

It Matters...Being a Welcoming Church

James 2:1-4 - February 15, 2026

ME

It's an honor to share with you this morning some of the things the Lord has taught me over the past 35 years of ministry concerning the importance of being a welcoming church.

Let me start with an experience that still sticks with me from a LONG time ago...

I remember walking into a church once where I didn't know anyone. I was a little early, dressed fine—but not “church fancy.” I found a seat, smiled at a few people, and sat there... and sat there... and sat there. Service started. Worship was good. The message was solid. But when I walked out, no one spoke to me. Not one person asked my name. No handshake. No “glad you're here.” Not-a-thing!

And I remember thinking, *“If I were new to faith... if I were hurting... if today was my last shot at church or Jesus, or life... I don't think I'd come back.”*

Now, let me be clear—I don't think anyone at that church was intentionally rude. No one woke up that morning thinking, *“You know what? Let's make someone feel invisible today.”* It wasn't malicious. It was subtle. It was unintentional. But it was real.

Now, before you go and say “Well, that was ONE experience from a LONG time ago,” let me tell you that it happened again just a few months ago, right in our little town of Durant, in one of the largest churches in our area. No Parking Team, no Greeters at the door. Not a SINGLE “Hello” from anyone before or after the service. We walked in. Walked out. We walked around. No contact.

And here's the thing I couldn't shake...not being seen...it mattered. It mattered more than the music. More than the sermon. More than the Folgers Coffee [which I could preach an entire message on the importance of serving good coffee!] More than the building. More than the Kids or Student programming.

Whether we like it or not, **before people hear what we believe, they FEEL how we receive them.**

WE:

We may all have had moments like that, haven't we?

Maybe not in church—but in a room where you felt like you didn't belong. You walk in and immediately feel like everyone else knows the rules, the language, the expectations...

And you don't.

No one says anything outright, but you feel it anyway. The looks. The silence. The unspoken message: *“You’re not really one of us.”* And if you’ve ever felt that way, you know—it sticks with you. You don’t forget it. You don’t shrug it off. You carry it.

And now here’s the uncomfortable truth: sometimes churches create that feeling without even realizing it. They don’t mean to. They’re not trying to. But they do it anyway. WE do it anyway:

We notice who’s dressed well.

We gravitate toward people we already know.

We assume someone else will say hello.

And, unintentionally send the message: *“You can belong... once you fit.”*

This isn’t a new issue for the American Church. It is not a post-COVID phenomenon. It is something the local church has struggled with for centuries.

GOD:

Let’s open up our Bibles and turn to the book of James, chapter 2 and be encouraged [and challenged] by the fact that James needed to address this WAY back in the first generation of the church.

In case you are not familiar with this person, here are a few highlights from his life:

- He was the half-brother of Jesus [why half...because Joseph was NOT Jesus’ Father!]
- James DID NOT believe in Jesus at the beginning [John 7:5]
- Became a leader in the church at Jerusalem.
- Wrote this book to the churches scattered throughout the Roman Empire.

You see, James writes this letter to people who love Jesus. These aren’t unbelievers or seekers. These are good old “church folks”. And he says in the first verse of chapter 2...

“My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.”

WoW! That’s how he opens this letter?? No warm-up. No soft intro. Just straight to the point. Then he paints a picture. And it’s uncomfortably specific. And James—very lovingly, very directly—steps into that reality and says, *“This matters.”*

Now, he could have stopped there and moved on to talking about controlling the tongue [which is what this book is known for], but instead he unpacks what “favoritism” could look like...with incredibly specific detail. Let’s continue reading 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.”

Two people: One looks successful. The other looks like a mess. One fits in. The other makes people uncomfortable. As you read this, don't be tempted to put yourself [or the person sitting next to you] in one of these two categories. It's tempting...But Don't!

James continues by saying, **"If you show special attention to the one 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 among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"**

That's strong language.

James isn't talking about seating logistics or the Usher Team's professionalism. He's talking about heart posture. About how quickly our tendency is to rank or "label" people. How almost immediately, we assign value. About how subtle how we treat people reveals what we really believe.

Because here's what James is exposing: **When we treat people differently based on appearance, status, or comfort level, we are acting like we are the judges of *their* worth.**

And James says, *"That doesn't line up with faith in Jesus."* Let's jump down to vs. 9...

But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers.

Not only is favoritism sin, but Jesus never did that.

Jesus moved toward the overlooked.

Jesus touched the untouchable.

Jesus noticed the ignored.

Jesus welcomed people before they ever changed.

