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## The Revised Common Lectionary Notes

October 7, 14, 21, 28, and November 4  
by the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, founder of Crossways International

### 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 is 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 are doing 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.

## **October 14, The Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 10:17–31**

**V. 17:** A man runs up to Jesus, kneels before Him, and asks, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Matthew refers to the person as a *young man* (19:16–22); Luke as a *ruler* (18:18–23). The running and dropping to his knees are details not found elsewhere in the Gospels. The man’s form of address is unusual in Jewish circles, but his concern is not. The focus on eternal life dates back at least two centuries to Daniel 12:2 and 2 Maccabees 7:9, where the hope of unending life in a resurrected body is expressed.

**V. 18:** Jesus objects to the title *Good*, even though the Jews did not hesitate to call creatures good. Jesus is obviously distinguishing Himself from His Father. Does Jesus do this to invite the man—and the disciples as well—to give thought to the possibility that a title appropriate to the absolutely Good (God) may also be applied to Him? John stresses that Jesus has come to seek His Father’s glory. The Father will indeed show forth His Son’s glory, but Jesus never does anything to seek His own glory. His concern is to point to His Father, not to Himself.

**V. 19:** Jesus quotes the commandments for which He has already shown reverence. The order differs from that in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 in that the commandments to honor one’s parents and not to murder are reversed. The command not to defraud is a Mosaic command, but because it does not occur in the Decalogue, it is missing from some Markan manuscripts. In Mark 10, Jesus mentions only commands involving duties to fellow humans—not to God. However, of these, He includes all but those that refer to covetousness.

**V. 20:** The man declares that, throughout his life, he has kept all the commandments that Jesus quotes.

**V. 21:** Jesus looks upon the man lovingly. However, He proposes that the man should close the gap between Mosaic observance and life as His disciple. Poverty freely chosen is the one thing lacking. To be without possessions in this life is not so much to be rich in the hereafter as to be rich in the here and now—by another accounting system. True riches are not what we *acquire for ourselves* but what we *give of ourselves*. We are to care and share in this life, knowing that we shall be well cared for in the life to come.

Jesus invites the man to follow *Him*, not *the principles proposed by the world around him*. Discipleship is not about conforming to the Mosaic code, but embracing Jesus’ manner of life.

**V. 22:** When the man hears Jesus’ words, he is shocked and goes away grieving. He has many possessions and cannot accept the idea of abandoning them in order to follow Jesus. This is the only case recorded in the Gospels where someone refuses a direct invitation from Jesus to follow Him.

**V. 23:** After the man leaves, Jesus focuses on His teaching in relation to poverty. It is indeed hard for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God, where God’s dominion is exercised.

**V. 24:** The disciples are perplexed by Jesus’ statement that trusting in one’s riches makes entry into God’s Kingdom impossible. Pious Jews looked on honestly acquired possessions as a sign of divine favor. Although there were sects who embraced the concept of poverty (e.g., the Essenes), they were not in the mainstream of Jewish national life. Those who lived in poverty were regarded as those enduring a divine visitation; they had not chosen the way of poverty but had been afflicted with it. Jesus shocks His hearers by referring to wealth as a barrier to submitting to the reign of God.

**V. 25:** Jesus reinforces His teaching with a colorful metaphor, so exaggerated that its meaning is immediately apparent (cf. Luke 6:41 on the beam and the speck; Matthew 23:24 on the gnat and the camel).

**V. 26:** What will the population of God’s Kingdom be if those who are thought to be especially favored are now excluded?

**V. 27:** We might expect Jesus to respond by describing an attitude in the minds of pious rich that might

somehow exonerate them. Jesus does not do this. He deals with an example of the insoluble. (Here, we as well as the Palestinian Jews, need to be amazed!) The rich man simply cannot enter the kingdom of God in any way known to man. Only the gracious and all-powerful God can solve this paradox and do the impossible.

**V. 28:** Peter asks what he and the disciples might expect now that they have “paid the price” for discipleship, for leaving everything they had and following Jesus.

**Vv. 29–30:** Jesus stresses that those who have left everyone and everything to follow Him will find themselves belonging to a precious family, a divine community, in this life—and they will experience eternal life in the age to come.

