

February 5, 2012 by Steve Brandon



Jesus and Sinners

Mark 2:1-17

1. Jesus Forgives Sinners (verses 1-12)

2. Jesus Pursues Sinners (verses 13-17)

The gospel of Mark is divided into two portions. The first half of the gospel is focused upon the identity of Jesus -- who He is. The second half of the gospel is focused upon the mission of Jesus -- what He came to do.

We have seen the identity of Jesus arise in chapter 1. We saw John the Baptist come and identify Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, preparing the way for Him. We saw the Spirit descend upon Jesus, signifying the anointing of the Messiah. We heard the voice of the Father coming from heaven, identifying Jesus as God's son, "This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." We read about the preaching ministry of Jesus, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; Repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15). In a subtle sort of a way, this was a proclamation that Jesus was king. The kingdom was at hand, because the king was here. We even heard the voice of a demon identify Jesus, "I know who You are--the Holy One of God!" (Mark 1:24). All of these voices begin to show us who Jesus is.

Last week, as we finished Mark, chapter 1, we saw that the ministry of Jesus was taking off in the city of Capernaum. In the morning, He cast the demon out of the man in the synagogue (Mark 1:25-26). In the afternoon, He healed Peter's mother-in-law of a fever (Mark 1:31). And that evening, the entire city of Capernaum was at Peter's house, seeking healing (Mark 1:32-34). His ministry was so successful that "Jesus could no longer publicly enter a city" (Mark 1:45). Rather, Jesus "stayed out in unpopulated areas" (Mark 1:45). But, people found him. "They were coming to Him from everywhere" (Mark 1:45).

As we begin our exposition of Mark, chapter 2, we find Jesus back in Capernaum. We find Jesus continuing His popular ministry. But, it won't last long. Look at chapter 3, verse 6, "The Pharisees went out and immediately began conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him." Jesus is provoking these religious leaders to the point that they want to kill Him! This morning, in our exposition, we will see the tide beginning to change against Jesus. Let's pick up our story in verse 1 of chapter 2.

Mark 2:1-2

When He had come back to Capernaum several days afterward, it was heard that He was at home. And many were gathered together, so that there was no longer room, not even near the door; and He was speaking the word to them.

As I said earlier, we see Jesus, back in Capernaum. Verse 1 tells us that Jesus was "at home." We can only figure that they were at the home of Peter, where they had been before. Jesus was from Nazareth, not from Capernaum. He didn't have a house in Capernaum, but Peter did.

As we might expect, the presence of Jesus caused an uproar in the city. We see that "many were gathered together" at the home (verses 1-2). In fact, look at how verse 2 describes the situation, "there was no longer room, not even near the door;". Picture with me a jam-packed house. Wall-to-wall people. And they were all listening to Jesus, who "was speaking the word to them" (verse 2). Again, like much of Mark already, we don't know what Jesus was saying to those in the crowded house. But, we do know enough that the people were longing to hear Him. They were crowded in to see Him.

In verse 3, we come across 5 men who wanted to see Jesus.

Mark 2:3-4

And they *came, bringing to Him a paralytic, carried by four men. Being unable to get to Him because of the crowd, they removed the roof above Him; and when they had dug an opening, they let down the pallet on which the paralytic was lying.

Again, try to picture the scene with outside the home. These four guys are bringing this paralytic. He is being carried, because he cannot walk. Each of his friends are carrying one corner of the mat. Obviously, they want to see Jesus, because all of them believe that Jesus can heal their friend. He had healed many others. Why not their friend? But, upon coming close to the door, they discovered that they couldn't get to Jesus. One person might be able to squirm his way into the home through a bunch of people, but not four men carrying a fifth. But, they were determined.

So, they went up to the roof. In those days, it was customary to have a set of outside staircases that led to the flat roof, a place of rest and quiet. So, up they went. One commentator described this roof as "probably formed by beams and rafters across which matting, branches and twigs, covered by earth trodden hard, were laid." [\[1\]](#) And they began digging through the roof.

