Jesus Eats With the Non-Religious
Mark 2:13-17
Bellevue Baptist Church
March 22, 2025

Today we begin a three-week series from the Gospel of Mark, if you will open to Mark 2:13.

As you turn there, I have three quick announcements to share:

- Three services: 8, 9:30, 11. No photo booth this year because we are doing 3.
- Pick up your Easter crosses. You can pick up your Easter cross outside at any one of the main entrances to our building. Grab one and display it in your yard as we look towards Easter Sunday.
- Pick up your Easter invite bags. You can also pick up some Neighbor Invite bags in our east and west lobbies and in mission central. Take as many as you would like and use this to get to know your neighbors better and invite them to join you for Family worship next week or to one of our Easter services.

The title of my message today: Jesus Eats with the Non-Religious.

Did you know, that according to the Bible, two things on Earth will go beyond the grave: the words of God and the souls of people. The words of God, the souls of people.

Said another way: You will never see a U-haul behind a hearse.
Can you imagine that scene? What if you were standing on the street corner, and yours took this in?

No, according to the Bible, there are just two things on Earth that go with us beyond the grave–the word of God is forever. So is the soul of the human being.

Psalm 49:16 declares:

Do not be in awe when others grow rich,
when the splendor of their houses increase;
17 for they will take nothing with them when they die… Psalm 49:16-17

Over and over again, the Bible reminds us of the brevity of life, and the importance of spreading the good news to all that will hear, before they breathe their last breath.

In 2013, God called our family to uproot and move 1000 miles west, to the city of Denver, Colorado, to plant a new church in a place that desperately needed new churches. We settled in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. A missions magazine ran a little story about our family–

describing the call we felt to resign a great church in Jackson, TN, to start a new work in a brand new place.

Upon arrival, it didn't take us long to realize that the subject of Christianity was taboo–that those two things: the Word of God and the souls of people were a wonderful way to kill a conversation. Just bring up Jesus at dinner, and you'd think that a man just found a hair in his biscuit.

Colorado had become a place where people had fled to get free of legalistic, rule-keeping religions. In Colorado, they felt like they could live as they please Monday-Friday, hike whatever ever trail, or ski whatever slope they fancied on the weekend–no more need for church or discussion on where you went to church.

Yet, in spite of all this, the little church we planted began to grow. Slow at first, but steady. What began as a huddle in our home soon held Sunday services in the elementary school gym next to your house. Some of the parents were outraged that a Christian church was now associated with the school their kids attended–the lady next door went to the principal demanding we be cancelled, but we kept on, wheeling in cases full of kids toys, speakers and microphones. It as church in a box, and we did this for several years, until a Wal-Mart went out of business down the road. I'll never forget the day I bought a Wal-Mart. Later that week, our first staff meeting in the chips and beverage section, on camping chairs.

Now that we owned this big open building, it took us time to raise the money and work with architects to construct a church inside it. In the meantime, our family found a way to make it useful (go cart video). We turned Wal-mart into our own go-cart track. One day while the kids were racing, a woman walked through the front sliding doors, curious what the Wal-Mart would soon become, and she looked astonished. She said, "Is this what it's gonna be???"

I let her know that soon, this space would become a worship center for Christians who wanted to gather on Sundays. It would be a church called Storyline. And to this day, I can't get over the way that God moved in those years in our lives.

That little bible study soon filled up all the sections of Wal-Mart, a 1000 seat worship center filled with people, Colorado people who were asking questions about eternity. It was some of the hardest, but most rewarding work of our lives.

And because the church grew in such a surprising way, (show outside of the building), we started to hear from other church planters whom God had called to start up churches. These rookie planters wanted to peek at our playbook. They would say, "What was your secret? Why do you think the church was able to grow, like it did?"

My response was always the same: we found a way to make evangelism everybody's job. That's what makes all churches grow. Have something well-prepared in the pulpit, and have a room

full of people who invest in their neighbors, have them into their home, and invite them to church.
According to Barna Research, 80% of non-churchgoers will say yes to an invitation to church IF they have strong preexisting relationship with the person who invited them.

We laid down the challenge to the people of Storyline–that we were called to cultivate a culture of invitation, not isolation–that in order to be a faithful Christian, we should all be cultivating relationships with people far from God. You cannot say that you're a committed Christian while showing zero interest in reaching lost people.

