

Accepting one another

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everybody. Happy Advent week two, and good to see you again. You know, we live in an interesting time in our country. When we look at the United States, the people who live here, there may never have been a time in all of history where there was as much diversity as we currently have in the United States. There may never have been a society anywhere in history as diverse as we are right now.

And if you live in the DMV area, we are particularly aware of that. When you look around the area, the kind of DC metro area, there are people from over 170 different countries who live here. In some parts of the DMV area, there are schools where over 200 different languages are spoken.

This is one of the most diverse areas, not only in the United States, but actually in the world. So if you live in an area like this, we are constantly confronted with and we are constantly wrestling with this question.

How can people from different cultures and ethnicities and social classes and religions and political persuasions live together in peace?

How do we do it? If you live in an area like this, you can't ignore that kind of question because every time you leave your house, you are confronted with situations that require you to think about it. And there are very few models in history for how to do this kind of thing well. And quite honestly, there are a lot of great examples of spectacular failures of diverse societies.

[2 : 0 4] The only other society in history that even comes close to where we are right now is the Roman Empire. And we saw how that turned out. But even as the Roman Empire began to crumble, what we see in history is that that is also the time when the world first caught a glimpse of the power of the gospel to bring all different kinds of people together into one place.

Because as the empire crumbled, the early Christian church was emerging and beginning to blossom. And the question that we are going to ask this morning is how did they do it?

How did the early Christian church become such a wildly diverse community when none of the other examples or societies around were able to hold together? How did the early Christian church do it? How did they live in peace across all of these different dividing lines?

And our New Testament reading from the New Testament is Romans chapter 15. And that really speaks to this question. This is the climax of Paul's letter to the Romans, where he is talking about God's vision of all different kinds of people living together as one family.

So we're going to see from this passage in Paul's writing, we're going to see first the impact of cultural difference, the problem with those differences, the solution to that problem, and then finally the power that makes it possible.

[3 : 4 0] So let's pray and then we're going to open God's word together. Lord, we thank you for this morning and we pray your blessing on us as we open your word. We also pray your blessing on the slide projector and those who are endeavoring to fix it.

We pray your blessing on this lectern may it not crumble as I preach. Lord, we pray your blessing in all regards, Lord. We know that your presence with us cannot be hindered.

And we know that despite whatever technical difficulties we may have, your ability to minister to your people and do your work through your word is unhindered. And that's really why we're here, Lord. It is to encounter you. So may we encounter you through your written word. May we come face to face with the living word, Jesus Christ. It's in his name that we pray. Amen.

So, friends, first of all, the impact of cultural difference. What's going on in the church in Rome? There were many disagreements in the church in Rome over what we might consider to be secondary issues.

These are not primary issues like did Jesus rise from the grave. These are not primary issues like the gospel. These are secondary issues. All of these people that Paul's writing to, they're all believing Christians. They're all baptized gospel believing Christians.

[4 : 59] They were disagreeing over how to live out their faith in certain ways. One of the debates that happened was over the issue of holy days. Should we continue to observe the Sabbath? Should we continue to observe the various holy feast days in the Jewish tradition?

The issue that we're going to focus on, the primary issue that Paul focuses on is this question. Is it okay for Christians to eat meat? Now, it's not that they were vegetarians in the sense that we think of today that there were different reasons that we're going to get into why some Christians felt that they could not eat meat.

Paul believed, as did Jesus, and Paul taught, as did Jesus, that because of the gospel and because of the freedom that comes with the grace of the gospel, that all food had been declared clean and that Christians should feel freedom to eat whatever they wanted.

There was no food that was considered unclean for any reason. So that's what Paul taught in the spirit of Jesus. However, there were some Christians who simply didn't feel right about it.

They felt guilty for eating meat. They believed the gospel. They believed what Paul taught about the gospel. They believed in Jesus. They still couldn't get over the sense of guilt they felt eating the meat.