So, again, picture the scene below. Jesus is teaching in the house, and there begins some stirring in the ceiling. Pretty soon, some clumps of

dirt begin to fall upon those who were listening. Soon, they see a hand begin to reach through the roof. And the men above keep digging, until there's a hole that's large enough to let a man down through the hole in the rafters. I'm guessing a hole something like 4 feet by 2 feet. And the paralytic gets set down in front of everyone.

This isn't the sort of commotion that you can ignore. I know that when I'm preaching, there are often disturbances during my speaking. A baby cries; a clipboard drops; a cell phone goes off; perhaps a child comes to the front to get another set of notes; someone gets up and leaves the auditorium to visit the restroom. When these sorts of things happen, I do my best to ignore them, and not bring attention to them. That's for my benefit and for your benefit, especially if you are the one who gets up in the middle of my message.

But, you couldn't ignore this interruption. In fact, from the first clump of ceiling that fell until the paralytic was lowered down through the ceiling, all eyes were on the digging process. So, what's Jesus going to do? In verse 5, we see what Jesus does.

Mark 2:5

And Jesus seeing their faith *said to the paralytic, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

These aren't accidental words. They are very calculated. As they were digging through the ceiling, Jesus was surely thinking about His response. As they were digging, Jesus was surely observing these men very carefully. He was watching the way that they were digging. He was listening to what they were saying. And the first words out of His mouth were these: "Son, your sins are forgiven."

We read in verse 5 why Jesus said this: "seeing their faith said to the paralytic, 'Son, your sins are forgiven.'" We don't know what the paralytic's friends said from above. We don't know what sort of discussion they were having as they were digging. But, obviously, their faith was clear for Jesus to see. Their faith was obvious for all to see. They all believed that Jesus could heal their friend. Why else would they dig a hole in the roof, unless they wanted to place him in front of Jesus so that the paralytic might be healed?

Whenever people put forth signs of faith, Jesus responds. This is simply the way that He works. In chapter 5, we'll see the woman, who simply wanted to touch Jesus' garments, believing that the touch will make her well. To her, Jesus says, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace and be healed of your affliction" (Mark 5:34). In chapter 7, we'll see the Syrophenician woman, who kept seeking Jesus to heal her daughter. Even when Jesus initially refused her, in faith she continued to beg Him to heal her daughter. Because of her faith, Jesus healed her daughter (Mark 7:24).

And, when there is no faith, Jesus will not heal. This is what happened when Jesus returned to His hometown of Nazareth. When He was there, the people didn't believe. And Mark 6:5-6 says, "He could do no miracle there except that He laid His hands on a few sick people and healed them. And He wondered at their unbelief." God's work is always linked with our faith.

In this case, Jesus saw the faith of paralytic and the faith of his friends, and said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." And with these words, Jesus set off a firestorm. Look at verse 6, ...

Mark 2:6-7

But some of the scribes were sitting there and reasoning in their hearts, "Why does this man speak that way? He is blaspheming; who can forgive sins but God alone?"

It is interesting here that the scribes had their theology exactly right. No one can forgive sins, but God alone. "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (Ps. 130:3). In other words, it doesn't matter what men or women may do or say regarding the forgiveness of sins. It's only the Lord who can forgive. If God marks iniquities, none of us can stand. Even if a priest says, "You are forgiven"; even if a high-priest says, "You are forgiven"; even if the offending party says, "You are forgiven", all is for naught if God doesn't forgive sins. "But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared" (Psalm 130:4). No one can forgive sins, but God alone. Isaiah 43:25 tells us, "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions." Daniel 9:9 says, "To the Lord our God belong compassion and forgiveness."

They got their theology right. But, they got their conclusion wrong. They said, "He is blaspheming." And indeed, if Jesus were a mere man, like you or me, He would have been blaspheming. Ah, but this is the rub. Jesus isn't mere man, like you or me. He is the God-man. He is God, come into the flesh. Therefore, His words were not blasphemy. And that's what the rest of this story is about. The rest of the story puts forth who Jesus is, and that He has the authority on earth to forgive sins. Look at verse 8, ...