What I believe James is trying to communicate to us is that we can't say you follow Jesus and then create a culture where some people feel invisible."

Why? Because... hospitality...valuing people...it matters.

Think about that for just a moment...

The gospel says every person stands on equal ground at the foot of the cross. No résumé. No reputation. No dress code. No social rank. Just sinners in need of grace.

It's the difference between *"I'm glad you're here"* and *"You're interrupting my comfort."*

So let me try bringing this closer to home.

Imagine walking into a church for the first time. You're nervous. You're unsure. Maybe you've been hurt by a church before. Maybe this is your last try. And before you hear a word preached, before you sing a song, before anyone opens a Bible—you're already deciding: *"Is this a place where I'm safe?"*

And that decision is shaped by tiny moments.

Did someone smile?

Did someone acknowledge you?

Did anyone make space for you?

Or did you feel like you had to earn your place? Those moments matter more than we realize.

Now, let me turn this toward each of us personally: What would it look like for **YOU** to take James seriously?

Not theoretically. Not in principle. But practically.

Who do you naturally gravitate toward on Sundays?

Who do you instinctively avoid?

Who feels easy to welcome—and who feels awkward?

Because being welcoming doesn't just happen automatically. It happens intentionally.

Being a welcoming church doesn't mean having a friendly sign, good coffee, or a professional Parking Team. Those help. But hospitality is personal before it's organizational.

It's eye contact.

It's remembering names.

It's noticing the small things

It's choosing inconvenience over comfort.

Here's the kicker... it is not only Pastor Travis' job or Nathan's responsibility to be hospitable...it EVERYONE's mission! [Honestly, church staff get paid to be nice to you!]

Now, I know what you are thinking to yourself...*"That's easy for you, extroverts, but for us introverts, the very thought of saying "Hello" to someone I don't know scares me to death."*

Maybe here's a thought: **You don't have to be outgoing to be welcoming. You just have to be aware.**

James isn't calling us to a personality change. We don't need to try to alter our Myer Briggs's or DISC profile or be ashamed of our Enneagram numbers [7W1]. He's calling us to heart alignment.

Let me say this gently, but clearly...

If someone can walk into this church and leave feeling invisible, we've missed something important—even if the sermon & worship was great.

If someone feels judged before they feel welcomed, we've reversed the order of grace.

If people feel like they have to clean themselves up before they belong, we're asking them to do what only Jesus can do.

Now imagine the opposite.

Imagine a church where people don't feel sized up—but opened up to.

Where the first thing people experience isn't evaluation, but acceptance.

Where people say, *"I don't know what I believe yet, but I felt safe there."*

That's powerful. Because **belonging often comes before believing**. And being welcoming doesn't lower the standard of truth—it creates space for transformation. Jesus never compromised truth—but He always led with love.

Let me share with you about Amanda...

- Came into our church. Gothic in dress & makeup
- Super standoffish. Literally told me "I don't know if I believe in this Jesus crap." My response, "Than this is the PERFECT place for you to be!"
- Read **August. 27 Text**. A group of us prayed for her weekly. We made sure she NEVER sat alone on a Sunday morning. We invited her and her son to our house for Labor Day. I started sending her verses each week that showed her God loved her [Yes, I was probably bordering on stalking...but it was for God!]
- Read **Oct. 9th Text**. Then, the Holy Spirit impacted her life and she beleived in Jesus!

Again, there may be those of you here today thinking, *"That's just ONE person,"* but let me tell you, God has blown our minds by almost doubling the size of our church in just over 2 years... mainly because of the way we view the people who He brings through our doors!!

So here's the question I want to leave you with: **What kind of church are YOU becoming**—one moment, one conversation, one smile at a time?

Because culture isn't built by mission statements. It's built by small, repeated behaviors.

It's built by who we notice.

Who we invite.

Who we sit next to.

Who we make room for.

And every one of YOU plays a role in that. Not just greeters. Not just staff. All of us.

That kind of church doesn't happen accidentally. It happens when we decide—together—that it matters.

It matters how we welcome.

It matters how we see people.

It matters how closely our behavior matches the heart of Jesus.

Let me encourage you to be that kind of church.

Not perfect—but personal.

Not flashy—but faithful.

Not impressed by appearances—but able to see past the exterior to the heart.

Because when we welcome the way Jesus welcomes, people don't just feel accepted—they catch a glimpse of the gospel.

And that...THAT...really matters.

I'd love to take a moment to pray for all of you. God has called you to reflect His light to those here in this area, and can't wait to see what God will do through YOU to bring Himself honor and glory!

Please pray with me...