[6 : 18] And Paul refers to a couple of groups of people in the opening of this passage, the strong and the weak. He refers to the strong Christians because they were the ones who more fully applied the gospel to their lives.

And so they felt freedom to eat meat. They didn't have any qualms about eating meat. He refers to another group called, which he calls weak, the weak Christians. And he calls them weak because they're still struggling to apply the gospel to this area of their life.

They believe in the gospel. They've been saved. But they just, when it comes to what they eat, they still feel some guilt and trepidation. So he calls them weak because they had not applied the gospel to that area of their life.

Now, here's where it starts to get interesting. In Rome, the weak Christians were mostly people who were culturally Jewish. These are people who had grown up under the Old Testament cleanliness laws, which were ultimately meant to teach people this lesson.

You cannot simply come into the presence of a holy God without being thoroughly and completely spiritually cleansed. But now that Jesus has come, right, Paul taught, Jesus is the means through which we are made clean and we are welcomed into God's presence.

[7 : 33] So the cleanliness laws are no longer relevant, right? These culturally Jewish Christians in Rome, though, had grown up their whole lives avoiding certain kinds of food.

And even though they had become Christians, they just, they didn't feel right about eating meat that had been prohibited their entire time growing up. It just didn't feel right. So in Rome, these were the culturally Jewish people were the Christians who avoided eating meat.

I said, this is where it gets interesting. If we compare this to the church in Corinth, which we read about in 1 Corinthians 8, you see something very different. It's not the Jews. In Corinth, the weak Christians who didn't feel like they could eat meat were Greeks.

Now you say, well, that doesn't make any sense. Well, it's for very different reasons. These Greek converts had not grown up under the Old Testament prohibitions. They maybe didn't even understand or know about the cleanliness laws at all.

They were irrelevant. So you're like, well, why did they avoid eating meat? It's because they had grown up as a part of pagan cults. And in these pagan cults, they would sacrifice animals as a part of their pagan rituals to these various gods and goddesses.

[8 : 44] And then they would sell that meat in the marketplace. And so there was a real live question among these Greek converts like, if this meat was blessed in the name of a pagan deity, if this meat was sacrificed in the name of a pagan deity, if I eat it, now that I'm a Christian, am I betraying Jesus somehow?

Or am I eating something that still has a dark or evil spiritual power connected to it? Right? So it's a completely different reason why they wouldn't eat meat. Right? So in one church, it's the Jews because of their cultural background.

And in another place, they're doing the same thing. But there are Greeks who are doing it because of their very different cultural background. So the point that we're trying to make is this debate over eating meat is not purely a theological debate.

Behind the scenes, under the surface, there are major significant cultural differences that influence how people are approaching this question.

And what we see beginning to emerge here is this fact that there are always cultural differences in play. They're always there under the surface. What do I mean by cultural differences?

[9 : 59] The family you grow up in and their values, your social class, your economic class, your race, your ethnicity, your level of education relative to the people around you.

Things like that all contribute to the culture that formed us. And different people have different formative influences, different cultural influences that shape who they are.

And they shape how we experience life. And they shape how we interpret the world. Now, there's been a very interesting case study about this in our church over the last year. We've been discussing the issue of women's ordination.

And this is not, by the way, I'm not making a one-to-one parallel between ordination and eating meat. And ordination is a far more important question and deals with the leadership of the church and the nature of the sacraments.

So this is not a one-to-one parallel. But there are some similarities. Over the last few months, I've had a lot of conversations with people. And in our church, there's a whole range of perspectives on this question.

[11 : 06] But what I've noticed is before we even get to the biblical or theological aspects of that conversation, what I've noticed is how much, and I would include myself in this, how much cultural differences and people's cultural background influences the way we approach an issue like this.

It's just the way we even are able to engage the conversation. In our denomination, it's a very broad denomination. And so there are both views represented. There are some people who do ordain women and some people who don't and everything in between.