Mark 2:8

Immediately Jesus, aware in His spirit that they were reasoning that way within themselves, *said to them, "Why are you reasoning about these things in your hearts?"

If you look closely again at verses 6 and 7, you will find that they didn't outwardly verbalize that concerns. They were merely "reasoning in their hearts." But Jesus, knowing their hearts (and able to read their faces), knew full well what they were reasoning. And so, Jesus sets everything up to demonstrate that He, indeed, has the authority to forgive sins. In fact, this is my first point this morning, ...

1. Jesus Forgives Sinners (verses 1-12)

Jesus answers the question of their hearts with His own question....

Mark 2:9

Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven'; or to say, 'Get up, and pick up your pallet and walk'?

Now, it's not a matter of difficulty of verbalization. It's a matter of difficult of verification. One can easily say, "Your sins are forgiven," and nobody will know whether you are telling the truth or not. But, if one says, "Get up, and take up your pallet and walk," well, then the authority of your words will be immediately made apparent and verified by whether the man obeys or not.

This is made all the more dramatic when you realize that the paralytic may have been well-known by many in the room, as Capernaum was a small town. It wasn't like Jesus was a traveling evangelist or con-man, who brought with him his travelling crew -- those who feign sickness in their wheelchairs only to leave the stage walking, because they were never truly confined to a wheel chair in the first place. No, it was clear that this man was a genuine cripple. Surely, a simple gaze upon the man and a quick look at his legs would tell you that he couldn't walk. All who were there knew that this man couldn't walk.

And so, Jesus does the more difficult, that He might verify that He is able to do the easier. This is his argument in verse 10, ...

Mark 2:10-12

But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins" -- He *said to the paralytic, "I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet and go home." And he got up and immediately picked up the pallet and went out in the sight of everyone, so that they were all amazed and were glorifying God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this."

Picture what this scene would look like if a movie was made of this event.

Jesus says to the paralytic, "I say to you, get up, pick up your pallet and go home" (verse 11). The background music stops. All would be silent.

The camera would pan to the facial expressions of those crammed into that little house, face after face after face of tension in the room. The camera would focus upon the paralytic, who is seated on his pallet, looking up at Jesus. The camera would focus upon Jesus, who is standing over the paralytic, looking down upon him. The camera would turn up to the hole in the ceiling to this man's four friends, who are peering through the hole in the roof.

The camera would turn back to the paralytic, who looks down at his legs. The camera moves from his head to his legs, which begin to twitch and quiver. Pretty soon, like a newborn colt, he would stand up, with wobbly legs -- Jesus, standing right beside him, not helping him stand in the least. And then, once gaining his footing, he would step off of his pallet which carried him to the house and down through the ceiling. He would bend down and pick up the pallet, place it underneath his arms, and begin to work his way through the crowd.

Finally, he would reach the door, which, at one time, he couldn't enter. But now, he can exit, as the crowds shift to let him pass by. Once gone, the camera would turn its attention upon the people, who would initially be in shock.

Then the silence would be broken. And then, chaos would erupt, with each of them giving praise to God. Saying things like, "Hallelujah!" "What power this man has!" "This is amazing!" "We have never seen anything like this." "Can this man really forgive sins?" "Is this the Messiah?" Perhaps, spontaneous singing might ensue, singing the old Jewish hymns of praise.

"In the presence of Your people,
I will bless Your name.
For, alone you are Holy,
Enthroned on the praises of Israel.
Li, li, li, ..."

And then, the camera would be outside in the darkness of the night. With the singing of the house faintly in the background, the camera would focus upon the man who was healed, walking briskly in the dark with his four friends, laughing in joy as they made their way home. And fade out.

