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Mark 2:1-12

“A PRACTICAL PLAN FOR BRINGING PEOPLE TO JESUS”

If we are going to “each one reach one,” in 1998, then we must come up with a practical plan for doing so.

Some of us have almost given up on taking someone else to Heaven with us, because we haven’t known how to start things rolling. We just can’t see ourselves, going door to door like a Jehovah’s Witness or like a pair of Mormons. And Maybe that is the only idea we have about how it might be done.

Well, I’ve done that sort of thing before, and sometimes with good results. However, I do not think that it is the best way for the average Christian to approach it.

In fact, when I see a couple of young men in white shirts and ties, approaching the front door, my first inclination is to hide. When I do go to the door, out of courtesy, I try to let them know—as quickly as possible—that I am not interested in talking, nor in buying one of their magazines.

You are probably the same way. Nor do I imagine that you like phone solicitors, any more than I do.

Besides, with gated communities and apartment buildings with electronic locks, it is harder and harder to even get up to some people’s doors to do “house to house” evangelism.

Certainly, there must be a more practical plan for bringing people to Jesus.

And I am particularly interested in this, now that I am no longer going to be the pastor of a church, where many visitors come each week and where I have an entrée to visit in their homes. I’m going to have to learn, myself, how to begin cultivating for folks for Christ, cold turkey!

Well I believe that I have good news for all of us. From this story, which we have just read, I have picked up on “A Practical Plan for Bringing People to Jesus.”

Look at verse 3. Four people brought their “friend” to Jesus. They were practicing “Friendship Evangelism.”

It is a lot easier, as well as being more practical, to bring a friend to Jesus than it is to go out, knocking on doors. If each of us could bring a friend to Jesus this year, just imagine how many people we could reach for the Kingdom of God and save from going to Hell.

I see this happening quite often, when people are first saved. They have so many other friends, who need Jesus. And one by one, they start to bring them to church, so that they can hear the good news that Jesus has a new a better life for them... a life which will not have to end at the grave.

I always try to help in this, by visiting these folks and trying to explain how easy it is to come to Jesus.

But I notice that, after a year or two, most of these people—who get saved—begin to center their social lives on the church and their Christian family. A lot of them don’t have many intimate friends, who are not Christians, any more.

Now this is quite natural. We have so much more in common with people, who share our faith and values.

But what about all of those people out there, who need a friend to bring them to Jesus? What if the four men, in the story, had been satisfied to simply enjoy one another’s company and had kept at arm’s length from the poor paralytic, who needed Jesus so much?

Why, there are people all around us, who are paralyzed in a lot worse ways than someone who cannot use his legs. Some are paralyzed by sin... where they can’t seem to live a normal and satisfying life. Some are paralyzed by grief, not knowing how they are going to continue on, in their loss. Some are paralyzed by bitterness, unable to move forward in their lives, because of something terrible, which has happened to them in the past.

Listen; there are paralyzed people all around us. And they need some friend to bring them to Jesus, if they are ever going to be made better.

But the truth is that we are never going to bring them to Jesus, unless we make friends with them and win their trust, enough for them to confide in us about their deepest needs. Only then can we really share Jesus with a ready audience.

So we need to make some friends who aren’t already Christians, and spend enough time with them to build a relationship of mutual trust. Then, one day, we can bring them to Jesus.

This, to me, is **“a practical plan for bringing people to Jesus.”** Let me try to **spell it out**...

I. **Try to MAKE FRIENDS With Some Neighbors or Associates, Who Are Not Already Christians.**

Pray for God to give you guidance and to set up some “divine appointments” for you. Speak to these people. Show an interest in what they do? Ask questions about their family and their work.

See if they would like to play a round of golf, some day. Invite them over to your house for a cook-out. Offer them a life, to watch the kids play soccer.

God’s Word is emphatic about this: “He, who would have friends, must show himself friendly.” To make a friend, whom we can hope to someday bring to Jesus, we must show ourselves to be friendly to some folks, who don’t already know Jesus.