The following are some general thoughts in relation to managing life and God’s creation:

- We humans own nothing—neither the land on which we stand nor even the body in which we live; see Luke 12:13–21.
- The First Article of the Apostles’ Creed should read, “. . . Maker *and Owner* of heaven and earth.”
- In relation to the stewardship of money, the goal must not be to encourage people to give more. It must be to inspire people to manage better and rob God less.
- We must get people to think beyond “tithing,” an OT concept referred to in Malachi 3:8–13. The issue is not persuading people to give ten percent and then keep the rest for themselves! No one owns anything because God owns everything.
- According to Jesus, being blessed has nothing to do with possessions or status; it has to do with devoting one’s life to serving Jesus in all His “distressing disguises” (Mother Theresa’s term). Ponder Matthew 25:31–46.
- God has provided abundantly but humanity has shared compassionately.
- “One never sees a U-Haul attached to a hearse!”

## **October 21, The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 10:35–45**

As pointed out in previous pericope studies, Mark’s Gospel contains three blocks of prediction, confusion, and clarification (8:27–38; 9:30–37; 10:32–44). For no apparent reason, the prediction element (10:32–34) has been omitted from this pericope selection. It should be cited when dealing with this passage.

**V. 32** refers to Jesus and the disciples “going up to Jerusalem.” When people approached Jerusalem, they “went up.” When they departed from Jerusalem, they “went down.” After all, God’s people believed that Jerusalem and its Temple were situated on the highest mountain, the spiritual pinnacle, of the world.

In typical rabbinic style, Jesus walks ahead of the disciples along with a second group of followers. The disciples are amazed and the followers are afraid. Jesus takes the disciples aside and begins to tell them (and therefore continued to tell them) what will happen to Him after He enters Jerusalem.

**Vv. 33–34:** Jesus predicts His coming trial, passion, death, and resurrection in detail. Note that He refers

to Himself as “the Son of Man,” a term used 82 times in the four Gospels (NRSV). To understand the significance of this term, it is essential to understand the book of Daniel (particularly chapter 7). The message of Daniel is that the Jewish people have suffered for centuries under a series of foreign powers: the Babylonians, the Medes, the Persians, the Greeks, the Ptolemies—and now the Seleucids. The writer assures his readers that the time will soon come when the Jewish people (“the Son of Man,” “the saints of the Most High”) will *overthrow* and *dominate* the nations of the world forever. However, Jesus rejected that hope and set about forming a community that would *serve* the nations of the world forever.

**Vv. 35–40:** James and John come to Jesus with a request. (In Matthew 20:20–23, it is their mother who makes the request.) They ask that they might be assigned places of honor to His right and left hand when He is enthroned as Messianic King in Jerusalem. The brothers simply do not understand what Jesus has been teaching them. Their hope is to sit on thrones of gold. Little do they understand that they are asking to be nailed to crosses to the right and left of Jesus.

In the conversation that follows, Jesus sets out to change their view of things. Are James and John ready to endure being drowned in pain? Furthermore, the only one who has the authority to assign people a place of special dignity, to Jesus’ right or left, is His Father.

**Vv. 41–43:** The other ten disciples respond to the brothers’ selfish request as we might expect. Jesus calls the disciples together and reminds the Twelve of the pagan pattern of absolute rule. In the pagan world, the “power boys” know nothing of the equality that characterizes the sons of Abraham, and still less of the principle of service that will distinguish Jesus’ followers: “If you want to be great, *serve!*”

**Vv. 44–45:** The two sayings in these verses reflect that in v. 43, although they are more strongly worded. A slave (*doulos*) is much lower in the social scale than a servant (*diakonos*); his submission is to be total. The mission of Jesus, the Son of Man, is demonstrated in His serving, which will eventually involve paying a ransom price with life itself.

The Jewish world knew of both brigandage and the holding of hostages in warfare. Our Lord speaks of profiting many (i.e., all). In His Person, the Son of Man is one with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. He dies that a multitude might live.

## **October 28, The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 10:46–52**

Although one of the passages suggested for use on Reformation Day is John 8:31–36, we shall focus on Mark 10:46–52. However, preachers might note that both Paul and Luther went through eye-opening experiences when they learned to understand that salvation is never by works, but always by grace. The commandments were never given to enable people to *effect* a relationship with God; they were given as guidelines for *reflecting* a relationship with God. Even so, the model for the godly life is the life of Jesus, who give us a new, one-and-only commandment (John 13:15; 15:12). In John 8:31–36, Jesus scraps the idea that genetic descent from Abraham makes one a child of God. John points out that some of Jesus’ hearers were so angry with Him that they were plotting to kill Him. Without a doubt, God’s desire is to open ever more widely the eyes of each and every one of us to the wonder of Jesus’ Person and to the radical implications of following Him as Servant King.