And so if you come out of a tradition like that, it's sort of like you see it as an important issue, but it's a non-essential issue. It's a secondary issue. And so you're sort of used to people having both views and maybe agreeing to disagree.

Some people that I've talked to, though, didn't grow up in the church. And so they're kind of like, what's the issue? I didn't know there was an issue, right? Some people come from theologically conservative churches, theologically conservative churches, but they ordain women, right?

So they come out of the Assemblies of God or the Vineyard Movement or EPC Church or something like that where they're theologically conservative, but they ordain women. To them it's normal. Other people, and this is actually my background, other people come from a culture where the only churches that ordain women are the highly progressive liberal churches.

[12 : 29] Women's ordination is seen as a sign, as maybe the sign of capitulation to culture and progressive ideology and spiritual, theological and spiritual decline.

And so in those cultures, this is a first order issue. It's a deal breaker issue. And what I've noticed, again, you know, it's important in a topic like this, here's what I'm not saying, here's what I'm saying, okay?

Here's what I'm not saying. What I'm not saying is that what you think about this issue is purely determined by cultural factors. I'm not saying. This is a biblical and theological debate with very legitimate arguments on both sides in my opinion.

But what I am saying is this, is before we even get to the biblical or theological piece of this conversation, there are powerful, inescapable cultural forces impacting how we approach it.

To what extent do we see certain things as being more plausible or less plausible? And it's essential, this first point I want to make, it's essential to recognize the impact of cultural differences on a community like ours, when you have people who think different things.

[13 : 40] This is the first point. This leads us to the second point. What is, what I'm referring to as the problem with cultural differences. The problem with cultural differences.

Let me be clear. The existence of cultural differences is not the problem. In fact, I would say quite the opposite. It's a feature, not a bug.

I remember many years ago, I was talking to a friend of mine, who's a black pastor, and we were talking about race and ethnicity and racial justice and reconciliation.

And he made an offhand comment about the book of Acts. And he made this comment about how the book of Acts, just this core theme all throughout the book of Acts is racial reconciliation. And I'm embarrassed to say, I've read the book of Acts many, many, many times up to that point.

It had never occurred to me that racial reconciliation was a core theme in the book of Acts. If you asked me back then, and let's just say this was a long time ago. Like, like 30 years ago.

[14 : 50] I was 10. Way back in ancient history. I, I, I, you know, if you asked me what's the book of Acts about, I would say, oh, well, it's about the coming of the Holy Spirit.

And it's about the giving of the spiritual gifts. It's about the, the starting, the birth of the early church. It's about the, the great missionary, Paul's great missionary movements and church planting. That's what I would say it was about.

It's about the gospel going out to the ends of the earth. All that is true. And I sit down with my friend and he just kind of walks me through chapter by chapter. And it was like I was reading it for the first time.

Now, why did I have that experience? Because of my cultural background, I had a massive blind spot. Right? Cause I mean, one of the things that white people are known for is we don't really think we have a culture.

Right? So we just, I didn't, wasn't even thinking. Right? I just, I didn't even realize I had a blind spot. I, I was just not seeing something. When my friend read the same text, it's on every page.

[15 : 51] He's seeing it everywhere. Right? And turns out he was right. So this is a great example of how easy it is to have a major blind spot and to not even be aware of it.

And, and you know, I heard the late pastor, Tim Keller, one of my great heroes, make this point one time. He says, you know, we're all standing in a culture.

And because of that, we are limited in our ability to see the full glory of the gospel. That we're standing in a culture. And because of that, we have a perspective.

We have a lens in on the gospel. But it also limits our ability to see the full glory of the gospel. And he says, because of that, we need other Christians in our lives who have different perspectives, different cultural backgrounds to help us see things that we would otherwise not be able to see.

And together, we gain a much greater ability to see the full glory of the gospel. So, so another way of putting it is this. A culturally homogenous church is much, much, much more likely to have massive blind spots.

[17 : 03] Massive blind spots. We will have a truncated, limited view of who Jesus is. Because there are going to be things that we can't see, that we're going to be blind to.

