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## The Revised Common Lectionary Notes

September 2, 9, 16, 23, 30, and October 7

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### September 2, The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

In Mark 7:1–23, Jesus attacks the narrow, legalistic, and extreme practices of the Pharisees in relation to purification (vv. 2–5), external worship (vv. 6–7), and observance of commandments. In doing this, Jesus defines the true moral intent of the divine law (vv. 8–13). However, He does more than merely contrast His Father’s true law with the manner in which the Pharisees interpret it. In vv. 14–15, He sets aside the law itself in respect to clean and unclean food, and in doing so, opens the way for unity between *Jew* and *Gentile* in the kingdom of God. And *He Himself ministers in Gentile territory* (Mark 5:1–20; 7:24–30, 31–37; 8:1–10).

**V. 1:** Some unfriendly Pharisees and scribes from Jerusalem gather around Jesus to spy on Him.

**Vv. 2–4:** Some scholars point out that there are no references in the Jewish Talmuds (written AD 250–450) to the observance of the severe ritual requirements referred to in these verses. Some suggest that the rituals referred to were practiced in the Diaspora—by Jews living beyond the borders of the Holy Land.

However, there is every reason to believe that Mark was very familiar with the rabbinic practices and oral traditions of Jesus’ day. He wrote only a few decades after Jesus completed His ministry—at a time when many who had been eyewitnesses and hearers of what Jesus did and said were still alive. Furthermore, he explains patiently and in detail (as if to non-Jews) what the practices of “the Jews” or “the Judeans” were. In the rabbinic mind, a trip to a public place could certainly bring defilement through proximity, and kitchen utensils did have to be immersed after use.

**V. 5:** When some Pharisees confront Jesus about the fact that His disciples do not practice ritual washing prior to eating, Jesus responds that, although the Pharisees pay much attention to *external* ritual purity, they pay little or no attention to *inner* spiritual purity.

Jesus’ challenge to the authority of oral law is in question when these scribal and Pharisaic heirs of “the ancients” (like-minded men of the previous two centuries) attack Him through His disciples. The Greek

word translated as “live” in this verse means literally “walk”; it has links to the Hebrew verb *halak*, “to conduct one’s life.”

**V. 6:** This verse contains Jesus’ first use of the term *hypocrite* in Mark’s Gospel. In this verse, Mark quotes the Septuagint (Greek) translation of the Jewish scriptures, which offers a slightly different meaning from the Hebrew. However, Jesus’ meaning remains clear, whichever translation is used.

**Vv. 7–8:** It is dishonorable to substitute human precepts for divine teaching. Those who claim to be well informed concerning God’s will set aside great religious matters and focus instead on minor issues that have to do with such things as crockery!

**Vv. 14–15:** Jesus points out that what enters a person is of no great consequence; it enters the stomach and passes through the body. What matters is what comes out of the heart via the mouth.

**Vv. 21–23:** Jesus then lists the thoughts and actions that flow from the heart and mouth and truly defile. “Evil intentions” have to do with wicked designs and desires. Jesus lists 12 of them, which read like a catechetical list that resembles those found in Paul’s writings (e.g., Galatians 5:19–21).

Jesus’ overall message in this section of Mark is that the Pharisees and scribes had made the outward observance of the Law all important, with the result that ceremonial uncleanness had replaced purity of heart, and religious rituals had taken priority over right relationships. Because they focused on appearances rather than attitudes, pretense was never far away. Their lip service to God was a cover for hearts that dishonored Him. Still today (and sad to say), we, like the scribes and Pharisees of old, often blame *things* for our failings—for our spiritual and moral uncleanness. However, the heart of the issue usually has to do with our inner life. It is there that Jesus wants to rule!

We might say that the scribes and Pharisees established “legal checkpoints” in relation to entry into Jewish synagogues and communities. And do not some churches still today operate checkpoints in relation to whom they accept into the fellowship? “You are not welcome here! You have the wrong skin color! You belong to the wrong political party! You had a child out of wedlock!” However, Jesus touched lepers and those with physical blemishes—those affected with things that religious leaders said excluded them from membership in God’s people (Mark 1:40–45). For example, He permitted a Jewish woman who had been experiencing non-stop menstrual bleeding for 12 years (and was therefore seen as an outcast in both her family circle and village community) to touch Him—and addressed her as *daughter* (Mark 5:25–34). He showed mercy to a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21–28) and fed 4,000 Gentile men with bread and fish (Mark 8:1–10).