Such is the joy of this text. Jesus Forgives Sinners (verses 1-12). And He proved it by healing the paralytic. And all were amazed and giving praise to God (verse 12).

However, I would suspect that not all in the house were so joyful. I would suspect that the scribes still had a scowl upon their faces in that house surrounded by such joy. I say this, because we saw their resistance in verses 6 and 7. It is the whole trajectory of the text in verse 6. See, it wasn't the people who were grumbling in their hearts when Jesus told the man that he was forgiven. It was the religious leaders who were grumbling. These are the same ones who will find fault with Jesus eating with sinners (2:17), the same ones who will question Jesus and His disciples for not fasting as everyone else does (2:18), the same ones who will protest at the disciples picking and eating heads of grain on the Sabbath (2:23-24), the same ones who will harden their hearts and test Jesus to see if He will heal on the Sabbath or not (3:2, 5), the same ones who will go out and "begin conspiring with the Herodians against Him, as to how they might destroy Him."

This event was just the beginning of the long conflict throughout the gospel of Mark between Jesus and the religious establishment of the day. The person of Jesus was just coming into focus. He was the Son of Man. He was the Messiah who had power to heal, who had power to forgive sins. And the scribes and Pharisees and religious elite of the day hated Jesus because of it, which we will see develop in the next few stories.

But, before we move on, let me ask you. The text teaches us that Jesus Forgives Sinners (verses 1-12) Do you find this to be good news?

As we read before, Psalm 130:3 says, "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" None of us would stand. We would be crushed by the holiness of God. Isaiah says, beholding the holiness of God, "Woe is me" (Is. 6:5). But, there is forgiveness with God! Psalm 130:4 tells us, "But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared."

The whole point of the text is in verse 10, "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins...". "So that you may know." This is a foreshadowing of who Jesus -- the Son of Man -- is. On earth, His forgiveness is something tangible, something real. "Forgiveness is no longer something far away, but something to be accepted here on earth." [\[2\]](#)

Forgiveness is real. Jesus forgives sin! This is good news. Believe it! By grace through faith, Jesus forgives us "all our transgressions" (Col 2:13).

Well, let's move to my second point this morning. First was: Jesus Forgives Sinners (verses 1-12). And now, ...
2. Jesus Pursues Sinners (verses 13-17)

Let's pick it up in verse 13, ...

Mark 2:13

And He went out again by the seashore; and all the people were coming to Him, and He was teaching them.

Here, we see a simple change in geography. He left the city of Capernaum, and went to the seashore. Now, if you remember from last week, Capernaum was along the sea. So, Jesus merely walked a few hundred yards to the sea, where he was continuing to teach the people. Throughout the gospel of Mark, we constantly find Jesus doing just this. [\[3\]](#) But, as Jesus was on His way out of the city, He passed by a tax booth. Verse 14 tells us what happened.

Mark 2:14

As He passed by, He saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting in the tax booth, and He *said to him, "Follow Me!" And he got up and followed Him.

Here, we have some echoes from chapter 1, when Jesus called Peter and Andrew and James and John. They were fisherman. Levi the son of Alphaeus, was a tax collector. Peter, Andrew, James and John were doing their business. And so was Levi.

In Jesus day, a fisherman was a noble profession. It was a blue-collar profession, entailing much labor. But, it was a very accepted profession in Israel in those days. They provided much fish for the people to eat. A tax-collector, on the other hand, was much different. Rather than working outside upon the sea, the tax collector worked inside in an office, a white-collar profession, if you will. Rather than being an accepted profession in Israel, it was a despised profession in those days.

The reason is simple. A tax-collector was, in some measure, a traitor to Israel. They worked closely with the Roman authorities. They worked to collect taxes from the Jewish people to give to the Romans, to support their oppressive government. The Jews hated the Romans, because they had dominion over them.