I’ll be honest with you. I don’t get to know my neighbors very well. I’m rarely home, except to eat and sleep. I’m always working with the people of God, or out trying to win someone who have come to church, seeking to know God.

And I’m not ashamed of that. That is my first priority. However, it would be a shame if I won hundreds to Christ, but my own next door neighbors would end up in Hell for all of eternity.

When we lived in Maryland, this really started to get to me. So Gean and I began to pray for an opening, to cultivate our neighbors for Christ. And we began to reach out to them.

On the one side were a man and wife, who were scientists at the Smithsonian institute, downtown in Washington. I tried to think of something nice that I could do, in order to reach out to them.

Their house was new and their back lot was overgrown with weeds—a real mess. I thought that I might mow down their weeds, to show friendliness.

Boy, when they got home, they reamed me out. They had apparently spotted some exotic ferns, out there (I don’t know how they ever saw them, with all the weeds), and they had been planning to pull out each kind of weed, systematically and scientifically, while leaving all those special plants to become a ground cover. Now I had mowed them all down. Ouch!

Well, lesson number 1: YOU CAN’T WIN THEM ALL!!

Thank God, the neighbors on the other side responded more warmly to our overtures of friendship. We would talk over the fence—in our case, over the drainage ditch. Their kids played with our kids, and they spent a lot of time at our house.

I went along with him to the hospital, one time, while she had a biopsy performed. When we found out that it was benign, I offered to pray and give God thanks. He cut me off quickly with “I don’t believe in God.”

Oops! “Well, shut my mouth!” I thought I was about to strike out again.

But apparently not. We continued to be friends and our mutual trust was increasing.

All the time, we were praying for some divine appointment... a way to bring them to Jesus. But we did not want to rush it and run them off.

Finally, that opportunity came. A major tragedy happened at his work. It was so serious it even threatened their marriage.

He came to me to talk, as only a trusted friend could talk to another. She had come to talk to Gean, unknown to me. And on that day, we both had the joy of bringing each of them to Jesus. We each helped one of them to invite Jesus into their lives and to accept His gift of salvation and to enter into that realm, called Grace (the undeserved favor of God).

And what followed was more than I could have expected, in my wildest dreams. They began to come to church. They drank in everything, which they could learn, and began to put it into practice. Their marriage became stronger than ever, and God helped him find a new and better job.

One day he about floored me with the news that he had been called to the ministry. On the next day, he received a letter from Uncle Sam, explaining that his G.I. bill had been extended and that he could now further his education at the government's expense. There was his financing for college.

We watched them go on to pastor a church. Their boys are actively serving the Lord. One of them spent a couple of years here in Ft. Myers and was at McGregor, as a strong leader in our youth and singles.

But it all started, because we made up our minds that we must make some friends who weren't already Christians!

I have a friend, in England, who studied for the Baptist ministry. However, God called him to work with the labor unions and their leaders.

Now I don't even like labor unions. My dad hated them. At the very mention of John L. Lewis or Walter Reuther, I was taught to hiss!

How could this guy work with the labor movement? Why so many of them—in Europe, particularly—had been shot through with Communist agitators.

He looked at me and said: "Jim, how are you going to win them, if you don't first make friends with them?" And he began to tell me stories of men, whom he had brought to Christ. And once they came to Christ, they gave up the Communism and began to cooperate more with the management of their companies. He told me of industrial disputes, which had been settled when the leaders of labor and management got their hearts right with God.

And it was wonderful. He never compromised his own convictions. He never was called upon to go along with what he believed to be wrong.

But he made his point with me: “How are you ever going to win them, if you don’t first make friends with them?” and I saw that God needs a lot of us who are out there making friends with people who are not already in a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

We have a whole row down in front, which is occupied every Sunday by one of our couples and the friends, whom they have brought to Jesus. They met them, while country line dancing. How about that?

I never thought that I’d hear myself saying this; but if that’s what it take to reach out and make some friends, whom you can bring to Jesus, try some line dancing.

