

Love Your Church by Welcoming

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Preacher: Rev. Murdo M Campbell

[0 : 00] And if we could, this evening with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling, if we could turn back to that portion of Scripture that we read. The letter of James, James chapter 2.

It's on page 1216 of the Pew Bible. James chapter 2, and if we read again just at the beginning, the first verse. The beginning.

Where James writes, he says, My brothers and sisters, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

My brothers and sisters, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

A number of years ago, in what was 2008, the Reverend Derek Rigby, he made the Daily Telegraph.

[1 : 04] And he made the Daily Telegraph for giving a clear and challenging message to his congregation. One Sunday morning, as worshippers arrived at their local church in Wales, they were met by a tramp sitting in the doorway, drinking a can of lager and smoking a cigarette.

And the tramp had long hair, he had broken glasses, he had ripped clothes, he had dirty fingernails and a dirty face, and he was stinking of alcohol.

And yet, regardless of the fact that this tramp was sitting right in the doorway of the church, all of the morning worshippers, they ignored their intruder and continued into their sanctuary for Sunday morning worship.

After a while, the tramp, he finished his can of lager and then he extinguished his cigarette on the ground, and he decided to proceed to enter into the church building.

And with no one on door duty that morning giving him a warm welcome or even offering him a Bible to read as he came into church, the tramp was left to find his own way into the sanctuary to sit on a pew.

[2 : 14] And of course, the tramp, he sat at the back pew. He found the back pew where there were many worshippers who looked at him and they spoke about him, but none spoke to him.

No one sat beside him. Then as it reached eleven o'clock for the time of the morning service to start, there was no sign of Reverend Rigby. And with no minister, as you'd expect, the elders began to get a bit restless.

They began to panic a little bit. And they began to panic a little bit more, especially when the tramp got up from the back pew and started making his way, staggering down towards the front.

And then he turned around and looked at the congregation. And then the tramp proceeded to take off his wig and remove his glasses and take off his dirty jacket and reveal his identity.

That he was, in fact, the Reverend Derek Rigby. And in the article of the Daily Telegraph, Reverend Rigby said, It was interesting to see the reaction of the people, especially because I was totally ignored.

[3 : 29] And afterwards, many of them were embarrassed. Many of them were ashamed that they had ignored me. And you know, what a lesson to learn.

And what a way to learn it. Now, you can be assured, I'm not going to dress up as a tramp. But you know, it should remind us that we should be a warm and welcoming congregation.

We should be a warm and welcoming congregation. And that's the focus of our study this evening. As I said, we're continuing our study on what we've called Love Your Church. Love Your Church.

And it's based upon a helpful and yet hard-hitting book by Tony Merida, where we're exhorted and encouraged to love your church because Jesus loves your church.

Love your church because Jesus loves your church. And as we've been reminded, our church is our focus. This is where we worship each week.

[4 : 27] Our church is our fellowship. This is our gathering. This is our koinonia. But more than that, our church is our family. Barber's Free Church is our church family.

And as a church family, we must be warm. And we must be welcoming. And there are two simple headings this evening. We are to be a warm church family and a welcoming church family.

A warm church family and a welcoming church family. So first of all, a warm church family. A warm church family. Look at verse 1. James says, My brothers and sisters, Do you know the letter of James?

It's one of the most practical books in the Bible. In fact, it's often considered to be a handbook for Christian living. Because James' greatest concern in writing his letter is not doctrinal information, but actually doctrinal application.

James not only wants us to learn about the gospel. James wants us to live out the gospel. Because our Christianity, it's not only to be personal.

[6 : 12] Our Christianity must also be practical. Because the information that we receive week by week from the pulpit, or even from reading the Bible ourselves, that information is useless if there is no application of it in our lives.

And that's what James emphasizes and explains throughout his letter, that Christianity and being a Christian, it isn't just about following teachings and different traditions of the church.

No, Christianity is about living your life transformed by the power of the gospel. And in order to get his point across, James, as you know, he has all these helpful images and illustrations throughout his letter, where he describes God's Word like a mirror, where we're standing in God's mirror, and God's Word is reading us.

It's reflecting into our lives. He also describes our tongue. He says it's like the rudder of a ship. And like the rudder of a ship, it needs to be controlled.