**V. 46:** Jesus and the disciples arrive at Jericho (about 15 miles to the northeast of Jerusalem, and five miles west of the Jordan River). Jericho was (and is!) a rather luxuriant spot. As Jesus, His disciples, and a large crowd leave Jericho for Jerusalem, they come across a blind man sitting by the roadside. His name was Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus. (Some suggest that the crowd was on its way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.)

In Matthew 29:29–34, we read of Jesus encountering *two* unnamed blind men on the way *out* of Jericho. In Luke 18:35–43, we read of Jesus encountering *one* unnamed blind man on the way *into* Jericho. In John 9, we read of Jesus healing an unnamed blind man *in* Jerusalem—a powerful narrative consisting of seven scenes in which the man refers to Jesus progressively as “the man Jesus,” “a prophet,” and finally “Lord.” His eyes had indeed been opened!

A wayside beggar was a familiar sight in Jesus’ day. Credibility was bestowed on a blind beggar, for he had no way of earning an income. However, those who regained their sight were faced with a challenge; they now had to learn to earn their own income.

**Vv. 47–48:** When Bartimaeus learns that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by, he begins to shout and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” He continues to shout even though some within the crowd rebuke him sternly and tell him to be quiet. He responds by shouting more loudly!

Remarkably, in Mark’s Gospel, Bartimaeus is the *first* and *only* person to address Jesus as “Son of David”—a politically dangerous thing to do. Up until this point in Mark’s Gospel, only demons have called Jesus “Jesus of Nazareth” and “the Holy One of God” (1:23–24).

Those who try to silence Bartimaeus may oppose Jesus and be offended by the Messianic title he proclaims. Or they may be friends concerned about Jesus’ “workload.” Bartimaeus ignores their protests. He possibly suspects that he is in the presence of Israel’s Messiah—a Messiah who will give sight to the blind (Isaiah 35:5–6).

**Vv. 49–50:** This account of Jesus’ command and Bartimaeus’ excited response is priceless. Bartimaeus throws off his cloak, his outer garment, and bounds toward Jesus.

**Vv. 51–52:** A dramatic exchange follows. Jesus asks Bartimaeus what he wants Jesus to do for him. Bartimaeus utters a powerful plea, beginning with the words “My Teacher.” In the Gospels, only Bartimaeus and Mary Magdalene address Jesus as “Rabbouni,” “My Master, my Teacher”; see John 20:16. Then he asks Jesus, “let me see again.”

Jesus says to Bartimaeus, “Go; your faith has made you well.” The blind man’s sight is restored, and he “follows Jesus on the way,” a statement that surfaces a number of times in Mark’s narrative. Bartimaeus joins Jesus’ community!

As pointed out above, Mark’s narrative contains three cycles of prediction, confusion, and clarification. The first (8:27–38) is preceded by an incident in which Jesus restores sight to a blind man, but He touches his eyes twice when doing so (8:22–26). The man is able to see only after Jesus’ second touch. The passage just surveyed (10:46–52) follows immediately after the third cycle of prediction, confusion, and clarification. Hence, the three cycles are bracketed by incidents in which Jesus gives sight to the blind.

We might ask, “Why the second touch in 8:22–26?” The disciples might be beginning to understand that Jesus is the Messiah, but they have no idea what that implies. However, they will be granted full sight only when they meet the Risen Jesus in Galilee; see Mark 16:1–8 and note v. 7 and the word *see*.

## **November 4, All Saints Sunday: John 11:32–44 (or The Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: Mark 12:28–34)**

One might ask, “Why does this pericopal selection begin with 11:32, and not with 11:1?” Because it is important to understand the larger message of John 11, we shall survey the entire chapter.

In John 10, we read of Jesus referring to Himself as “the Good Shepherd”—not as *a* good shepherd, but as *the* Good Shepherd (*the* Good King; see Psalm 23; Ezekiel 34; Jeremiah 23:1–4). The outcome is that some of His hearers insist that Jesus is out of His mind (10:20), plot to stone Him to death (10:31), and plan to arrest Him (10:39). Jesus leaves Jerusalem for safety reasons and goes to the place where John had been baptizing (10:40–42), possibly Bethany Beyond the Jordan (1:29). The day comes when Jesus receives word from Mary and Martha that their brother Lazarus is seriously ill, and Jesus returns to Bethany on the eastern slopes of the Mount of Olives.