And that's true of every church, of every culture. So we need one another. So you say, okay, well then why aren't there more culturally diverse churches? That's a great question.

It's because these cultural differences often become dividing lines. This is the problem with cultural difference. Not that they exist, but that they often become sources of division.

So in the church in Rome, the Christians who abstained from meat were judging and condemning the Christians who ate meat. Oh, you call yourself a Christian, but there you are eating that meat in clear violation of what you know God wants from you.

You're not a real Christian. Right? You're, you're, you're apostate. You're liberal. Right? The Christians who were eating meat, who did so freely, who had no hang-ups about it, they would roll their eyes and look down on and, and, and treat with a condescension.

[18 : 13] The Christians, oh, you know, you're, are you that scrupulous about everything? And why do you have to be so legalistic? And why, you know? And they had this attitude of like, oh my, they, they couldn't even tolerate being around these people. Because they're so rigid and black and white and legalistic and judgmental.

Right? So you had this division that was happening. And the reason is not because this was a particularly toxic church. The reason is because human beings are hardwired to want to be around and feel most comfortable around people who are like us.

You know that feeling when you're around somebody and you know where they stand theologically and you know where they stand politically and you know what they think and you just know that you agree with them kind of down the line.

And you just feel like you can let your hair down around that person. You feel that sense of ease. Like I don't have to guard what I say. I don't have to guard, you know, my behavior. I don't have to worry about, you know, I can just relax around this person because I know that we line up on all the issues.

Right? That's the way human beings are hardwired to operate. And we, you know, Jonathan Haidt writes about this in his book *The Righteous Mind* if you've read it. We tend to not only prefer the company of people who are like us in all those ways, but we also tend to assume that the people who are like us are actually the good people.

[19 : 28] Or the best people. The righteous ones. Right? And we tend to see people, research has shown, we tend to see people we disagree with ideologically, not only as being wrong, or having a difference of opinion, but we tend to see them as being intellectually or even morally inferior.

Right? It's really easy to roll your eyes at a person as you see as being, that's, when you're rolling your eyes, you're saying, you're inferior to me. That's what, that's what contempt really is. You know?

I'm better than you. You're inferior to me. And we tend to do that. Right? So this is why I think it's so scary. It's so scary for us to openly discuss something like our political differences.

We have a full range of political views in this church. Pretty much every time something major happens in the news, what we typically see is that people immediately group up with their tribe.

And so you have the more conservative people will talk about that issue with the other conservative people. The more progressive people will talk with the other progressive people about it. But immediately there's this kind of tribal affinity groups form.

[20 : 32] Right? But you don't see a lot of talk across those tribal dividing lines. And the reason, I don't think it's because people are afraid to disagree per se. I think the reason is actually that I don't want to feel like I'm going to be judged.

I don't want to feel like I'm going to be condemned. I don't want to feel like I'm going to be treated with contempt. I don't want people rolling their eyes about me behind my back. When I say, you know, here's what I think about the Israel-Hamas situation, or here's what I think about immigration, or here's what I think about Trump, or here's what I think about this policy or that policy.

What is that person going to think about? What are you going to say? Are you going to continue to respect me if you know that's what I think? Right? I think that's why we don't do it. So that's the problem. These cultural differences could be such sources of strength, but they end up dividing us.

That's the problem. What's the solution to the problem? Well, number one, a couple of things that don't work. They've been tried and found wanting. Don't waste your time. Number one, we can't pretend these differences aren't there.

We can't act like they don't matter, because they do. They matter a great deal. Have you ever seen the show? There's a new show out on Apple TV called *Pluribus*. Anybody seen *Pluribus*?

[21 : 47] I'd recommend it. *Pluribus*. Good show. I'm not going to spoil it for you. You said don't close your ears. I'm just going to give you the premise. Here's the premise.

Nearly every human being on the planet has been joined together into a kind of hive mind, a collective consciousness. What's great about that is that instantly there was total and complete world peace and unity.

