



Foreword by Tim Challies



welcome

**LOVING YOUR CHURCH
BY MAKING SPACE FOR EVERYONE**

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1. HOW JESUS WELCOMES US

Ten years ago, our family made a global move. We had been living in Okinawa, Japan for nearly a decade, where my husband pastored a church for American military personnel and their families. We believed, though, that God had called us to the city of Brno in the Czech Republic, one of the world's most atheist nations. So, along with our Asian-raised daughters, who were aged 16, 10, 8, and 6, and our Japanese chocolate Labrador Retriever, we moved 9,000 miles from the tropics in the East China Sea to the gray winter of Central Europe just ten days before Christmas.

Everything about our first Sunday in our new Czech church was as foreign to us as the language. Not only could we not speak a word of Czech—the Slavic language employs sounds the English speaker has never heard nor formed—but we didn't yet know a soul. We went from being the pastor's family on the inside of the church to being total newcomers nervously standing on the outside

of the church. We needed our new brothers and sisters to show us everything, like when to sit and when to stand during the service, how to take communion according to their tradition, and how to pronounce their names over coffee after church. We were totally at their mercy as we sought to make this new church, new country, and new faith family our home.

Today's global economy and increasingly transient lifestyles mean that you may well have made a few moves yourself. Even if you haven't moved a great distance, it's not unusual to have moved from one church to another at some point. And the fact that you're reading this book means there was a day when you walked through the front doors of your current church venue for the very first time.

Can you remember what it was like? Palms a little sweaty, breathing a little faster, heart thumping a little bit harder? Most first-time visitors feel this way. Questions flood our minds as we walk into the sanctuary. What if everyone else talks to one another but not to me? What if I sit down or raise my hand or say, "Amen" at the wrong time and everyone shifts in their pews to stare at me? Visiting a new church requires courage.

And how much more courage is required for those who are not yet followers of Christ? While our first Sunday in the Czech church was trying, we knew we were already among family. But there was an occasion, years prior, when I entered the doors of a church as someone who

did not yet know or love Jesus. My mom, who was a single mother, took me to church for the first time when I was nine years old. I could tell right away that we were different from the families gathered there. Sure, I knew the language being spoken, but I had no idea what we were getting ourselves into. That church was perhaps even more foreign to me then than the one I encountered in Brno years later.

For those who are not yet Christians, exploring the Christian faith and way of life requires a certain desperation, or at least a determination, to make it through the church front door. The question, then, for those of us on the inside is: How might we cross the wide divide to meet those who are on the outside? How might we become a people of welcome—a people who make complete strangers feel that they can come in and be right at home? How can we create an atmosphere that invites our neighbors who are strangers to become our brothers and sisters in Jesus, as they repent and believe the good news?

If we want to welcome others into Jesus' family, we need to start by looking at Jesus himself.

THE SELF-SACRIFICING WELCOME OF JESUS

Jesus displayed his heart of welcome when he set out on a rescue mission 2,000 years ago. What a distance Jesus traveled—what an incomprehensible divide he crossed—in pursuit of you and me. He traded in his throne for

a manger, his kingly majesty for skin and a frail body and the transcendence of heaven for the tangibility of walking this earth—so that humans might see him, touch him, and believe in him.

Still he went further. May it be ever fresh in our minds that while we were enemies of God, Jesus gave himself over to a violent death so that we might be reconciled to the Father (Romans 5:10). It's easy to get so cozy in our Christianity that we forget we were spiritually dead, following the ways of the world, when God, because of his great love and mercy, "made us alive with Christ" (Ephesians 2:1-5). We are Christians through no effort of our own. It's only because of the kindness and compassion of our Lord that we've been welcomed into his family.

This is the greatest scandal in history. No greater divide has ever been crossed in history. No one has ever traveled farther or suffered more to welcome their enemies in. Jesus, the Creator and God of the universe, exchanged all the goodness of heaven and *joyfully* endured the cross (Hebrews 12:2) so that you and I might become children of God (John 1:12).

FOLLOWING AFTER JESUS

With God's help and the leading of his Spirit, we can follow after Jesus and warmly welcome others as they become part of our faith families. That's what Paul calls the believers in Philippi to as he describes Jesus's downward journey in Philippians 2:5-11:

⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: ⁶ Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! ⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Paul instructs us to have the mind of Jesus and empty ourselves out. We follow Jesus by forsaking our status, becoming servants, and fully humbling ourselves.

Forsake Your Status

Jesus is God. Before the incarnation, as one Person of the Trinity, God the Son's status was as King over all, worthy of all majesty and adoration (Philippians 2:6). But we see also that he did not grasp (ESV) or cling to (NLT) his status. He didn't exploit his position (CSB) or take advantage of his own nature (NIV).

We who belong to Christ also enjoy a privileged status. We are co-heirs with him (Romans 8:17) and have all the benefits of being God's adopted sons and daughters. And it can be easy to take advantage of our status as "insiders"

without realizing it. Unless we are intentional about being otherwise, we easily get comfortable inside our own faith families and just stay put. I've heard this called a *holy huddle*—the saints gathered in an impenetrable circle with their backs to the outside world. This happens when we subconsciously look only to our own needs and don't have eyes to see those standing on the outside.

Kenton and Jaimie are a well-loved young couple at our church. Everyone wants to be in their small group because they are so good at building friendships and nurturing intimacy. But on Sunday mornings you will not find them cozied up inside a clique of friends. Even with their three young children tangled around their feet, they always make a beeline for newcomers. They make a concerted effort to introduce themselves to every visitor, and they always extend an invitation to their home. Week in and week out, Kenton and Jaimie forsake their status, leaving the comfort of their long-held and deep friendships, to ensure that every stranger receives a warm welcome.