No—there should never be a *checkpoint* at a church entrance, only a *welcome point*. And while some of Cl’s materials suggest placing a “Servants’ Entrance” sign above the door leading into a worship center, perhaps it would be more appropriate to word that sign, “Forgiven Servants’ Entrance.” No! We do not invite people to church so that they can “get” forgiveness. Rather, we invite them into our Christian family so that they might learn about the forgiveness that God has been offering to them throughout life! However, God’s goal has to do with more than offering information for the head; it has to do with achieving a radical transformation of the totality of life. His invitation is, “Believe in My forgiving, saving, servant Son—and follow Him full-time!”

## September 9, The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 7:24–37

When working through the following four pericopes, it is helpful to bear in mind the following:

Prior to Mark 8:27–30, Jesus never states *in words* that He is the Messiah and that He must experience crucifixion. Rather, He reveals His identity through His *actions*; see Isaiah 35:5–6.

In Luke 4:14–30, we read of Jesus reinterpreting the Jewish hopes that prevailed in His day—hopes based on Isaiah 60:1–61:6. According to this passage, the Jewish people were expecting the following to take place when the Messianic Age broke into history:

- All Jews living beyond the border of Judah would return to the so-called Holy Land (60:4, 9).
- The wealth of the nations would be brought to Israel—by ships across the sea and by camels across the land (60:5–6, 9, 11; 61:6b).
- Surrounding nations would provide the Jewish people with an abundance of animals for use in the sacrificial system—and those animals would be acceptable for use in this manner (60:7).
- Foreigners (Gentiles) would rebuild the structures that they had destroyed within the land of Israel (60:10).
- Any nation that refused to serve the Jewish people would be destroyed (60:12).
- The Jews would once again have access to the timbers of Lebanon for use in rebuilding the Jerusalem Temple (60:13).
- The descendants of those who ravaged the Holy Land would grovel at the feet of the Jewish people (60:14).
- The Jewish people would suck the wealth of surrounding nations (60:16).
- The building materials that they would use in rebuilding Jerusalem would be far more precious and magnificent than those that Solomon used (60:17).
- Peace would prevail throughout the land (60:18).
- God Himself would be all the light that they needed; the sun and the moon would no longer be needed (60:19–20).
- The Jewish people would increase greatly in number, be righteous, and live in the land forever (60:21–22).
- Indeed, God wanted the prophet to proclaim wonderfully good news to the Jewish people—to those who had been oppressed and brokenhearted (61:1).
- God would take vengeance on all who had troubled His people (61:2), and comfort those of His people who mourn (61:3). Every structure that had been destroyed would be rebuilt (61:4).
- Gentiles would serve the Jews by caring for their flocks, farming their land, and dressing their vines (61:5).
- The Jewish people would devote themselves to worshiping God in the Jerusalem Temple (61:6a).

When Jesus preached His first sermon in His hometown of Nazareth (Luke 4:14–30), He based His message on Isaiah 60:1–61:6. However, He “edited” this passage in a radical manner. He left out all references to vengeance, wealth, and the servitude of the Gentiles. He reminded His hearers that both Elijah and Elisha had ministered to *Gentiles*—Elijah to a Gentile Syrophoenician and Elisha to Naaman, a Syrian leper. No wonder that His hearers wanted to throw Him off a cliff! Jesus reinterpreted their dreams concerning what the coming Messianic Age would be like; furthermore, why should they minister to the needs of Gentiles when there were so many needy among the chosen people in Israel?

The points above throw light on the manner in which the disciples reacted to Jesus' passion predictions in Mark 8:27–30; 9:30–32; 10:32–34.

Note also that when Jesus began His ministry to the *Jewish* people, the first thing He did was to cast out a demon (1:21–28). When He began His ministry to the *Gentiles*, He cast out a host of demons (5:1–20).

### **Mark 7:24–37**

In this section, Mark describes two incidents in which Jesus ministers to Gentiles.

#### **7:24–30**

**V. 24:** In 7:24–30, Jesus ministers in the region of Syrophenicia. The references to Tyre and Sidon in vv. 24 and 31 may not mean that He actually visited these two cities, but that He worked in the general region of these locations. It is significant that, while in the region, Jesus enters the house of a Syrophenician—a Gentile. Acts 10:24–33 tells of Peter entering the house of a Gentile Roman centurion—an act for which he was later criticized by Jews living in Jerusalem (11:1–3).