Everybody is together. There's no more crime. There's no more war. The entire human race is now working together. Right? They're doing great things.

The world is the best it's ever been. Right? But that comes with the cost. And the cost is this. The complete loss of individual identity.

No longer do you have any individuals. Right? Everybody's part of the collective consciousness. So there is no longer any individual identity. And when we read the Bible it's very clear that is not God's vision for humanity.

[22 : 51] At all. God creates us to be individuals. God relates to us as individuals. Right? He knits us together specifically and uniquely in the womb.

And we come into the world as an individual bearer of his image. And that's how he relates to us. And when he comes to rescue us through the incarnation he comes as an individual. And he saves us each individually.

Right? So that's not a solution. And as we said our differences are not bugs. They're features. So we can't just pretend they're not there. Number two.

We can't do what the post-modern world has done. And simply say well it's all relative. You do you. I'll do me. Nothing is really true. Whatever works for you works for you.

We can't do that. Paul in this passage interestingly clearly believes there's a right answer. He doesn't say well you guys have a point and you guys have a point. And you're both kind.

[23 : 47] You know he says no the ones who are eating meat are correct. The ones who aren't eating meat are incorrect. Right? There is a clear right and wrong. The strong Christians are correct.

And so we can't simply say well you know there is no truth and you believe what you want. That's relativism and it doesn't work. So what is the solution? What should we be doing?

And here's where verse 7 is I think the climax of the whole deal. He says accept one another. Accept one another.

He's not just saying we should refrain from judging or condemning people who are different. The word accept in the Greek goes much much much further than just I'll tolerate you.

He's not just saying I'll put up with you. The Greek word for accept means it means to draw someone in. It means open your heart to that person.

[24 : 47] What he's saying is open your heart to one another. Draw one another in. Right? What does that mean?

Adjust your life. Set aside your personal preferences. Lay down whatever you need to feel comfortable. And enter into the awkwardness.

And enter into the tension. Required to open yourself up and welcome people who are culturally or theologically different than you into your life.

That's what he's saying. That's the kind of posture you need to have. Grant them access to your heart. Develop genuine friendships with them.

Right? The implications of this. We shouldn't just pretend these differences aren't there. Continue to hold your views.

[25 : 46] Continue to believe what you believe. Continue to respectfully disagree with people who believe differently. But be willing to adjust your life to develop genuine friendships with those people.

So you're not just disagreeing. And to grant them access to your heart. Right? What does that mean? Work hard to understand their perspective. Take the risk of sharing what you think.

Ask them to help you understand why they think what they think. And engage your higher cognitive processes in trying to find opportunities for connection.

Right? That's what he's saying. Imagine, just for a second, how different your friend group would be if this was your posture toward people who were markedly different than you.

Imagine how different your or our church would be if this was our posture. Imagine how different, this isn't just limited to the church.

- [27 : 03] Imagine how different your neighborhood would be if people did this and it was a norm. The reason it's maybe kind of hard or maybe kind of wonderful to imagine that is because this is not normal.

This kind of posture of granting access to your heart and your life to people who are very, very different from you is not normal. It is not natural.

What is natural is to spend all of our time with people who are pretty much exactly like we are. Culturally, theologically, politically, pretty much the same. So even in the same church, as I said a little while ago, even in the same church, people tend to identify very quickly who are the other people in this church who are culturally, politically, theologically similar to me.

And then those people group up. So we all worship together on Sunday, but then Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, who you're spending time with and talking to and really being vulnerable with are the people who are like us.

So think about your own life. The question is not who do you hang out with on occasion. That's not what Paul's saying. Here's the question. Who do you open your heart to?

- [28 : 16] Who do you let your hair down with? How often do you open your heart to people who are culturally, racially, politically, or theologically different?

I'm not trying to make anybody feel guilty. This is hard. It's incredibly uncomfortable. Throw a couple of kids and a couple of full-time jobs in the mix.