Become a Servant

Second, in Jesus' immeasurably compassionate rescue mission, "he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:7). Though he is more powerful than anything or anyone else in all of creation, our God "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). Jesus emptied

himself (Philippians 2:7 CSB, ESV); he gave up his divine privileges (NLT); he made himself nothing (NIV)—that we might be welcomed into his family. And he calls his followers to do the same.

Let's be real: serving is hard. I think all of us would prefer to walk through the doors into church on Sunday and be handed a warm cup of coffee and sit down in a cushy chair to consume the worship service like a paying customer—much like going to the movies at one of those theaters with reclining chairs and bottomless soda and popcorn. The comparison is laughable—the church is not the movies! But do we who are members of the faith family approach our times together ready to empty ourselves out? Do we view our church gatherings as a place to receive or as a place to give?

Before my husband and I headed for the mission field, we were loved and disciplined well by the staff and members of the church that married us and sent us out. I'll never forget one Sunday morning close to our departure. As was our usual custom when taking communion, the congregation arose and lined up to receive the bread and wine at the front of the sanctuary. Mark and I were in line, a few people behind the head pastor's wife. I watched her get out of line, take a few steps to the left, and bend down on one knee to scrape gum off the floor. Rather than ignore the mess or assume a janitor would tend to it later, she humbled herself and served the whole church family by instantly taking on this dirty

job. That example inspired me as I left to share Christ overseas—and it continues to remind me now that I am not too good to empty myself out. As I follow Jesus, I am not above serving in any capacity—whatever it takes to create an atmosphere of welcome.

Humble Yourself unto Death

I know, things just got real. I realize the heading above this paragraph is startling and unsettling. *Unto death*? Well, yes. Jesus really did say, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). As we progress through Philippians 2, we see that Jesus not only refused to take advantage of his status as God, and not only became a servant in human likeness, but he also “humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!” (v 8).

Our Savior stopped at *nothing* to welcome us in.

Jesus’ welcome is one of moving toward the outsider. He laid himself down. He cast aside his status and poured himself out. He gave everything—*his very life, which ended in a violent death*—to welcome us into the family. He does not stand far off, aloof, and cold. He does not require us to clean ourselves up before coming to him. He seeks us. He left heaven and came to us. Oh, what a merciful Savior! Oh, what an unfathomably good King!

Paul tells us to “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). I don’t know what this might look like in your own life and faith family, but I do know that

Jesus asks us to follow him. We may not be required to follow him to an early grave, but we are certainly called to put to death all the pride and selfishness that lurks in our hearts. Yet he is worthy of our following. Brothers and sisters, let us have the mind of Christ. By his spirit, he lives inside us, and he will help us. Let us empty ourselves, serve others, and obey our Lord as we go to great lengths to welcome the stranger into our Christian families.

GOD WILL GIVE US HEARTS OF WELCOME

“Forsake your status”; “become a servant”; “humble yourself”. Perhaps, as you’ve read this chapter, you are weighed down by the burden of welcoming. If you’re like me, you have looked back on your welcoming ways and found that you fall short. I know I have not welcomed others to the extent that God has welcomed me.

Let’s take a deep sigh of relief and remember our God will help us. As we have seen, Jesus came down. He draws near. The Holy Spirit lives inside us and is ever ready to equip us with hearts of welcome. He does not require us to conjure them up in our own strength. When you and I joined the family of God, he said he “will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezekiel 36:26-27). And what God promises he always delivers.

When our Czech brothers and sisters welcomed us that first Sunday in Brno, they did so out of the overflow of their hearts. They were patient with us because Jesus had been patient with them and his spirit lived inside them. Kenton and Jaimie have grown in their capacity for and commitment to welcoming others because the Holy Spirit in them has sanctified them, changed them, and helped them. My former pastor's wife was driven to love because she had first been loved (1 John 4:19). All of these Christ-followers were moved to follow his decrees because the Spirit in them moved them, just as the prophet Ezekiel says. And this truth applies to you and me too.

When we invite others in, it is because the Spirit in us has prompted us to do so. If you have a desire to be a welcoming follower of Jesus, praise God! That desire comes from him. Be encouraged. There is evidence of the Spirit's work in you. Cry out to him and ask him to continue to grow in you an open heart, which is bursting with hospitality and compassion and which results in open doors.

We are not left to our own devices, our own strength, or our own self-help. Jesus came down. We are his. Because he welcomed us and lives in us, we too can welcome.

ACTION STEPS

In light of Jesus' radical welcome of you and me, let us consider some ways in which we might grow in our desire and ability to warmly welcome others.

- *Imagine all that Jesus left behind when he came to rescue us and welcome us.* Remember that Jesus willingly laid aside the glory and comforts of heaven and chose to come to earth as a baby in a manger, born into an impoverished family. Remembering his great sacrifice for us spurs us to be willing to sacrifice for others too.
- *Study the many ways that Jesus poured himself out in the Gospels.* Consider reading through Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John over the next several months or whole year. Keep a notebook handy and jot down every time you read about Jesus emptying himself for the sake of others.
- *Reflect on how others have embodied a Philippians-2 attitude when welcoming you.* When have others forsaken themselves, become servants, and humbled themselves to draw you in? Consider thanking them in person, over the phone, by text, or with a handwritten note in the mail.
- *Take stock of your own spiritual status.* Have you surrendered to the Lord and received new life in Jesus, and so experienced the promise of Ezekiel 36:26-27? If God has turned your heart of stone to flesh and the Spirit now lives in you, take a minute to praise and worship him.

- *Pray for God to help you.* As Christ-followers we are not left to our own strength and devices. The Holy Spirit lives in us. Pause now and pray, asking God to help you grow in your desire and ability to warmly welcome others into your life and, if believers, into your faith family.

FREE SAMPLE