command, our first concern in Matthew 28:18-20, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*"

Philip's a prime example of God's strategic mission in Acts 8:26-39. If you remember our last sermon from two weeks ago how we studied Paul & his companions being led by the Spirit to witness in various areas, the same goes for Philip in this passage. Paul, his companions & Philip are all obedient to the call of God upon His followers...

26 Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road - the desert road - that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." 27 So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, 28 and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. 29 The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot & stay near it."

30 Then Philip ran up to the chariot & heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked. 31 "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up & sit with him. 32 This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. 33 In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth."

34 The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture & told him the good news about Jesus. 36 As they traveled along the road, they came to some water & the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" (37 Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.") 38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip & the eunuch went down into the water & Philip baptized him. 39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

Philip's in Jerusalem. Suddenly God calls him to go south to Gaza. As he goes, the Holy Spirit tells him to talk to an Ethiopian eunuch. A person very different than him, who at that VERY moment was reading the prophet Isaiah. Philip shared the Gospel, led him to faith in Jesus & baptized Him, and the eunuch "went away rejoicing."

Not only is Philip's encounter strategic for this one soul, but that eunuch was from a region which had been untouched with the Gospel message. He went back & told His friends, family & neighbors about the Gospel, paving the way for Jesus' Good News to spread to Ethiopia - and if I'm not mistaken, this man birthed the church in that area. God used strategy to place Philip & this eunuch together, and this new believer to spread the Gospel to an unreached people group.

Not only is God strategic, but **He's sovereign ordering & determining the steps of every man.** As it says in Prov. 16:9, *9 In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps.* As we saw with Philip, God uses His sovereign hand to place people where they need to be (Psalm 37:23).

Paul experienced this in a Philippian jail in Acts 16:16-34, when God caused an earthquake to throw open the doors, the jailer to seek death until Paul explained salvation. Because of this sovereign act of God through sending an earthquake, an entire

household came to faith in Jesus. What some might see as tragedy or failure, God uses to bring people to Himself.

If we believe this, recognizing the movement of God's Spirit in it, then **every new guest in our church is brought to us by God for a reason in that moment.** And remember, as God promises to provide for His people individually, how much more will He provide for His corporate church (Phil 4:19 - *God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus*).

God knows what His church needs to be the church. He'll send the volunteers, lay leaders & pastors we need to reach others. We need to pay attention to new guests, knowing He's both strategic & sovereign - guests are extremely important. We have a command to love those whom God sends us.

Loving others sacrificially is a sign of true faith. 1 John 3:10-11 says, *¹⁰ This is how we know who the children of God are & who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother & sister.*

Jesus says in John 13:35 *"By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."* As we love one another in the church, others see we truly follow Jesus. He doesn't put conditions on His love for us, so our unconditional love for other members of the church is an indication of true & abiding obedience to God.

1 Pe 1:22-23 also calls us to this, *²² Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart. ²³ For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living & enduring word of God.*

The Bible even gives specific instructions for the foreigner or stranger among us as well, telling us to love strangers as ourselves, and by doing so we are actually loving God. Such as in Lev 19:34, *³⁴ The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.* In other words, remember what it's like to be new & different, and how good it felt when someone welcomed you in (also see Matt 25:35-40; Heb 13:2; 2 John 1:5).

Loving others through practical ministry is a picture of the Gospel. Love isn't an abstract concept, the Bible instructs us, through love we should serve one another.

Gal 5:13-18 says, *¹³ You, my brothers & sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If you bite & devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other. ¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh.*

*They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.
18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.*

Paul instructs the Roman church to "*outdo one another in showing honor,*" thus love becomes expressed through serving (Rom 12:10, *10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.*). In fact, we have been given spiritual gifts to serve others (1Pet 4:10, *10 Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.*). As we practically show love for fellow members & guests, we model Christ to others. Matt 20:26-28 instructs, *26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

What does it look like practically to love others? Simply said, it looks like Jesus who served & gave his life as a ransom for many. But He didn't compromise on issues of holiness & purity as it pertains to the sin of people either. Since that wouldn't have been good for them, nor loving service to them. He loved & cared for people, and like the woman at the well, confronted them with that behavior in their lives which was detrimental to them & others - they made the choice to either repent, find freedom & follow Him, or remain in bondage.