**7:25–26:** After Jesus enters the house, a woman bows down at His feet and begs Him to heal her daughter who is possessed by an unclean spirit. (This is the first request for an exorcism of demons recorded in Mark.) In Mark's narrative, the woman is referred to as a Syrophenician (7:26). In Matthew's narrative (15:21–28), she is referred to as a Canaanite—a person to whom the Jews were to show no mercy but utterly destroy them (Deuteronomy 7:1–2).

**7:27:** In addressing the woman, Jesus uses the terms *children* and *dogs*. The Jews thought of themselves as God's children, and of the Gentiles as dogs and pigs. One gets the impression that Jesus is pointing out to the woman that Jews thought of themselves as genetically special—as a "chosen people" who were to have nothing to do with Gentiles! In the Jewish mind, God's favor and mercy were to be directed toward them alone, not to Gentiles!

**7:28:** Although the woman is quite open to being reminded of the superior Jewish "branding," she nevertheless asks that Jesus grant her (as a dog beneath the table) a few crumbs of divine mercy!

**7:29:** Jesus commends the woman for her response and assures her that her request has been granted. The demon has left her daughter.

**7:30:** The woman returns to her own home to find that her daughter has indeed been healed!

**Summary thoughts:** In this incident, Jesus stretches the borderlines of His ministry far to the north and away from the Jewish center of Jerusalem. In His dealings with the Syrophenician woman, He pushes the new communal identity to its limits with regard to geography, ethnicity, and gender.

Although Jesus raises the issue of Jewish priority over Gentiles, He ultimately defies and rejects that notion. The Syrophenician woman surpasses the disciples in perception and determination. In responding to the pleading of this Gentile woman, He actually helps two female sufferers—a mother and her daughter.

## 7:31–37

**7:31:** In this incident, we read of Jesus healing a deaf mute in the Gentile region of the Decapolis—to the 10 cities southeast of the Sea of Galilee. Mark does not tell us whether Jesus traveled along the west or east coast of the Sea of Galilee to get there. After healing the deaf mute, Jesus feeds 4,000 Gentile men (again, in the Decapolis, 8:1–10) and then heads north to Bethsaida where He healed a blind man (8:22–26). The location of Dalmanutha referred to in 8:10 is not known.

**7:32:** After Jesus arrives in the Decapolis, people (unnamed friends of the sufferer) bring to Him a man who is deaf and has a speech impediment.

**7:33:** Jesus, seeking some privacy, takes the man away from the crowd. Jesus touches first the man's ears, and then his tongue with saliva-covered fingers.

In relation to the use of saliva, Jesus acts as Greek and Jewish healers acted. Furthermore, because the man cannot hear, Jesus communicates through actions.

**7:34:** At the same time, Jesus heals the man through divinely-given power. He looks up to heaven, sighs, and says "Ephphatha" ("Be opened").

**7:35:** Jesus heals the man in three ways. He gives him the ability to hear, to speak, and know a language. After all, if the man has not been able to hear properly, how could he know a language and speak it plainly?

**7:36:** Although Jesus orders the crowd to tell no one what they have seen, the more He forbids them to tell others, the more they tell others what He has done!

**7:37:** The crowd is astonished beyond measure! Their statement that "He has done everything well" reflects "and it was good" in Genesis 1:1–2:4a. Their reference to Jesus' actions in empowering the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak reflects Isaiah 35:5–6. The subtext is this: If Jesus does these things, the Messianic Age has broken in—and Jesus is the Messiah. However, in the narratives that follow, Jesus endorses the fact that He is the Messiah, but a Messiah who is very different from what the people and the disciples are expecting!

**Summary thoughts:** Jesus' breakthrough toward the Gentiles is of great significance, and Mark's narratives in relation to this issue are detailed and elaborate. After a massive exorcism (5:1–20) and a vast number of healings among Gentiles (6:53–56), an individual exorcism (7:24–30), and an individual healing in a Gentile land (7:32–37), the time comes for the formal ratification of the Gentile part of the community. The feeding of the 4,000 Gentile men (8:1–9), the counterpart of the earlier feeding of 5,000 Jewish men (6:30–44), constitutes this affirmation. It is significant that the number *seven* surfaces in 8:5–6, 8. Why? In Deuteronomy 7:1–2, the Israelites are told to hate seven Gentile nations, show them no mercy, and destroy them. We might also note that the early Christian community in Jerusalem was presided over by a leadership structure of the 12 apostles and a group of *seven* Hellenists under the supervision of Stephen (Acts 6:1–6).