**11:1–4:** John does not tell us the story of Mary and Martha in which Mary sits at Jesus’ feet while Martha frets in the kitchen (Luke 10:38–42). In Luke, Mary’s posture denotes that she is asking Jesus to accept her as a student! Jesus obviously answered, “Yes.”

John is the only evangelist to tell us of the sickness of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. Naturally, Jesus is called when Lazarus becomes sick. The sisters send for Jesus not merely because He is their friend, but because He has the power to heal. When reacting to the call, Jesus explains to His disciples that the present sickness will not end in death; it has come about as an opportunity for God to show forth His glory so that the Son of Man may also be glorified.

**11:5–10:** Jesus does not rush to the bedside of His dear friend, but stays where He is for two days, after which He sets out for Bethany. The disciples remind Jesus of the opposition against Him in Jerusalem. Jesus responds by emphasizing two truths. The first is that the daylight is fleeting. Time is running out! He must go back to Jerusalem for His Father has work for Him to do. Jesus then adds a reminder in which He refers to walking by the light of day. People are safe as long as they are with Him, the Light of the World. But those who walk without His light walk in darkness—in peril.

**11:11–16:** Jesus takes His time to get to the scene. He also talks in riddles that make His disciples wonder what is going on. Only Jesus is in command of the situation. The disciples do not understand what Jesus means when He says that Lazarus is asleep. Jesus explains that He has purposely stayed away from Lazarus until he is dead so that the disciples might see His power and believe in Him. The disciples still do not understand. Thomas, nicknamed “The Twin,” shows admirable loyalty and affection. He is prepared to go with Jesus to Jerusalem—even if it means death. Possibly, Thomas suspects that Jesus’ death is not far away.

**11:17–27:** Lazarus has been buried for four days by the time Jesus reaches Bethany. (It is possible that Lazarus has been in a tomb for only a little over two days, since the Jews counted even part of a day as a full day.) While Jesus has been taking His time to get to His friends’ place, other relatives and friends

have wasted no time in coming to Mary and Martha to offer comfort. Comforting the grieving was considered a work of piety among the Jews; see Job 2:11. Some might be asking, “Has Jesus no sympathy and understanding for people in sorrow?”

When Jesus promises that Lazarus will live again, Martha sees only half the truth; as a good Jewess, she knows that God will raise the dead on the Final Day of resurrection. Jesus now makes an astounding *I Am* statement. He Himself *is* true life, He *is* the resurrection—and not only because He will finally call the dead out of their graves (see 5:28, 29; 6:40, 44). Faith in Him as the Son of God means that Eternal Life begins *here and now* (see 5:24; 8:51). Although the believer still must die and be buried, that does not mean that all hope is lost. Rather, dying means entry into eternal life in the fullest and most perfect sense. Only One who has life in himself, the perfect life of God, can offer this kind of life (see 1:4; 5:26; Revelation 1:18).

Before Jesus does anything else, He asks the crucial question, “Do you believe this?” Martha is asked to believe Jesus’ words even before He performs His greatest miracle. Like the man whose son was healed (4:50), she must learn that faith in Jesus means trusting in His promises. She stands the test and becomes one of those who make a great confession to Jesus: He is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Coming One (a Jewish expression for the Messiah); see 1:9, 15; 3:31; 4:25.

**11:28–32:** Mary is the quiet one, sitting at home and grieving for her lost brother. Martha (as in Luke 10:38–42) is the practical, busy person. We sense a tone of reproach in her first words to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Now it’s too late! At least Martha shows some faith. She knows that Jesus could have prevented Lazarus’ death. But even now a glimmer of hope shines through her sad words. Martha’s “if” does not mean that all hope is gone and there is nothing more to be done. When Jesus is present, there is always hope. Martha knows this, and clings to every small shred of hope.

John knows how to tell a good story to keep his readers in suspense. As readers, we know how things will end. However, the tension mounts as we follow the movements of people between Bethany and the place where Jesus is staying. Martha has gone out to get Jesus (v. 20); now she rushes back home to get Mary (v. 28). It is now Mary’s turn to run out to meet Jesus. Her friends follow her, thinking that she is going to her brother’s tomb. Mary repeats her sister’s “if.”