We don't have time. We don't have energy. When I'm hanging out with my friends, I just want to get replenished. I don't want to have to be like, well, help me understand your views on immigration. I don't want to go there. I just want to go to bed.

So where do we get the power to do this? What makes it possible? Read the rest of the verse in verse 7. Accept one another. Open your heart. Open your life.

Draw them in. Accept one another just as Christ accepted you. Just as Christ accepted you.

- [29 : 23] As Christ accepted you. What has the power to open a heart? What has the power to compel me to overcome my fatigue and my desire for comfort and convenience and to actually engage with somebody who's different?

Only the gospel. Only Christ. Because when Jesus looks at human beings like us, he sees people who have rejected him.

He sees people who have condemned him. He sees people who have judged him. He sees people who have rolled their eyes at him and written him off and who have decided in their hearts the world would be a better place if this person were dead.

That's who he sees. That's who he sees. And he doesn't overlook our sin. And he doesn't pretend it doesn't matter. He doesn't say it's all relative and you do you and I'll do me. He says, I've come to call sinners to repentance.

Right? In other words, everything about your life needs to change. Right? You need to be entirely reoriented toward God because God has created you to love and to serve him alone.

- [30 : 38] And if you're not doing that, you're wrong. Right? And you're going to perish. Right? So he's very clear on that. And yet, Jesus is the one who moves toward us before we move toward him.

Jesus is the one who pursues us before we choose to pursue him. If you follow Jesus, it is because Jesus pursued you first. Jesus is the one who opens his heart.

Jesus is the one who draws us to himself. Jesus is the one who cries out to those in the light of our Gospel reading, to all the Pharisees and Sadducees and scribes and teachers of the law who were overburdening their people, who were crushing them under guilt and shame.

Jesus is the one who opens up and cries out to the world, come all who are weary or heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Right?

And Jesus is the one who humbled himself, and as we say in our daily prayer, stretched out his arms of love on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace.

[31 : 48] That's the cost of opening your heart and your life to the world. Is you're going to do it on a cross. You're going to suffer.

And so when we think about the reality of the Gospel, when I know in my heart Jesus Christ had every right to reject me, but instead he humbled himself and he gave his life so that he could open his heart to me and welcome me into his saving embrace.

I cannot help but set aside my petty preferences and my petty desire for comfort and to open my life up to somebody who's different than me.

If Jesus was willing to do that for me, how can I not also do the same to this brother or sister sitting across the table from me? And when Paul says, friends, in verse 1, those who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak.

So he's kind of putting a bullseye on the strong. Who are the strong? They're the ones who had more fully applied the Gospel to every area of their life. It doesn't have to do with me.

[33 : 03] These are the people who are supposedly the ones who have more thoroughly applied the Gospel to every area of life. So what's Paul saying? If you have applied the Gospel to every area of your life, you ought to be the first to be willing to bear with and put up with the discomfort and the tension and the awkwardness of engaging somebody who disagrees with you.

If you believe the Gospel, the more you believe it, the more you've applied it. In other words, one of the clearest signs that you've applied the Gospel to every area of your life is that you have a continual ongoing willingness to accept those who are different from you.

And to actively engage them and to be the first in. And when we do this, he says in verse 7, it brings praise and glory to God.

Every time you open your heart and your life and you say, tell me more because I want to understand. How can we be friends? The angels in heaven rejoice.

And God is praised. Why? God is glorified when we open our lives to people who are different from us, because that's exactly what he's done for us. And, if you read on in the chapter, because his entire plan for the world is to create one great family from all the peoples of the earth.

[34 : 22] And so when we do this, it's like a little preview. And God is like, yeah, they're getting it. They're starting to live this way. Because one day this is going to be true for everybody. And he's like, when you do that at that table over that drink, talking about that issue, that's just a little foretaste of new creation in heaven.

He's like, they're figuring it out. He's glorified by them. So if we take the gospel seriously in our church and in our lives, and if we're committed to living this out in the church, what does it mean?