With Easter approaching, the weather warming–with your neighbors soon to be out in their yards laying mulch–this is an ideal time every year for us all to feel the call to evangelism, to look inside and ask–do I love lost people like Jesus loves them?

Do I take an active interest in the people who pass me by, like Jesus did one day with a man named Levi. Let's see what we can learn here from the Master…

Mark 2:13…

> **13 Jesus went out again beside the sea. The whole crowd was coming to him, and he was teaching them. 14 Then, passing by, he saw Levi the son of Alphaeus sitting at the toll booth, and he said to him, "Follow me," and he got up and followed him.**
>
> **15 While he was reclining at the table in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who were following him. 16 When the scribes who were Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"**
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> **17 When Jesus heard this, he told them, "It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners."**

Let's do some good ol' fashioned Bible study. If we are going to make an impact on the unsaved around us, we have to follow Jesus' example.

5 Observations of This Text

- **Jesus saw Levi. (v.14)**

  Then, passing by, he saw Levi…. V.14

And then it tells us that Levi was working at a toll booth. Why is Levi's occupation listed? There's a reason. This tells us his place in society. Levi collects taxes and there were different kinds of taxes back then. Income taxes, sales taxes, and even toll taxes. Levi ran a toll booth,

that was positioned along the road. He would search people's bags and charge them fees. Toll collectors were notorious for rounding up on the rate and taking advantage of people who felt forced to pay.

We are told what Levi did for a living because Mark wants us to know that Levi was a well-hated man. Most of the Jews had written him off as a loser, but there was one Jew who had not: Jesus.

Henry David Thoreau once wrote: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." Levi was a loner, most likely. Plenty of money but few friends. He felt ostracized and ready for a change.

You never know which people around you are ready for a change. You can't tell by looking at them. But, you do have to look at them. You have to see them. Jesus saw Levi. Evangelism starts with seeing people that are right in front of you, that others have chosen to ignore.

Observation #2:

- **Levi followed Jesus. (v.14)**

Jesus said to him, "Follow me." And he got up and followed him. V. 14

Was this the conversion experience of Levi? Soonafter, he will be called Matthew, and one day he will author the book that bears his name. No doubt Levi was impacted that day at the toll booth, but is this salvation his moment of salvation? It's hard to tell.

He doesn't pray a sinner's prayer or put a fish sticker on his car. The Bible just says that Levi saw Jesus, then he "rose and followed."

This shows us the mysterious nature of salvation, how difficult it is to know when a person has officially crossed from darkness to light. Jesus would say later: The wind blows where it pleases. You hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit (Jn. 3:8)."

Whether Levi is "officially" saved in this moment or not, his life takes a sharp turn. He becomes interested in Christ.

Sometimes a person, when they join our church, will ask if they should be baptized again, though they have memory of being put down in the water as a teenager. They often say things like, "That moment didn't mean anything. I did that to please my parents. Or, I don't think that I sincerely believed.." If that is the case, I never hesitate to say that salvation is the first step of obedience for those who are truly saved. If you feel that your conversion came later, then clear your conscience by being baptized.

Other times, people would ask: "Do I really need to be baptized at all?" And I would share with them the words of Jesus: If you are ashamed of me before men on Earth, I will be ashamed of you before my Father in heaven." That always settles it. Get. In. The. Water.

Levi doesn't get baptized the moment he meets Jesus, like the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts. We don't see him getting in the water on the side of the road that day with Jesus, but he's certainly moving in the right direction because Jesus gives him a command and he follows.

Obedience is the most clear sign someone is a believer–when we truly give our lives to the Lord, we want to do what God says. Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.

Now notice what happens next. This is my favorite part:

- **Levi invites his nonreligious friends over for dinner. (v.15)**

  While he was reclining at the table in Levi's house, many tax collectors and sinners were eating with Jesus and his disciples, for there were many who were following him. V. 15

Notice: Levi is not ashamed to associate publicly with Jesus.

Putting your faith out in the open is a powerful step forward with Christ. And Levi does it. He throws a prodigal party and brings others into contact with Christ. All of this happens in his house.