Now I’m not advocating anything which might weaken your influence. I’m certainly not telling you to start drinking or partying. But I am encouraging you to make some friends, who aren’t already Christians and in church.

We cannot “insulate” ourselves completely from folks, who don’t know Jesus. We’ve got to make some friendships with them.

Then maybe one day, we can fill a pew with folks, whom we have brought to Jesus, through “friendship evangelism.”

II. **CULTIVATE THEIR FRIENDSHIP** over a long range.

Don’t be in too big a hurry, and don’t push them toward Jesus too soon nor too strongly. Try to appreciate their good qualities. Be available and ready to talk about things. You are certainly not ready to “talk religion” all of the time, yet.

Again, you don’t have to compromise your own values. Certainly, you don’t want to. And you don’t have to be ashamed to talk freely about your church or your faith.

But, at first, let them bring it up. Let them ask the questions about religion.

Keep your eyes on the long-range goal, and give time for things to simmer. If you don’t, I’m afraid that they may never open up to you.

Eventually, you may feel confident to invite them to the Christmas pageant or to some special event, at church. By then, they will not feel as threatened to go into a strange place, because they can come as your friends. You will have built a relationship, where they will feel safe.

Now that may seem like a long time, when the Lord could return at any moment. I know that. But I also know that you cannot rush it too quickly, when it comes to cultivating a friend.

Usually, they will have to trust you pretty well, if they are going to open up and share with you what it is, which is paralyzing them in their lives. And until they do open up, we really don’t have that much opportunity to bring them to Jesus for His cure.

Now don't get me wrong. I am going to continue to encourage you to go, with me, into the highways and byways and to go after those, who have already shown an interest in spiritual things. This must never stop.

But all the while, we must each be cultivating friendships for the future, with people who don't know Christ nor even know that they need Him.

And do some fun things with them. Let them know that Christians are not a bunch of kill-joys and stuffed-shirts. We can have even more fun, when we know that things are right with our Creator. "in his presence there is fullness of joy."

You might want to have a party and show them how much fun you can have, without drinking and carousing. One former school teacher invited Gean and me to a neighborhood Christmas party, which she was giving, in order to get closer to her neighbors. And it was great.

The house was gaily decorated. She had a lot of games planned, which broke the ice and got us all laughing. Everyone really had a great time. She had wonderful refreshments...no booze...no spiked punch...no extra "nog" in the egg nog. And everybody left, saying that it was one of the greatest evenings that they could remember.

She later brought some of them to our church. I saw one of those couples come to Christ, in time. And it all started, because she had befriended and cultivated some folks, who were not already in her circle of Christian friends.

Now we need our circle of Christian friends. They are our support group. They are our prayer-backers.

But we also need to each be making some friends, whom we can someday look forward to bringing to Jesus.

Then...

III. **BRING THEM ALL THE WAY TO JESUS.**

These four men brought their crippled friend all the way to Jesus.

God knows, they had obstacles to get around. The crowd kept them from getting near the house. But they knew that it would do their friend no lasting good to just get him into the crowd, who were listening to Jesus.

We can't just get our friends into the church crowd. We must make sure that they get all the way to Jesus. We must pray our way around every interference and through every obstacle—and Satan will be sure that they are there.

We must **use ingenuity and creativity**. Those men were ingenious. They took their friend up onto the roof and tore the tiles off, so they could lower him, by the ropes, to the feet of Jesus.

They brought him all the way to Jesus. And only then was he made right in his heart (Jesus said: “your sins be forgiven”). And only then was his paralysis healed (Jesus said: “Take up your bed and walk”).

Likewise, we cannot stop, until we have introduced our friends to Jesus. Ideally, we can bring them to Jesus, one on one. If that doesn’t work, you may need someone like myself, to come and help. I am more than willing to try.

But you will have the potential of seeing you friend’s life gloriously changed, for time and eternity. And you will be glad for all that it took, to reach that moment.