But James also, he has lots of memorable phrases that we're all familiar with, where he says, Be doers of the Word and not hearers only. He says that a double-minded man is unstable in all his ways.

[7 : 30] He says every good and perfect gift comes from above. And that faith without works, as we read there in chapter 2, faith without works is dead.

James has all these great quotes in his letter. In fact, the letter of James, it's one of the most quoted books in the New Testament. But not everyone's a fan of the letter of James.

The 16th century German reformer Martin Luther, he regarded the letter of James as an epistle of straw. He said that it's a worthless letter that should be ripped out of the Bible because it's of no benefit to the Christian.

Unfortunately, due to his context and the conflicts that Luther was dealing with within the Roman Catholic Church, Luther had misunderstood what James meant when he said, Faith without works is dead.

Because, as you know, Martin Luther's emphasis in life was that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. As sinners were made righteous before a holy God, not by our works of righteousness, but by receiving Christ's righteousness by faith alone.

[8 : 42] But the thing is, in this letter, James isn't denying the doctrine of justification by faith. No, James is defining the doctrine of justification by faith.

James was saying that the doctrine of justification by faith, it must impact us. It must influence our lives, not only in our head, but also in our heart and our hands.

In other words, we need to exercise. We need to evidence our faith by our works. Because faith without works is a dead faith.

As someone said, works are not the root of our faith. Works are the fruit of our faith. Works are not the root of our faith.

Works are the fruit of our faith. Therefore, our systematic theology must also be practical theology. And you know, my friend, it's good to learn all the doctrines of grace.

[9 : 44] And it's a real benefit and a blessing these doctrines are to us and to the church. But if they're only learned in our head and not loved in our heart and lived out with our hands, then they're useless.

If they're only learned in our head, but not loved in our heart and lived out in our hands, they're useless. And you know, of all the practical areas to address in the Christian life, James begins here with the subject of prejudice and partiality.

And we might wonder, why does James address the subject of prejudice and partiality? Why begin with that area? But the hard-hitting truth is that the sin of prejudice and the sin of partiality, it finds its root in pride.

The sin of prejudice and partiality finds its root in pride. One commentator made the interesting statement about the opening verses of this chapter.

He said, James begins his application to the practical specifics of the Christian life by asking us, what happens at the church door? Because the church is the most public point of contact between the assembled people of God and the surrounding world.

[11:10] As such, he says, it is a simple practical test of the genuine nature of our faith. How do we treat newcomers?

How do we treat newcomers? You know, James is reminding and reaffirming to us that the sin of prejudice and partiality, it really matters to God.

Because, and it really matters to God because everyone is made in the image of God. Therefore, everyone matters to God. Which means that the sin of prejudice and the sin of partiality should matter to us.

Because whether we do it consciously or subconsciously, whether we do it publicly with others or privately, in our own heart, and we all do it, we all make comments or criticisms or we come to conclusions about people based upon their outward appearance, their accent, or their actions. Just like the tramp that came into church in Wales. But as a church, this is what James is teaching us, as a church, we have to remember that everyone, everyone, whoever they are, wherever they're from, whatever they look like, however they act, everyone is made in the image and in the likeness of our God.

[12:32] Therefore, a faith that works, a faith that works, says James, doesn't show prejudice, doesn't show partiality based upon someone's appearance or their accent or their actions, because that's to be unlike God.

That would be being ungodly. In fact, James says in verse 4, that's evil. That's evil. My brothers and sisters, she says, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. And you know, when we speak about our church family as a warm church family, we're not just talking about the ambience and the aesthetics of the church building. Although I do think it's important for us to have a bright and comfortable and warm space to gather for worship, it's important to have a warm and friendly building.

But as James reminds us and reaffirms to us here, our warm and friendly building is completely pointless if those gathering within the church building are not also warm and friendly.

So having a warm and friendly building, having a warm and welcoming building is completely pointless if the church family are cold and clinical and conservative.

[13:58] Therefore, we should be warm. We should be friendly as a church family. We should be homely. We should be hospitable as a church family because it's the gospel that has melted our hard hearts.

It's the gospel that has warmed us from our cold and clinical nature when we were dead in sin. You know, I think of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

They were two disciples who met with Jesus. But what did they say after they had met with Jesus? Did not our hearts burn within us?

Our hearts were warmed as Jesus walked with us on the way and He opened up unto us the Scriptures. And for us as Christians, our hearts have been warmed by Jesus.