## September 16, The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 8:27–38

Embedded in Mark 8–10 are three passion predictions: 8:27–30; 9:30–32; and 10:32–34. Each prediction is followed by a narrative in which the disciples reveal their confusion in relation to Jesus' predictions, after which Jesus clarifies what the coming events in Jerusalem will mean for both Him and the disciples. In these prediction sections, Jesus spares no effort to open the disciples' eyes and make them see the meaning of His mission. He is going to be a suffering and rejected Servant who will be tormented, spat upon, and killed. But then He will overcome death and return to life after three days. That much the disciples can and must know.

These three blocks of “prediction–confusion–clarification” are framed by events in which Jesus gives sight to the blind (8:22–26 and 10:46–52). The blind man that Jesus heals in the vicinity of Bethsaida (8:22–26) regains full sight only after Jesus touches his eyes a second time—even as the disciples will only see clearly after they get a “second touch” and “see” Jesus in Galilee after His resurrection (16:1–8; note v. 7). Blind Bartimaeus, whom Jesus heals on the way out of Jericho (10:46–52) is the first person in Mark's Gospel to address Jesus as “Son of David.” Ironically, although Bartimaeus is blind, he can “see” who Jesus really is! However, although the disciples can see Jesus with their *eyes*, they cannot yet see Him with their *hearts*.

Up until this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus has not stated openly that He is the Messiah. However, what He does not state in *words* He states in *actions*. He does the things that Isaiah said would take place when the Messianic Age broke in. He gives sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, speech to the mute, and a healthy body to the crippled (Isaiah 35:5–6). Having revealed His identity through His actions, Jesus now uses *words* to reveal His identity.

To open the eyes of the disciples and make them “see” is the overriding purpose of the conversations that take place during the journey from Caesarea to Jerusalem.

**V. 27:** After healing the blind man near Bethsaida, Jesus heads north to the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi—a city previously named Pan (hence Paneas; in modern Arabic, Banyas) and rebuilt by Herod the Great's son, Philip, who ruled the region to the northeast of the Sea of Galilee. Herod the Great had built a temple there to honor Caesar Augustus. (The Caesarea on the Mediterranean coastline was referred to as Caesarea Maritima.) The region had a long history of pagan worship. It was a spectacular site because of its rocky gorges and the melting snows from Mt. Hermon that flowed forth from underground waterways there into the headwaters of the Jordan River.

Note the phrase “on the way” in this verse and the reference to Bartimaeus following Jesus “on the way” in 10:52. (See also 9:33–34; 10:17, 32, 52.) The “on the way” motif is absent in the parallel passages in Matthew and Luke. Note that just as Mark, in the section preceding 8:27–10:45, organized his narrative around six boat trips, so he structured his Gospel's mid-section around six references to “along the way.” In 10:32, the “way” motif is linked to Jerusalem for the first time.

**V. 28:** When Jesus asks the disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” their answer reflects Mark 6:14–16. The expectation that a prophet would return is referred to in 4 Esdras 2:18 (an intertestamental writing), where the Lord promises to send His servants Isaiah and Jeremiah. Up until this point in Mark's narrative, there is no record of speculation among Jesus' hearers that He is the Messiah.

**V. 29:** When Jesus asks the disciples who they think He is, Peter answers on behalf of the Twelve rather tersely and without elaboration. His response points to his belief in Jesus as the one who fulfills Jewish hopes for a royal descendant of David who will reign over the Jewish people and give them dominion over the nations of the world; see Daniel 7.

**V. 30:** After Peter expresses his convictions concerning Jesus' identity, Jesus commands the disciples to say nothing about Peter's statement to anyone! Although the disciples now understand that Jesus is the Messiah, they have no idea what Jesus' Messianic role would mean for Him or for them.

**V. 31:** Peter's confession might be seen as a high point in Jesus' public ministry. What follows in Mark is introduced with the words, "And Jesus began to teach them . . ." (See also Matthew 16:21.) In Mark, Jesus predicts His coming passion three times: 8:31ff; 9:31ff; and 10:33ff. Although Jesus predicts His resurrection on all three occasions (and in 14:28), the disciples seem to forget that prediction entirely! *The elders* refer to the non-priestly members of the Jewish Sanhedrin.