And here is the advantage he has. He still has "unchurched" friends in his life! He's been surrounded for years by what we call today "secular" people. And because he has built relationships with these types of people, he is in a prime position to expose them to Jesus. He must tell them about the one who is changing him.

What is it about us Christians, that the longer we walk with Jesus, the less we are willing to speak of him?

Recently converted people seem to be the most committed evangelists. They have 1) a fire for Christ, and 2) friends that do not know him. That is a powerful combination.

Do you have fire for Christ, and friends that do not know him?

Scores of Christians start as fishers of men, but soon become keepers of the aquarium. They decide to "go pro" at church. Without knowing it, Christians morph into Pharisees. The word Pharisee means "separated ones." That's what we do: we become "separated ones." Listen to the words of Kent Hughes:

> **None of us Christians espouse Pharisaical beliefs. In fact, we loathe them. But many of us live them out nevertheless. We come to Christ, and in our desire to be godly we**

> **seek out people "like us." Ultimately, we arrange our lives so that we are with nonbelievers as little as possible. We attend Bible studies that are 100 percent Christian, a Sunday school that is 100 percent Christian, prayer meetings that are 100 percent Christian. We play tennis with Christians and eat dinner with Christians. We have Christian doctors, Christian dentists, Christian plumbers, Christian veterinarians, and even our dogs are Christian. The result is, we pass by hundreds without ever seeing them or positively influencing them for Christ. None of us are Pharisees philosophically, but we may be practically. – R. Kent Hughes, *Mark***

Are you a Pharisee, practically? Levi still hangs out with nonreligious people. He had 1) a fire for Christ, and 2) friends that did not know him, and 3) a strategy for inviting them for dinner.

Simple question: when's the last time you had unbelievers over for dinner?

Observation #4:

- **Jesus is judged for eating with "sinners." (v.16)**

  When the scribes who were Pharisees saw that he was eating with sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples, "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" v.16

"What's he doin' in there with those people?" the Pharisees said. They probably blasted him with Scripture.

Proverbs 13:20: "A companion of fools suffers harm." Doesn't he read the Old Testament?

Doesn't he know that we religious people create sub-cultures, and we stay inside those circles? We don't go where sinners go; we shame them for not showing up at our gatherings. The Pharisees made themselves feel superior, by separating from sinners. Jesus went after them.

It was the great missionary, C.T. Studd, that said:

Some want to live within the sound
Of church or chapel bell;
I want to run a rescue shop
Within a yard of hell. –C.T. Studd

Jesus hangs out with atheists and agnostics. He defies tradition.

Why does he do this? Is he trying to tick off his haters? Is he just trying to make them mad, like the guy in the Bible Belt that mows his grass on Sunday morning, just to make the Christians mad as they drive off to church? Is that what Jesus is doing–attempting to get a rise out of his opponents?

I don't think so. I think Jesus enjoyed being with people who were far from God–people who didn't think much about their need for God. Perhaps there's a simple principle for soul-winning here:

One cannot win people with whom one is not willing to eat.

You've got to start thinking beyond yourself. And beyond your comfortable relationships with believers. Jesus clearly didn't think it was the highest and best use of his time to constantly surround himself with those who had punched tickets to heaven.

#5….

- **Jesus reveals the ultimate reason He came to Earth. (v.17)**

  When Jesus heard this, he told them, "It is not those who are well who need a doctor, but those who are sick. I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners." v.17

One translation says, "I came not to call those who *think they are righteous*, but those who *know they are sinners*." The focus of Jesus' life was the far off. Call them the unbelieving, uncouth, unchurched, unsaved—whatever "un" you prefer. The Lord had his eye on people who had no felt need for religion. Do you?

Jesus declares his mission—he came to Earth to fill up heaven with sinners saved by grace./
Is the focus of Jesus' life the focus of your life?

Prior to coming to Bellevue, I served as the president of Lifeway Christian Resources–the world's largest provider of Christian products–everything from Bibles, to Bible Studies, to Vacation Bible School starter kits. I was leading one of the largest discipleship organizations on Earth, but as I've shared, those years were hard on my heart because my passion is to preach in rooms where unsaved people are likely to show up. Where a Levi might be sitting on the back row. This room–even right now–surely holds a few Levi's, individuals who explore the claims of Christ but you have not yet converted. You're a spiritual explorer, what I call a good-hearted skeptic.