Our hearts have been warmed by the message of the gospel. Therefore, as a church family, we're to be a warm church family. We're to be a warm church family that's warmed by Jesus and warmed by the message of the gospel.

[15:07] And James is challenging us here and it's a real challenge. He's confronting us. He's saying to us, we're not to comment. We're not to be here to criticize when people come into church.

No, we're to be caught up. We're to be captivated by the glory of Jesus. That's what he says in verse 1. We're to be captivated by the glory of Jesus as we come into church. We're not to fawn and fall over people who are affluent or attractive or achievers in life.

Neither are we to be focused and fixated upon those who are poor. No, we're to be caught up with the glory of Jesus. He says, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory.

And you know, my friend, when we're excited, when we're enthusiastic about the glory of Jesus in our lives and in our worship, we will look at people and we will love people. just like, just the way Jesus looks at people and the way Jesus loves people. When we're filled with the glory of Jesus, we will look at people and love people the way that Jesus looks at people and loves people.

[16:20] And you know, this is what Paul was getting at when he was coming to the end of his letter to the Romans. He was saying to the church in Rome, he was encouraging the church in Rome to be a warm church family.

And he said to them, welcome one another. And the thing about the church family in Rome is that there were so many different people, so many outsiders, so many people who weren't part of their church family.

And yet he says to them, welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God. Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you for the glory of God.

My friend, love your church because we need to be a warm church family. Love your church because we need to be a warm church family. But secondly, a welcoming church family.

So a warm church family and a welcoming church family. A welcoming church family. He says in verse 5, listen, listen, my beloved brother, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which he has promised to those who love him?

[17:34] But you have dishonored the poor man. Are you not, are not the rich the ones who oppress you and the ones who drag you into court? Are they not the ones who blaspheme and blaspheme the honorable name by which you were called?

If you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, you shall love your neighbor as yourself and you are doing well. Now as James continues his practical application about prejudice and partiality, the first thing he says in verse 5 is, listen.

He says, listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. And you know, James, he sees the importance of being a warm and welcoming church family that he calls us to listen.

He says to the church, listen, because he says in verse 8, the royal law of God is a law of love. So love your neighbor as yourself.

Love your neighbor as yourself. And as Jesus taught, Jesus taught us in the Gospels, our neighbor, our neighbor excludes no one and includes everyone.

[18:50] Our neighbor is whosoever. Our neighbor is whosoever. Therefore, who is welcome to come to church, boys and girls? Who is welcome to come to church? Who is invited to come to church?

Who is welcome to come and join our church family? Whosoever. Whosoever. You know, I love that word, whosoever, because it encapsulates, it embraces all that the gospel is.

Because as you know, the gospel, it's a full and free offer of salvation to whosoever. It's a full and free offer of salvation to everyone without exception, without exemption, without exclusion.

The gospel is a full and free offer of salvation without distinction, without discrimination, and without division. And this is James' point. Because he's saying to us, well, if the gospel is a full and free offer of salvation to whosoever, then we cannot as a church family, we cannot show prejudice or partiality to anyone.

We cannot. And the thing is, Jesus is our example. He's always our example. We say we're Christians. That's a follower of Christ.

[20:02] So he's our example. He's our example of being a warm and welcoming church family. Because when it comes to Jesus, there's no one to whom Jesus would not be warm and welcoming.

There's no one to whom Jesus said, the gospel is not for you. There's no one Jesus didn't move towards with compassion. You see it time and time again in the gospels.

Jesus, the most loving man that ever lived, and it didn't matter who it was, he went to them. He moved with compassion towards them. He went, as we read throughout the gospels, he went to the lonely and to the leper.

He went to the publican and to the prostitute. He went to the sick and to the suffering. He went to the dying and even the demon-possessed. My friend, Jesus went to those who felt that they were completely unworthy and unwilling and unwanted.

And he went to them because there's nowhere and there's no one to whom Jesus is not willing to go. No one is excluded. No one is exempt. No one is rejected or refused.

[21 : 11] There's no boundary too big, no barrier too high that will keep Jesus away. That's why the gospel offer is a full and free offer to whosoever.

It's a full and free offer to whosoever. And we read it so many times in the gospel, don't we? Jesus says, whosoever comes to me. Whosoever believes in me.