The profession worked like this. The tax-collectors would bid for the rights to collect taxes in a given region from the Jewish people. For instance, Levi was a tax-collector in Capernaum. Suppose there were 1,000 people in the city, some 200 homes. They might calculate that they could collect an average of 10 denarii from each family. Thus, they might bid something like 2,000 denarii for the rights to collect taxes in the city of Capernaum. Then, having the bid accepted, the tax collectors would owe the Roman government 2,000 denarii. The tax-collector was then given freedom to demand any sort of tax from the people that they wanted. Anything above that amount that they collected would go straight into their own coffers. Which meant that the tax-collectors were often rich people, who derived their wealth at the expense of the Jewish people.

You also have to realize that there were no tax-codes. Nobody knew exactly what they owed. The tax-collector was able to vary the amount, depending upon his own perception of what he thought he might be able to collect. They were essentially bullies, who demanded money from people, with the authority of the government behind them. If someone refused to pay, then the tax collector was able to bring in the army to make them pay.

We really don't have an equivalent position in our society today. Perhaps a leader of a gang might be equivalent -- one who "protects" a neighborhood by receiving a "tax" in exchange for their protection. In some measure, it's blackmail. Yet, you can't refuse to pay the tax or the gang will come and inflict harm upon you.

Such is the sort of person that Jesus called to be His disciple. Levi was known far and wide as a "sinner." This is my point, Jesus Pursues Sinners (verses 13-17) Jesus pursues notorious sinners, like Levi. Notice that Jesus didn't wait for Levi to come to Him and ask permission to follow Him. No, Jesus went after Levi and called him to "Follow Me." And, like the four previous disciples, we see Levi following Christ immediately. "Jesus said to him, 'Follow Me!' And he got up and followed Him" (verse 14).

In a very real way, this is the reality in our lives. Jesus pursues us. Believers in Christ were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). God pursues us in His love and opens our eyes to the glories of the gospel and changes our heart to believe.

The pursuit of sinners continued on. Look at verse 15, ...

Mark 2:15

And it *happened that He was reclining at the table in his house, and many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him.

A good question to ask at this point is this: whose house did Jesus go to? Verse 15 gives the clue, "He was reclining at the table in his house." The "his" refers back to Levi. Levi begins to follow Jesus. Jesus Levi invites to come to his house and dine with him. Jesus says, "Sure, I'll come." And who was there? "Many tax collectors and sinners" (verse 15). Where did these people come from? They came from Levi. I believe that they were all of Levi's friends.

See, when someone is saved from a sinful background, they have many sinful friends. The only people that were going to associate with a tax-collector would be other tax-collectors and other sinners. But, Jesus saw the opportunity to bring His message to many, who naturally wouldn't be inclined to hear it.

I have heard this called, "A Levi Party." When someone is converted to Christ, he (or she), then, begins to invite their old friends to meet their new friends, and opportunities for the gospel abound. But, pretty soon there's a natural divide between the followers of Christ and the followers of the world. Followers of Christ are different than followers of the world. They have different mindsets. They have different values. They have different lifestyles. They have different goals in life. But not at first.

When someone converts to Christ, there is often an opportunity early on to have "a Levi Party." And Jesus saw this opportunity. He knew that His days with Levi's friends would soon close. And so, He came to the party that Levi threw. By God's grace, the efforts of Jesus were successful. Look again at verse 15, "Many tax collectors and sinners were dining with Jesus and His disciples; for there were many of them, and they were following Him."

Note that Jesus didn't go and engage with their sin. No, Jesus went and called the unrighteous to repentance. And He was receiving a good hearing. Jesus was telling them that, "The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14-15). And they were repenting and believing.

This is totally different than what the religious elite of Jesus' day would have done. In fact, we see their reaction in verse 16, ...

Mark 2:16

When the scribes of the Pharisees saw that He was eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they said to His disciples, "Why is He eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners?"

The Pharisees and religious elite of the day would never associate with such a crowd as this. This is typical of religious and "righteous" people today. They know the ways of God -- that He is righteous and holy. They know that they are to keep themselves from the world and its influences. 1 John 2:15 tells us, "Do not love the world, nor the things in the world." And so, religious people will not only refuse to associate with the "sinners" of this world, but will also look down upon those who do. This is our danger.