I'll give you a few of my thoughts before we close. If we take this seriously and we're committed to living it out, number one, it means that we should be committed to becoming more diverse in terms of age, class, race, life stage, political lives, leanings.

Not to be diverse for its own sake. Not because diversity and inclusion happen to be trending for this period of time or not trending for this period of time.

Not because it's a quality for our quality. it glorifies God, because God, the heavens rejoice, and because we need people who are different than us in our lives to help us see Jesus more fully and completely.

[35 : 38] We need it. We don't want to operate with massive blind spots that hinder our faith. Number two, if we take this seriously, we should be a politically purple church where people openly discuss our differences of opinion with one another. The next presidential election, you have your bumper sticker prominently displayed. You're wearing your t-shirt for who you're pulling for, right? It means we should be able to have a culture of civil discourse and respectful debate. It means people don't just spend time with their own tribe. It means people should be eagerly pursuing one another. It means it should be normal for people to say, can I buy you a drink? I want to hear more about why you think that. And it means there should be absolutely no fear of eye-rolling or judgmentalism anywhere. It means people say, man, Thanksgiving was really hard, and man, my family, but coming back to church and feeling like I'm in a space where I can just let my hair down work with everybody in the room, that means the gospel is true. And number three, finally, as a church,

I think it means that we should be known for our absurdly over-the-top hospitality. Absurdly over-the-top hospitality. You know, last night, there was this Chevrolet progressive dinner.

Over 100 people from the neighborhood invited to do this progressive dinner, ultimately culminating in, you know, with Tim and Lisa Schultz and Tim sharing this sort of short gospel presentation to a room where half the people there are not Christians, right? And then the whole culture of that is just welcoming people in. And the reason they have so many people come to the event itself is because this isn't just a one-off. They're doing this open, accepting, embracing, drawing in, living out of the gospel all year long. And so when they invite people to something like this, they come because they're like, these people, even though we completely disagree about fundamental things, they have consistently opened their hearts and their lives to us. We've been drawn in.

And when they want us to come to a party where we know we're going to hear the gospel presented, in an amazingly effective way, by the way, when we know that's going to happen and we know we don't believe it, we're going to go anyway. Because guess what? These are people we can let our hair down with. It's okay to disagree. It's okay to ask questions or push back because they've opened their heart and their life to me. We should be known for our absurdly over-the-top hospitality.

We should not need a welcome team in our church, friends. Why? Because every single member and regular attender should assume I'm on the welcome team, right? So when somebody comes in the door, there should be a race to be the first to say, welcome. I'm so glad you're here.

[38 : 40] Now that might freak some people out. But it'll do far more good than bad. It'll do far more good than the opposite where somebody comes in and they're like, man, I was there for two hours and nobody said a single word to me. Nobody invited me over. Nobody invited me out to dinner. I really wanted to go to lunch and get to know people, but everybody seemed to group up and kind of do their own thing and everybody seemed to have their friends and nobody talked to me. Every single person who comes through the door of our church should be welcomed and embraced and treated like family because we should all be compelled by the gospel to welcome others as Christ has welcomed us.

Let's pray. Our Lord and Heavenly Father, thank you for being a God of hospitality. Thank you for being a God of invitation. Thank you for being a God who, when there was no way for us to be in fellowship with you, when it was impossible, when all of the best efforts of the greatest people in the world failed to bridge that gap. Thank you for being the one to lay down your life to make it possible.

Thank you for paying the unthinkable cost required to invite us into your heart. And Lord, may we in some small way reflect that same generosity of spirit and that same willingness to put aside our own comfort to welcome others in. May this be a place in the power of your Holy Spirit where every single person who comes is welcomed like family.

Because we know that as we welcome them, we welcome them in your name. And as we love them, so they will come to expect your love and experience your love. And Lord, we pray this ultimately as the Apostle Paul says himself, that you would be glorified. In Jesus' name. Amen.