Whosoever calls upon me. Whosoever seeks me. Whosoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst again. Whosoever. It includes everyone.

It excludes no one. You know, my Christian friend, Jesus has warmly welcomed you. That's the amazing thing. We have been warmly welcomed into the church family.

Therefore, as Paul said, warmly welcome one another as Christ has warmly welcomed you. Warmly welcome one another as Christ has warmly welcomed you.

[22 : 21] I don't know if you've ever noticed that on the top of our notice sheet, I put it there a number of weeks ago, there are words of welcome.

You get it on the top of your email every Friday morning. If you pick up the intimation sheet on the way in, you get it there too. Words of welcome. And these are the words of welcome.

To all who are weary and need rest. To all who mourn and need comfort. To all who are lonely and need friendship. To all who fail and desire strength.

To all who sin and need a saviour. We welcome you. In the name of Jesus Christ, the friend of sinners. That's our welcome as a congregation.

Because regardless of appearance, actions, or accent. Regardless of social status, skin colour, or even sexuality. The gospel is an open invitation to whosoever.

[23 : 28] Therefore church is an open invitation to whosoever. An absolute open invitation to whosoever. Which raises the question, when was the last time you invited whosoever to come to church?

When was the last time you invited the whosoever to come? To come with you to church? To meet you at the church door?

To bring them in with you? When was the last time you invited them to come to church? When was the last time you invited a family member or a neighbour or a work colleague or a friend to come to church?

And knowing how Jesus treated people when someone new comes to church, how did you treat someone who was new when they came to church? Did you treat them like the tramp?

Did you treat them the way Reverend Rigby was treated by his own congregation? You know, I don't think we realise the role and responsibility we have as a church family within this community.

[24 : 43] It's a huge role and responsibility to be warm and welcoming. Because as someone once said, people come to church for faithful preaching, but people stay in a church with friendly people.

people come to a church for faithful preaching, but people stay in a church with friendly people. And you know, I'm asking myself, I'm not just preaching to you, I'm preaching to myself first and foremost.

Are we a warm and welcoming church family? Are we a warm and welcoming church family?

Which, that warm welcome doesn't just begin at the church door with those on door duty.

It begins in the church car park. My friend, are we warm and welcoming to our community? Are we warm and welcoming to our congregation?

Are we warm and welcoming to our own church family? You know, whatever church is, it's not to be cold. It's not to be clinical. Church is to be warm.

[25 : 49] That's the biblical basis. We've seen that already. Church is to be warm. It's to be welcoming. It's not to be a place where people are sitting stiffly and staring silently and just looking at one another.

No, church is to be a place where we're smiling and speaking with one another and sharing fellowship with one another. As we said on Wednesday evening when we were looking at 2 Timothy, God's house is to be a holy house, but it's also to be a happy house.

God's house is to be a happy house. And yes, that takes energy. That takes effort. But you know, it doesn't cost us to say hello. It doesn't cost us to ask someone, to say to someone, good morning or good evening.

It doesn't cost you to turn around to someone in your seat and someone you don't know, someone you're not related to and ask them, how are you? Are you visiting? Where are you from? How has your week been? It doesn't cost us. And you know, let's be practical in our warm welcome. Let's be practical in our warm welcome because, you know, coming to church for the first time, maybe I've mentioned this before, coming to church for the first time has often been likened to going to a betting shop.

[27 : 10] Now, I don't know how many of you place bets, but I'm not encouraging you to go to the bookies either. But I know that if I went into a betting shop, I wouldn't have a clue what to do.

I'd be so nervous. I wouldn't know where to stand. I wouldn't know what to say. And I wouldn't have a clue how to put down a bet.

But you know, it's also the same for people who have never been to church. I've heard people saying to me, well, I can't come to church. If I came through the church door, I'd go on fire.

Stupid things like that. Or people, do I have to wear black in order to come to church? The things people have in their heads about coming to church because they don't know, they've never been.

That's why we need to be warm and welcoming. We need to be practical in our warm welcome. And let's also be aware. Let's also be alert of the people who are around us.

[28 : 09] We're all in church. We're all seeing one another. We're all noticing one another. So if you see someone who doesn't have a Bible, get them one. If you see someone who doesn't have a psalm book, get them one.