With the Pharisees' comments, we see the mounting hatred toward Jesus, which is only going to build until we reach chapter 3, verse 6. Next week, we'll see more of the same, as the "righteous" complain to Jesus for all of the ways in which His practices aren't "orthodox." How quick the "righteous" are to complain at the practices of others, that don't quite live up to their standard! But, Jesus puts it all in perspective in verse 17, ...

Mark 2:17

And hearing this, Jesus *said to them, "It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners."

This places the focus of Jesus' ministry dead center. William Barclay said it well, "The one person for whom Jesus can do nothing is the person who thinks himself so good that he does not need anything done for him; And the one person for whom Jesus can do everything is the person who is a sinner and knows it and who longs in his heart for a cure." [\[4\]](#)

That's why Jesus Pursues Sinners (verses 13-17) They are the ones who need his healing touch. They are often the ones who know that they need a healing touch. And so, we see Jesus pursuing Levi (verse 14) and his friends (verse 15).

Now, what about you? Do you pursue sinners? When you see those who have little to no religious values, do you have a heart for them like Jesus did? Or, do you view them with contempt like the Pharisees did?

I recently read a great article about having a heart for the lost, written by Tim Challies. It's a bit long, but it helps to bring this message down to our own hearts, bringing application into our lives.

The Enemy Next Door.

I grew up in a Christian culture in which very little evangelism took place. How little? The first believer's baptism I ever witnessed was my wife (she was my girlfriend at the time) and that was when we were eighteen or nineteen. It was the first time our church had ever baptized an adult. And what's more, it was the first time most of the people who attended that

church had ever seen an adult get baptized.

A few years after my wife's baptism we moved away from the town we had grown up in so we could be closer to my place of business. In the past decade we have been members of two different churches that place much greater emphasis on reaching the lost. We have seen many, many people come to faith, including several who are now close friends. We have seen lives altered dramatically and have seen more baptisms than we can count—baptisms in churches, rivers, pools, and a really big, ugly aluminum tank. We have shared in the joy of seeing people profess their faith by being baptized. It truly is one of the greatest joys of any church.

Over the years I've had to reflect on what made the churches I attended as a child and teenager so ineffective at evangelism. While there are several reasons I could provide, and they are of varying importance, there is one that I believe stands at the foundation of the rest: These churches often regarded the unbeliever as the enemy. Of course the church would never have articulated that belief, but it seemed to be deeply rooted.

This attitude manifested itself in many ways. One of the clearest ways was among the children of church members. They would rarely, if ever, be allowed or encouraged to play or even interact with the unsaved children in the neighborhood. I knew an "urban missionary" whose children were confined to their backyard and were forbidden from playing with the other children. The church children were not allowed to play with other children lest they become corrupted by their worldliness.

My observation was that this approach failed and failed badly. First, the church was not faithful in its calling to take the gospel throughout the world. They preferred to exist in an enclave, safe from outside influences. Second, and ironically, the children developed a fascination with the world. I believe this was, in large part, because access to the outside world had been denied to them and they had never seen the pain and heartbreak that are the inevitable results of forsaking God. The world can look awfully attractive until a person sees the results of giving himself over to it. Third, the parents were prone to ignoring worldliness in their own children. I know that I saw more drugs, more drinking, more disrespect and more awful behavior in the Christian schools I attended than I did in the public schools. This isolation simply did not work. What I saw was that we do not need the world to teach us worldliness. Worldliness arises from within.

The attitude that was modeled by my parents was far different. They took the opposite approach and we, their children, were always encouraged to make friends with the children in the neighborhoods we lived in. We saw many children and parents come to faith in this way. Many others may not have become believers, but they received a clear presentation of the gospel so that they are now without excuse before God. And regardless of whether or not these people came to faith, we gained many good and valuable friendships. Mom and dad did not do this because they regarded the folks in the neighborhood as a project, but out of a genuine love, concern and appreciation for these people. The person next door was not an enemy, but a person who was just as unsaved as my parents were not too many years before. The person next door was someone in desperate need of a Savior, and they intended to give everyone the opportunity to meet the Savior through them.