Las summer, we planned out vacation so that we could stop at a custom car show, in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee. I was especially glad, when I learned that one of the pioneers—one of the “legends,” if you please—in the field of custom cars, was going to be there.

His name is Joe Bailon. They call him “Candy Apple Joe,” because he invented candy apple red paint, which set customs apart for so many years and which has finally been offered in some Detroit cars.

Well, I was really excited to meet one of my heroes from the sixties. And we kind-of hit-it-off. I got his autograph. We talked cars. He told me of cars he had done for Zsa Zsa Gabor and Dean Martin and for the Pink Panther movies.

Then I showed him one of my hand carved car models. And he said: “Boy, I’d love to have a model like that of ‘Miss Elegance.’” That was his first famous custom, which had brought him into national prominence. I told him that I would consider it an honor to try and make one for him, in the months to come.

Soon after I arrived home, there was a package in the mail, with pictures and magazine articles about “Miss Elegance.” And I began carving.

You talk about obstacles. I’ve never had such trouble, in making a model of a car. I only had two photo’s to go by. I had already painted it. But it didn’t look right. So I had to saw it right down the middle, glue it back together, and start over. I don’t know if Satan was trying to stop me or not, but I tried to use all of the creativity and ingenuity that I had.

Meanwhile, I had read that Joe’s son had died. Gean and I sent them a sympathy card. They wrote a “thank you.”

We exchanged several long distance phone calls, between here and California. We were getting to feel like friends. And all the time I was praying that I could bring this dear man to Jesus.

Last January, I arranged to fly to Sacramento, after speaking at Dr. Schuller's conference, in Los Angeles. I was ready to take the 1/43 sized "Miss Elegance" to my long distance friend.

Again there were obstacles. At 7 A.M. we left L.A. to Sacramento, only to find that the field was fogged-in. Would you believe it? We turned around and came back to L.A.

But we had gone this far. We were not going to let that stop us. Back we flew at 12 noon. We arrived at Joe's place about 2:00 P.M.

When I presented him with the model, in its clear case, he looked at it and began to cry. Standing in a room full of trophies and awards, he said: "This is the nicest trophy I ever got."

We spent a couple hours, looking at two cars, on which he was working. One was to be the new "Miss Elegance," to be displayed at the Oakland Roadster Show in the year 2000. We looked through all of his awards and memorabilia. Time was flying, and we had to return to the airport soon.

God seemed to tell me, "It's time. You can bring your friend to me now."

I asked Joe if I could share something with him, which was far more wonderful and priceless than that model of his car. He was very open. And I went through God's plan of salvation with him, from the Bible. (My son was with me. In all the years, he had never watched me lead someone to Christ.)

It was wonderful. Joe prayed to receive Jesus. We reassured him from the Bible and gave him our follow-up materials, for his later study and understanding.

And we flew back to LA, two happy campers!

I have heard from Candy Joe, several times since. He is confident about what he has done. He has shown the model to everyone at the shows, where he is a celebrity guest. And he has told a lot of them about what he did that day. Isn't that great!

Now that is what I mean by friendship evangelism. I made a friend, cultivated that friendship, and showed my friendship on a human level. As our trust grew, I was able to bring him all the way to Jesus.

You might say: "that certainly took a long time and a lot of effort." You don't know the half of it. If I made only \$1.00 an hour, while working on that model, and if you added to it the plane tickets from LA plus the car rental, I would have had well over \$600 invested.

But it was worth it all, to see him come to Jesus. And I will treasure seeing him in heaven for all of eternity.

And what is more, we are probably better friends than ever now, because we are now brothers in Christ.

My friends, I am offering you a practical plan for bringing someone to Christ. Start now to look for some friends, who aren't already Christians. Cultivate that friendship. Bathe it in prayer. And be sensitive when the time is right to bring them to Jesus.

Introduce them to Him, yourself. You are their friend. No one else can do it any better.

And be ready to rejoice for time and eternity!

P.S. I would not be much of a friend to you, if I did not invite you to meet Jesus. Aren't you ready to meet Jesus now?!