Better still, get up and sit beside them. Share your Bible. Share your psalm book with them. Let's be practical in our warm welcome. Let's be practical.

You know, in the book by Tony Merida, Love Your Church, he talks about the sit-by-us test. The sit-by-us test, where you see someone new in church and you sit beside them and you talk to them. You welcome them. It's where instead of snubbing people for their first time in church, we sit by them. We talk to them. We get to know them.

We welcome them. We make sure they're welcomed into our church family. My friend, love your church because we're to be a warm and welcoming church family.

[29 : 14] Love your church because we're to be a warm and welcoming church family. And the thing is, Jesus notices. Jesus notices if we are a warm and welcoming church family.

And with this, I'll conclude because, you know, it really struck me and it really stayed with me, especially when looking at this passage and preaching to myself.

Jesus notices if we're a warm and welcoming church family because we're told in Matthew chapter 25 that on the day of judgment, even our welcome will be judged by Jesus.

On the day of judgment, even our welcome will be judged by Jesus. Jesus says in Matthew, chapter 25, that on the day of judgment, when all the nations are gathered before him, he will separate people.

That's what he says. He will separate people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. Jesus will stand there as king and he will place the sheep on his right-hand side and the goats on his left.

[30 : 18] He will say to the goats, depart from me. He'll say, depart from me because I never knew you. But Jesus will then say to the sheep, and listen to what Jesus says.

Come, you blessed of my father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from before the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food.

I was thirsty and you gave me drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you visited me.

I was in prison and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer, he says, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you or thirsty and give you drink?

When did we see you a stranger and welcome you or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the king will say to them, Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, my brother, you did it to me.

[31 : 25] Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these, my brother, you did it to me. You know, Jesus, Jesus notices if we are a warm and welcoming church family.

He notices it all. Therefore, the challenge that we are being confronted with this evening, and it's a challenge I take to myself. Love your church.

Love your church because we're to be a warm and welcoming church family. Love your church. And may the Lord bless these thoughts to us.

Let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks to Thee for Thy Word. Thy Word that is not only full of information, but also full of application.

And Lord, we know that the application, it is hard-hitting. It confronts us and challenges us to step out of our comfort zone and to be more and more like Jesus.

[32 : 35] And Lord, we pray for the grace to do it, that we might be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, to be warm and to be welcoming, to love people and to love Jesus.

And Lord, we pray that we would do it always to Thy glory, realizing that everyone we meet is made in the image and likeness of our great God. And help us then, we pray, to serve aright, to serve wholeheartedly, to serve lovingly, to serve faithfully.

Lord, bless us then, we pray. Bless us in the week that lies ahead, a week that is unknown to any of us. But Lord, we give thanks that this is where we are found, in the Lord's house, on the Lord's day. Guide us, we pray, watch over us, we ask, take away our iniquity, receive us graciously, for Jesus' sake. Amen. We're going to sing again this time in Psalm 40.

Psalm 40 is in the Scottish Psalter, page 260. We're singing from verse 9 down to the verse 11.

[33 : 51] But before we sing, I'll ask the questions. Are you ready? I'll let you find your psalm first.

So question one, who was the tramp in church? It was the minister, it was. The minister dressed up as a tramp, and he made a very challenging sermon to his congregation.

Who is invited to come to church? Everybody. What's the word? Whosoever. Great word.

Whosoever. What kind of church family are we to be?

Warm and welcoming. So let's be a warm and welcoming church family, will we? Yeah. Let's be warm and welcoming to whosoever. Okay.

Psalm 40. We're singing from verse 9. Again, a psalm that emphasizes the congregation. Within the congregation great, I righteousness did preach.

[34 : 54] Lo, thou dost know, Lord, that I refrain not my speech. I never did within my heart conceal thy righteousness. I thy salvation have declared and shown thy faithfulness.

And we'll sing on down to the verse marked 11 of Psalm 40 to God's praise. all ourselves. within the congregation great, my righteousness will be reached.

Oh, Lord, I pray, pray, let not my speech.

I never did within my heart, once in thy righteousness.

I thy salvation have been, and show thy faithfulness.

[36 : 20] Thy kindness which was loving is, once in the town of night.

Nor from the congregation great, how did thy verity?

Thy tender mercy's heart draw me, O to the Lord we stream.

Thy loving kindness, and thy truth, let them be still maintained.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.