When I was at Lifeway, I spent most of my days with Christians, designing Christian things for Christian people.

Now, I'll be honest. I feel most at home with Christian people. Like most people, I would not call myself a natural evangelist. I like hanging out with Christians and I like eating Christian nuggets at Chic Fil A. My family started going to church when I was in elementary school, and it was a way of life. My brothers and I knew what food to avoid at the churchwide meals—we were potluck pros. I went to a Christian college, attended a Christian seminary, earned a Christian

doctorate, I have pastored Christian churches–this is my third one. I like things "Christian" and yet, I can't get away from the thrust of Jesus' mission, which was to seek after the lost.

So how do we reach them? Step one: we've got to get to know them. Let me share

Three Things I Learned About Non-Religious People

1. **They think most of what we Christians do is weird.**

They don't understand our strange behavior. In the book, *I Once Was Lost*, the author Doug shares the story of he and a group of Christian friends who decided to be a witness at their secular university in the West. On the high-traffic lawn of the campus, they formed a circle. They held guitars and sang praise songs as their postmodern peers walked to class. What better way to witness than with bold worship? They reasoned.

But the non-religious students seemed to be turned off by it. They didn't get it. Here's what Doug writes now, looking back on that day:

> *We came up with our evangelistic strategy while we were alone in a room together with a bunch of Christians. Not once in our brainstorming did we ask where our non-Christian fellow students were coming from. Not once did we try to find out what they might need to take a step toward Jesus. --Doug Shaupp (with Don Everts), I Once Was Lost*

In that book *I Once Was Lost*, the authors share the results of surveying 2000 non-religious people who eventually became Christians. What they found was there are five main thresholds that people pass through on the way to becoming a believer. There's a series of doors that a person usually walks through before they enter the door to the kingdom.

The first door that they can recall walking through is this: they remember the day they trusted a Christian. They became close friends with a Christ-follower of Jesus, and that friend was not a weirdo to them. That person took a genuine interest in their lives.

<u>What makes you appealing to a non-religious person is not your religion. It's the relationship that you offer them. Genuine friendship is never weird.</u>

Nonchristian people think most of what we do is weird, but love is never off-putting.

The second thing I'm learning:

2. **They will listen once they feel loved.**

Whether we like it or not, unbelievers think that Christians are judgers. We are perceived as always looking down our nose at their parties, their weekend activities, their purchases.

In Denver, we became close friends with some of the non-churchgoing crowd on our street, but it took a long time to earn their trust. Some of them told us a year later, that when they heard these Southern Baptist Church Planters filling a house, they all released a collective sigh. "Great. Here come the Puritans. They are going to suck the fun right off the street."

After we had lived there for a few months, one of the neighbor ladies told Lynley: "You've passed my test. We can be friends now."

Lynley said, "I didn't know there was a test."

She said, "Yep, I decided I was going to give you six weeks to judge me. You haven't done that. We can be friends now."

Lynley appreciated her candor and the two of them became good friends.

When we launched our church, we learned that spending quality time with nonreligious people is the best way to influence them. Now…I can already hear the objection, "But hanging out with people doesn't get them into heaven! You have to confront them with the Gospel, and the Gospel is offensive."

To that I say, "The wounds of a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses." Proverbs 27:5-6

Sharing the message of Christ is essential for seeing lives changed, but friendship opens that door like nothing else. In this day and age, we often have to love people for a long time, before they will listen to Christian testimony.

Remember it is God's kindness that leads people to repentance. Romans 2:4

3. **The kids and students are more open than their parents.**

When we moved to Denver, we had about 65 people move with us, and I used to say a disclaimer, "but about half were kids." As if to say: only 30 "useful" people…the rest were just kids.

I have repented of saying such things. When kids invite kids to church, those kids invite their parents. It's a package deal. This is something you're going to here me say over and over again. For Bellevue to reach this community, we have to place a heavy emphasis on reaching kids and students. It's one of the reasons I include a question for the students in most sermons.