**11:33–37:** Jesus does not offer cheap comfort such as, “Cheer up! You’ll soon get over it! This time next year the pain will be gone.” No! He is deeply moved by the tears of Mary and her friends. Even the shortest verse in the Bible, “Jesus wept,” (“began to weep”) contains a message of comfort. He knows and understands human sorrow as we mere mortals stand crying at a graveside. We do not have to try to hide our feelings, or put on a brave front. The onlookers do not understand Jesus’ weeping. His tears are not a sign of hopelessness in the face of death, but of compassion and sorrow over the power of death, which must be broken by the Lord of Life.

**11:38–40:** Humanly speaking, everything points to the terrible finality of death. Lazarus has been dead for four days. His body, wrapped in cloth (probably with some preservative ointments between the folds), will by now have begun to decompose. Again, it is the ever-practical Martha who states the obvious. Why open the grave now? What is to be gained by looking at a dead body? Jesus has to remind her of His words to her a little while earlier (vv. 25–26). Has she so quickly lost the faith that she confessed so magnificently (v. 27)?

**11:41-44:** Jesus talks with His Heavenly Father—not to gain some power that He does not yet possess, but for the benefit of the onlookers. They must be reminded that He is the Son doing the work that the Father sent Him to do. One of the sheep hears the Shepherd’s voice (10:16). The Life calls a dead friend back to life (v. 25). The One who will raise the dead on the Last Day with the command of His voice now raises a man back to physical life in this world; see 5:28. At the command of Jesus, the grave must give up its captives. The miracle has happened: Lazarus comes out still wearing his bandages and probably squinting as his eyes adjust to the sunlight. What a sight!

### **Mark 12:28–34**

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus leaves Galilee in 10:1 and enters Jerusalem in 11:1. After Jesus inspects and attacks the Temple system (11:1–20), He has to deal with a number of confrontations; see 11:27–33; 12:13–17; 12:18–27. In 12:28–34, Jesus is approached by a scribe who asks Him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” The ensuing dialog is anything but confrontational. Jesus answers the scribe’s question (11:29–31), and the scribe seems happy with Jesus’ answer (11:32). He even goes on to say that to love God and neighbor is more important than offering whole burnt offerings and sacrifices (11:33). And Jesus commends him warmly!

Some comments: The scribe poses a typical rabbinic question, asking about the “most important” in a given class. Moses’ commandments were many. Which one takes precedence over all others? Jesus responds by quoting the daily prayer of Jewish people, the Great *Shema* (“Listen”); see Deuteronomy 6:4f. The biggest issue of all is the love of God alone, the love of Israel’s covenant-God. This allegiance is to be total. The Great *Shema* is to be the first—absolutely!

Love of neighbor is another matter; see Leviticus 19:18. This OT precedent is referred to and counseled everywhere in the New. When it first appears in Leviticus, it is contrasted with revenge against a fellow Jew—but the significance of “neighbor” had become much wider with the passing of the centuries. Prior to 138 AD, Rabbi Akiba wrote, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself”; this is the greatest general principal in the Torah” (*Sifra*, Lev. 19:18). Jesus welded these two commandments together—to make them inseparable.

Some who argue for the Jewish origins of a writing known as the *Didache* (where the two commandments occur side by side) say that it was already rabbinic practice to join them by Jesus’ day. However, others—including some contemporary Jewish rabbis—assert that it is very likely that Jesus was the first to foment a spiritual revolution by joining the two together—inseparably.

The questioner echoes Jesus’ response by changing but a few words and adding a familiar idea from the OT. The Jews did not speculate about the meaning of loving one’s neighbor “as yourself.” For them, it simply meant promoting the well-being of a fellow Jew, just as one would be pleased to have good things done to oneself.

The speaker offered a comparison uncommon among scribes. One cannot imagine Jesus praising him so enthusiastically for a rabbinic platitude. Setting fraternal love above ritual sacrifice—rather than on a par with it—may have been the special insight. Then, because a significant agreement had been reached between rabbi and pupil, the onlookers sink into silence. They ponder what Jesus, Who sets such challenging terms for entering God’s Kingdom, might understand about that Kingdom.

We would do well to remember that Jesus’ teaching on God’s will for His sons and daughters goes even

further than the insights offered in this passage. Jewish rabbis taught that:

- God gave Adam and Eve two commandments: love God and love neighbor.
- God gave Noah and his descendants (human race, all Gentiles) seven of the Commandments.
- God gave the Jewish people 613 commandments, plus hundreds of oral traditions.
- However, Jesus finally gives His brothers and sisters only one commandment (John 13:15, 34–35; 15:12–13).

The implications of Jesus' new single commandment are profound beyond definition!