My parents were not afraid. They did not hide us away from the world. They allowed us to see sin and to see the effects of sin. They allowed sin's mystique to be destroyed, they allowed us to see unbelievers acting like unbelievers. When we saw difficult things or shocking things they taught us that the wages of sin is death. We saw this, not in the abstract but in reality.

Sometimes worlds clashed. There were a couple of times when my sisters brought friends to church, friends who were unsaved but were showing interest in the gospel, only to have them mocked or scorned. One little girl was scolded and had her ear "flicked" by the woman in the pew behind her because she was not able to sit still throughout the service. A friend my sister brought to church was openly mocked by the children in the church because he had dyed-blond hair and an earring. He never returned, and as far as I know, never expressed any openness to the gospel after that time.

I truly believe, after many years of reflection, that the heart of the problem in these churches was in their attitude towards the unbeliever. The person next door was the enemy; he was a person to be feared for what he might do to the family, and the children in particular; he was someone to be regarded with distrust and suspicion rather than with love and sympathy.

The irony is that when we protect ourselves from this enemy, we are prone to take our eyes off the real enemy; we allow him to slip by, unnoticed. We are not waging war "against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). The real enemy is not next door. The real enemy is our own sinfulness and the worldliness that continues to try to manifest itself in our lives. The real enemy is spiritual, not physical. The real enemy, the most dangerous enemy, is within.

[\[5\]](#)

God is doing wonderful things here at Rock Valley Bible Church. There is much here for us to enjoy. But, how easily may we become like the Pharisees, despising sinners. May we instead keep the gospel central, and remember that we ourselves are sinners, saved by the grace of God.

How about in your own neighborhood where you live? Do you know your neighbors? I'm not talking about sacrificing the safety of your kids for the sake of evangelism. No, I am asking whether or not you are willing to let your kids go out into the world where, yes, there are some bad influences. But, are you willing to let them shine the light of the gospel to those who need to see it?

I know in our own experience, we do not have a lot of kids in our neighborhood. But, I do specifically recall a few kids, four or five years ago,

who would come to our house to play on our back yard play set. Now, we had a rule that they could not play on the play set without my children playing with them, so we would encourage our older children to play with them. We realized that these kids needed Jesus, and we pushed our kids to step out of their comfort zone to play with them. Did it hurt our kids? I don't think so.

Our kids naturally did not want to be with the neighborhood kids. My wife and I recognized that our children were sort of fostering this pharisaical attitude. We did not want that to happen, so we had to continue to push them to play with those in our neighborhood that were far from God. Don't foster in your kids a pharisaical attitude. Don't let yourself foster that kind of attitude with others.

It's easy for us to say, "Oh! I would never be like that! I would be like Jesus!" Well, in these situations, be like Jesus! Love your neighbors. Pursue your neighbors. For the sake of the gospel, go after them.

When you look out on our neighborhood here at church, do you view them as enemies? Do you have a heart to see them saved? Will you love them? What happens when they come to church? What happens when they are rough around the edges? Will you love them for the gospel's sake?

Jesus said, "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?" (Matt. 5:46). I encourage you to love those who are different from you, those who may be excluded from the "religious circles." Serve them. Seek to bring them into the fold. Let's love people for the sake of the gospel, and trust that God will transform them into the image of His Son, where we are seeking to grow as well.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on February 5, 2012 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge Greek Testament Commentaries), p. 97, quoting Taylor.

[2] Cranfield, p. 101.

[3] Mark 1:45; 2:13; 3:7, 13; 4:1; 5:21, ...

[4] William Barclay, commentary on Mark, p. 57

[5] <http://www.challies.com/christian-living/the-enemy-next-door>