When we lived in Denver, one of our kids came home from school one day, and said, "Dad, what's a Mormon?" Our children were befriending other boys and girls that came from a wide range of religious backgrounds. So I decided to teach a weekly world religions class in our basement–something that soon became known in the neighborhood as "Uncle Ben's Bible

Time" and each week, I would teach on the different religions of the world, and how they compared to Christianity. To our complete surprise, the other children on the street found out about it, and soon wanted to attend also. Then, a few of their parents asked if they could sit in also. Our basement filled up and we saw the hunger that people have for God when it's presented in a loving way–especially with children.

4 out of 5 Christians say that they came to faith in Christ before the age of 14.

Children's ministry and student ministry is where the action is. Young people have a hunger for God and they share it with their parents.

I used to think that this room is the main event and we needed to keep the children occupied while the parents engaged in the real work of Christianity. Statistically speaking, it's the opposite. I'm giving you all something to do while the children's ministry is at work!

If we are going to reach our city, we have to make children and student ministry a priority.

Now as we close, I want to give you some specific ways that you can become the missionary on your street. What we have done, anybody can do. I'll put the cookies on the bottom shelf.

A Seasoned Christian Asks:
I don't want to compromise my values. How do I spend time with unbelievers without drifting?

That's the tension, isn't it? "Bad company corrupts good character." 1 Corinthians 15:33

Human beings *do* become like the people we spend time with. As the old saying goes, "Show me your friends and I'll show you your future."

If we're not careful, we can wake up one day and realize we've been shaped more by the world than we've shaped it. So yes—Scripture calls us to keep a close watch on our lives.

But here's what I've observed, both in my own heart and in the church. For most Christians the greatest danger is not overexposure. It's isolation.

We build lives where our friends are Christians, our conversations are Christian, and our environments are Christian. And without realizing it, we lose touch with the very people Jesus came to reach.

I've noticed this in myself. I can walk into a room and, almost instinctively, scan for the people I know—the ones who feel easy, familiar, safe. And before I know it, I've positioned myself in a circle where no one is stretching me outward.

But when you lay our lives beside the life of Jesus… it's hard to miss. He didn't drift toward comfort. He drifted toward need. He moved toward lepers in graveyards. He locked eyes with

tax collectors at booths. He sat down at tables where reputations were messy and conversations unpredictable.

I can't tell you what to do with this information, but I can tell you to talk to God about it. Ask the Lord how he wants you to refocus on reaching people.

A Good-hearted Skeptic Asks:
Why would Jesus want a relationship with me? I'm not exactly the "church type."

First, let me say this as plainly as I can: You *are* His type.

God designed every human being with purpose, and the Bible says He desires for *all* people to be saved. That includes every personality, every background, every story… including yours. The grace of God is not reserved for a certain kind of person. It's for *every* kind of person.

Now, when you say you're "not the church type," I understand what you mean.

You've likely seen a version of Christianity that feels like a mold: how people dress, how they talk, how they act. And somewhere along the way, you thought, *"That's not me."*

But the Bible cuts right through that idea:

Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. 1 Samuel 16:7

God has never been impressed with appearances. He doesn't care if I wear a tie today.

He's interested in something deeper. You don't become the "church type" by fitting into a culture. You become the "church type" when your heart turns toward Him. When, like Levi, you decide:*"I'm more interested in what God wants for my life…than what others expect from my life."*

Christianity is not about blending into a group. It's about responding to a Call. And Acts 17:30 says that God is calling all people everwhere to repent and to be saved.

What's holding you back?

A Student Asks:
My friends don't care about God. How do I talk about faith without losing them?

To this question, I would say just try to remember this: would you be offended if a friend shared their honest feelings about God? So, why would a true friend be offended if you shared yours?

Real friends are open to your point of view–so be careful calling someone a friend if they mock you for believing in God.

On a practical level, I would say that it's best to share your faith in a way that actually fits *you*—your personality, your voice, your story. Do it in a way that feels more like a conversation and less like a presentation.

The Bible says:

"Always be ready to give an answer… for the hope that is in you." 1 Peter 3:15

That doesn't mean forcing the conversation. It means being *ready* when the moment opens.

I think, for students, one of the easiest ways is to talk about the importance of church. And how it plays such an important role in your life. Talk about the things you're learning at church, the things you're praying about, the excitement you have for a mission trip, or an upcoming event at church.

They will become interested in what you're interested in. Just don't hide that part of your life, and the Lord always has a way of becoming a part of the conversation.