In 1 Peter 1 we heard that we purify ourselves by obeying the truth leading to a sincere love for others. In 1 John 3 we heard, those who are the children of God do what is right. Galatians 5 tells us we live by the Spirit & not the Flesh, and in doing so we can fulfill the command to love our neighbor as ourselves.

How do we know what is right, or what is of the Spirit, or what is of the Flesh? Is it our instincts, experience, feelings, or culture which dictates rightness? No, we know what is right as Christ knew what is right, by obedience & purification of God's Word revealed to us from outside ourselves, not that which is internal produced in us. God speaks His truth into us, and we obey out of gratitude for the freedom & life His Truth brings. Which means it's loving to speak God's Truth to others, even if they disagree. We're purified by it, we reflect God in our obedience to it. If something 'feels' right, but it's not commiserate with the Scriptures, it's living by the flesh, no matter how strongly we feel. *Feelings must be subordinate to Truth. It's the old Faith Train you may've seen before. Feelings follow Fact & Faith, and eventually they will conform to new life in Christ if we submit in obedience to the Word through faith. We do well to give up on the thought that if we just love well, everyone will be amenable to our message, but it does not stop us from loving & welcoming them.*

So we welcome guests with open arms inviting them to Gospel transformation. As Galatians 5 says, *you are not to do whatever you want.* Because whatever we want, is not always good for us or others! The message of church is, come as you are & leave transformed (because Jesus life is best for all)!

Shaping a welcoming church culture in this day & age can be challenging- Satan's orchestrated the conversations to be killed before they start - people stop at the 'what' & don't even get to the 'why' they should be transformed. In such an environment the church struggles against entropy. The older a church gets the harder it becomes to see the benefit of guests. Complacency like a weed grows in churches over time - it takes every one of us engaging in the process of spiritual formation so that we're all purified by obedience to the Truth & prepared to love well. Opening up to others means we give them opportunity to hurt us, which is part of the sacrificial call of the Gospel. As Jesus gave His life, we do so willingly in effort to welcome others into Jesus' life. Intentionally looking for guests & greeting them well is part of loving others the way God's loved us.

So we develop intentional ways to connect others with our body (newcomer assimilation). Having clear processes to connect is a sign of love & stewardship. Jesus brought an undeniably clear way to connect with God - clarity with others & among ministry & leadership teams helps the Gospel become the only stumbling block or hindrance, not systems or structures. So, we desire for people not to stumble upon how we treat them, rather to stumble on the message of the Gospel, if they're to do so.

We develop clear on-ramps to practically serve & help one another (Growth Track). The Bible is crystal clear we're to love the poor, the widowed & orphans in distress. Deacon ministry was formed in Acts 6 because people who needed help were being overlooked, and one of the first recorded written lists of members in the church was for widows in 1Tim 5:9. We have a new Deacon Board for this very reason! As we have clear processes for service to others, we get the double benefit of practically meeting others needs & also activating members for ministry.

We need to pay attention to opportunities to sacrificially & practically love the people God sends us. We have an opportunity to join God in building His church. Paying attention to people promotes good in the world. **Paul instructs the Ephesian church to "pay attention to how you walk."** Instructing that as we are wise we counter the evil in the world through the Holy Spirit's power in our lives (Eph 5:15-16).

As more people are cared for & the body of Christ is activated to serve, faith starts to flourish, love increases & thankfulness abounds, which then draws more people to Jesus & His Church (Gen 12:1-3; 2 Thess 1:3).

Paying attention to people increases God's household. As Jesus' good news is shared & people believe the Gospel, they need a community to thrive & grow within. Welcoming believers as fellow members of God's household, grows the visible church into a spiritual house of worship to Jesus (Acts 2:40-21; Eph 2:17-22). As we increase the household of God, His message is spread & more people find a place to call home.

When we see guests & fellow believers as partners to build & grow God's church instead of threats to neutralize, we become like Jesus & expand the influence of His Body in the world. We need to pay attention to people so the church will grow & faith will flourish. So be prayerful starting now...who around you needs attention & discipleship?