**V. 32:** Although Jesus predicts His coming passion openly, Peter takes Him aside to rebuke Him privately.

**V. 33:** Jesus turns around—as He had done with the hemorrhaging woman (Luke 7:44). He rebukes Peter in severe terms (the word *rebuke* is a technical term connoting exorcism language), and His remarks apply to the other disciples as well. (Here, note also Matthew 4:10.) Peter resembles Satan in that he conceives of the role of the Messiah in human terms—glory without the need to suffer. Jesus will have none of this. He is the Servant of His Father, and His mission is to serve and to suffer. His approaching passion is the essential high point of His saving mission.

**V. 34:** Six sayings follow, with v. 34a serving as the introductory phrase. Jesus now addresses "the crowd with His disciples." The crowd has not been referred to since 8:6. Jesus proclaims the necessity of the cross to His disciples and also to all others. Hence, His six sayings are given a wide proclamation after His plain speaking concerning rejection and death. Those who follow Him must not focus on themselves, but on that familiar Roman instrument of torture and execution.

**V. 35:** Those who desire to use life totally for themselves will lose it; those who lose it by giving it away in the service of Jesus will find it. In short, Jesus' followers find life by giving it away.

**V. 36-37:** What a tragedy to "gain the whole world," but lose everything—yes, even life itself in the process!

**V. 38:** We mere humans must be completely loyal to Jesus as He revealed Himself during His ministry if the triumphant Son of Man is to welcome us as His friends on the Last Day!

The adulterous and sinful generation that will experience the shame of rejection are the descendants of a faithless Israel in the days of the prophets—all of whose defections are described as *harlotries*. The term "in the glory of his Father" in this verse is used for the first time in Mark.

**September 23, The Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 9:30–37**

Jesus predicted His coming passion for the first time in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi. Although Mark does not offer specific details about Jesus' itinerary in the verses that follow, he refers to events associated with Jesus' transfiguration in 9:1–13. The location of the mountain on which the transfiguration took place is debated. However, during the course of the event, a voice from the cloud (9:7) referred to Jesus as King (a descendant of David; see Psalm 2:7), and Prophet (a new Moses; see Deut. 18:15). In the conversation that takes place while Jesus and Peter, James, and John descend from the mountain, Jesus twice refers to Himself as "the Son of Man"; see Daniel 7:13.

In Mark 9:14-29, we read of Jesus healing a young boy of what sounds like epilepsy, or seizures caused by demonic possession.

**9:30–32:** Jesus predicts His passion a second time. The first sequence of prediction, confusion, and clarification took place in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi (previous pericope); the second sequence takes place somewhere in Galilee. During this sequence of events, Jesus wants no one but the disciples to know of His whereabouts and teachings.

When speaking of His coming passion in Jerusalem, Jesus again refers to Himself as the Son of Man (v. 31). Once again, His disciples do not understand the message (v. 32) but are afraid to ask Him to explain the significance of what He has shared with them.

**9:33:** Eventually, the group arrives in Capernaum on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee. After they enter a house there, Jesus questions the disciples concerning what they had been arguing about along the way.

**9:34:** The disciples choose not to respond to Jesus' question. Sadly, they still do not understand Jesus' message and the nature of His Messianic *Servant* ministry. And worse, they had been arguing about which of them was the greatest!

**9:35:** Jesus sits down, calls the Twelve, and tells them that those who want to be first must be last of all and servant of all! We might well ask, "Do we understand Jesus' message any better than His first disciples did?"

The disciples had been focusing on issues such as power, priority, and prestige. Their understanding of *greatest* had to do with hierarchical leadership. Jesus responds by stressing that authority is assumed by serving all people, not by lording it over them. Above all, *authority* means to show concern for the little ones, the children, those who have the least power. Jesus' desire is that, as He and the disciples approach Jerusalem, they will prepare themselves for the exercise of power in service and stop thinking of themselves as if they were to become the leaders of a new establishment.

**9:36–37:** Jesus then places a little child among them, takes it in His arms, and tells the disciples that those who welcome such a child in Jesus' name welcome Jesus—and whoever welcomes Jesus actually welcomes the One (Jesus' Father) Who sent Him.

## September 30, The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 9:38–50

**V. 38:** This is the only narrative in Mark in which John is mentioned. He states that the disciples tried to stop someone using Jesus' name to cast out demons because the person doing this was not a follower of Jesus. Oriental "holy men" often sought new spells and talismans.

**V. 39:** Jesus objects to the disciples' interference. He sees a potential doorway to faith for the would-be healer. The contrast between Jesus' message and ministry and the realm of the demonic is so very obvious. The person who experiences the "power of Jesus' name" will be won over to Jesus' cause.

**V. 40:** There is no middle ground. People are either *for* Jesus or *against* Jesus.

**V. 41:** ". . . because you bear the name of Christ" sounds somewhat Pauline. One might have expected, "...because you are Mine." Jesus' mention of a reward is equally unexpected. Although Jesus will promise a reward for deeds of mercy, He stresses that His followers are to do what is right because that is what He expects of them. They are to do what is right as a response to the limitless grace that Jesus has lavished on them. God's people are not to do anything to earn a reward; they are to do everything out of gratitude to God for what He has done for them.

**V. 42:** The cruel punishment of drowning people with a millstone tied to the neck was a Roman practice, although Josephus reports that certain Jews employed it in an uprising against the Herods (*Ant.* XIV).

**Vv. 43–48:** Earlier, the wiles of evil men are what cause the innocent to stumble. In these verses, the causes are internal: a hand, a foot, and an eye. Jesus uses the strongest figurative language possible, recommending the blinding and maiming of oneself rather than thinking about doing evil.

The two alternatives are entrance into life and entrance into Gehenna—that valley west of Jerusalem used for the burning of refuse. (In previous centuries, children had been burned there as offerings to Molech; see 1 Kings 11:7. In the apocalyptic literature of Jesus' day, it served as a symbolic name to describe the hellfire-like punishment of the wicked.

Jesus conformed His speech to contemporary usage. Down through the ages, the Church has always taught the reality of the punishment of the wicked, although whatever that grim experience might be, it is not an eternity on a burning refuse dump and infestations by worms. Jesus uses the vocabulary at His disposal to describe eternal spiritual ruin!

**Vv. 49–50:** Verse 49 may have links to Leviticus 2:13, which states that cereal offerings are to be seasoned with salt; so too the victims that are burnt in a sacrifice that sets right the scales of justice. The meaning may be eschatological. In the last days the wicked will be purified by fire and salt, just as the good are to be immersed in fire and the Spirit.

The final saying is in a different vein altogether. The seasoning properties of salt are good. They give taste to a meal, just as peace ensures joy in human relationships. The chemical change that makes salt lose its flavor while retaining its appearance (a natural phenomenon understood in Palestine still today) is presumed to be behind Jesus' saying.

## October 7, The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 10:2–16

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus leaves Galilee in 10:1 and enters Jerusalem for the first time in 11:1. Some manuscripts omit the word *and* after the phrase "the region of Judea" (10:1). However, Judea was not "beyond the Jordan." As Jesus travels south toward Jerusalem, crowds flock to Him and He teaches them. It is important to note that the Gospels make few references to Jesus preaching, but many, many references to Him teaching. The church today has much to learn from Jesus' strategy and methodology.

**V. 2:** Some Pharisees join the crowd and, to test Jesus, ask Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Possibly, they recalled that Herod the Great had divorced his first wife, Doris, and married Mariamne I (whom he later had put to death). And Herodias divorced her husband Philip so that she might marry Philip's brother, Herod Antipas. Perhaps the Pharisees are attempting to discredit Jesus by asking a question that He would have to answer to the dissatisfaction of some of those present. Perhaps the question is intended to be the first of a series of questions, or else is an attempt to get Jesus' view on a current rabbinic dispute.

The Pharisees are inquiring about an obvious matter as it stands in the Jewish Law. Deuteronomy 24:1 states that a man may divorce his wife if he finds her to be objectionable. The meaning of this OT passage was hotly debated in Jesus' day.

**V. 3:** Jesus puts an end to their parrying with Him by asking them to quote a Mosaic text.

**V. 4:** They cite the privilege of a Jewish male to end his marriage by issuing his wife a certificate of dismissal and divorce. The wife is therefore put away and freed from any further obligation with regard to him. The Jewish notion from Moses' time was that both parties were then free to remarry. If the question underlying the Pharisees' challenge was the interpretation of the phrase "something objectionable" (Deut. 24:1), Mark suppresses it and focuses on the larger matter of what Jesus had to say about divorce.

**V. 5:** Jesus rejects the notion that Moses' words had anything to do with "male privilege"—the view generally embraced by Jewish men. He states that the issue at stake is the hardheartedness of male Jews, and relief for Jewish women.

**Vv. 6–9:** Jesus reminds the Pharisees how things were meant to be with the human race from the beginning of time. The original divine intent was monogamy—a monogamy so binding that a couple are no longer two creatures but one. And because after marriage a husband and wife are no longer two but "one flesh," this unity brought about by God is not to be terminated by human will.

**Vv. 10–12:** The disciples seek clarification from Jesus. He tells them what had been perfectly allowable before, divorce and remarriage, is adulterous conduct. Previous reasons for justifying divorce are no longer valid. It is now possible for a Jewish man to sin against his spouse by taking another partner—something that Jewish interpretation had overlooked. Furthermore, the same guilt is incurred by a woman who repudiates her husband—a second innovation.

In today's world, much needs to be done to help people understand what they do when they are joined together in holy matrimony. The traditional marriage vows are a little misleading: "Will you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife? Will you take this man to be your lawful wedded husband?"

However, marriage is not about *taking*; it is about *giving*. A useful purpose would be served if marriage vows were to read as follows: “Will you *give* yourself to this woman to *serve* her as her husband? Will you *give* yourself to this man to *serve* him as his wife?”

Describing marriage, Joseph Newton said: “Marriage is a struggle for adjustment, an experience in unselfishness, an adventure in self-sacrifice . . . a discipline in patience, kindness, sympathy, renunciation, and utter devotion, not to oneself but to another—else it fails.”

In the first century world, divorce was so widespread that some women were hesitant to marry on the grounds of marital insecurity. Jesus’ call to fidelity was, however, more than a moral challenge. He desired that men and women should see marriage as a mystical union, unbreakable because God Himself “hath joined together.” This is the Christian ideal, and its fulfillment, as in all harmonious relationships, is as rewarding as it is demanding.

**V. 13:** Jesus is asked to touch some children brought to Him by their parents. The parents do not ask Jesus to heal or exorcize the children, only to bless them. The disciples react sharply, thinking perhaps that Jesus will be annoyed by the parents’ requests, or that He would prefer privacy.

**V. 14:** Jesus responds (with some indignation) that the disciples should change their attitude completely!

No one should stop little children who want to come to Him—perhaps for a hug! He welcomes little children into His kingdom.

**V. 15:** Even more, adults need to come to Him in the same spirit as do little children! If they do not, they will exclude themselves from membership in God’s Kingdom.

**V. 16:** Jesus embraces the children, lays His hands on them (no doubt, their heads), and blesses them.

### **Some additional thoughts in relation to marriage and marriage vows:**

It is all too easy to point the finger at those experiencing marriage problems. However, we fail to do all we can to *help people prepare for marriage*.

Those involved in conducting marriage ceremonies know only too well that some couples preparing for marriage are experiencing a short-term glandular, emotional imbalance from which they will eventually recover. It is important that they be made aware of what they are doing when they exchange marriage vows. The following revised vows are worth pondering—and using:

*Celebrant:* \_\_\_\_\_, will you give yourself to \_\_\_\_\_ to serve her as her husband: to love her, comfort her, honor and protect her; and forsaking all others, to be faithful to her alone as long as you both shall live?

*Bridegroom:* I will.

*Celebrant:* \_\_\_\_\_, will you give yourself to \_\_\_\_\_ to serve him as his wife: to love him, comfort him, honor and protect him; and forsaking all others to be faithful to him alone as long as you both shall live?

*Bride:* I will.

*(The bride and bridegroom face each other and join hands.)*

*Celebrant:* Repeat after me:

*Bridegroom and Bride:*

I, \_\_\_\_\_, receive you, \_\_\_\_\_, as my wife/husband,  
to have and to hold  
from this day forward;  
for better, for worse,  
in plenty and in want,  
in joy and in sorrow,  
in sickness and in health,  
to love and to cherish,  
to forgive and to strengthen,  
as Jesus would lead us,  
while God grants us life.  
I promise this before God and these witnesses.