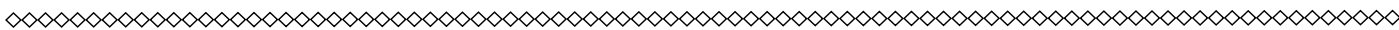




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many.

**Sermon Brief**  
**Text: Mark 10:13-16**  
**Title: Blessing the Children**  
Lorin L. Cranford

Seeking to faith-  
fully proclaim  
the whole coun-  
cil of God in  
scripture!



**INTRODUCTION**

Today is a very special day across our country. It is Mother's Day. This celebration has a fascinating history. The current celebration is worldwide in practice, although it is celebrated at different times of the year in different countries. The two primary dates are the second Sunday in May -- the most dominant celebration world wide -- and less wide spread is the celebration on the fourth Sunday of Lent, which comes out of the Mothering Sunday tradition in the UK. Most European countries, primarily except for France and the UK, follow the dominate pattern of the second Sunday of May.



The dominant pattern of celebration on the second Sunday of May began with Anna Jarvis in 1912 who began the Mother's Day International Association. She was passionate about the spelling of the title "Mother's Day" because she wanted the possessive singular form "Mother's" used as a way of stressing that each family was to honor their mother in this day, rather than a plural "Mothers' Day" that would have been a rather generic celebration of motherhood in general. And so we come today to honor mother's in our church. But Mrs. Jarvis had a point that I think remains valid: this celebration should be primarily to honor one's own mother as a family celebration. We as a church family so honor the mothers in our church but in this context of the primary emphasis being within each family unit in our church.

Today is also very special because we are dedicating two precious children to the Lord. The practice of a Baby Dedication service is a growing pattern in Evangelical churches world wide who practice believer's baptism and do not accept infant baptism as being scriptural. The practice has its basis in numerous scriptural texts reaching all the way back to Hannah's vow to God to give her son to the Lord, as she pledged in 1 Sam. 1:11, "O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head." For the Christian practice, the main text comes with Jesus blessing the children, as described in Mark 10:13-16,<sup>1</sup> with the gospel parallel texts in Matt. 19:13-15<sup>2</sup> and Luke 18:15-17.<sup>3</sup> Turn with me in your Bibles to Mark 10:13-16, which is our text for today:



13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14 But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." 16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

The setting for the text is the latter part of Jesus' public ministry as he and his disciples are making their way to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration when Jesus was arrested and crucified. In Mark 10, there come a series of episodes related to different topics as various individuals approach Jesus with questions and issues. Matthew follows the Markan pattern rather closely but Luke has his own sequence of events during this segment of Jesus' public ministry. Also Mark uses some of this language in a previous episode in 9:33-37<sup>4</sup> which is important for the Markan setting of our text.

<sup>1</sup>10.13 Καὶ προσέφερον αὐτῷ παιδία ἵνα αὐτῶν ἅψηται· οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ ἐπετίμησαν αὐτοῖς. 10.14 ἰδὼν δὲ ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἠγανάκτησεν καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς, Ἔφετε τὰ παιδία ἔρχεσθαι πρὸς με, μὴ κωλύετε αὐτά, τῶν γὰρ τοιούτων ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ. 10.15 ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ὃς ἂν μὴ δέξηται τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ ὡς παιδίον, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃ εἰς αὐτήν. 10.16 καὶ ἐναγκαλισάμενος αὐτὰ κατευλόγει τιθεὶς τὰς χεῖρας ἐπ' αὐτά.

<sup>2</sup>Mt. 19:13-15 (NRSV): 13 Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; 14 but Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." 15 And he laid his hands on them and went on his way.

<sup>3</sup>Luke 18:15-17 (NRSV): 15 People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. 16 But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 17 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

<sup>4</sup> Mk. 9:33-37 (NRSV): 33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What

From this episode, which in Mark's narrative provides us the most detailed account, we can learn several helpful insights about children and their importance to Christ and thus to us today. I want to stress three of them from this text today.

## BODY

### I. Jesus cares for children, vv. 13-14

13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14 But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

That Jesus loves children seems so normal and natural to us in our world today. But in his own time of the first Christian century his expression of caring love for children made him stand out as quite unusual and different from the norm in Jewish tradition, and even more so in Greco-Roman society. Among the Romans, children were to "be seen but not heard" in public life. They were valued, especially the boys, but were not allowed public exposure. The father of the family had absolute power of life and death over his children, which began with their birth and ended only at his death. The childhood of Roman children focused around their being educated and trained. The girls were taught primarily by their mothers at home, while the boys were taught either by slaves who were trained as teachers or in the third stage of Roman education the boys were sent off to Athens or Rhodes to attend one of the philosophical schools in order to complete their education. Daily family life was very formal since children were required to treat their father with absolute reverence, or else face the severest of physical punishments that could extend to execution.

Jewish family life in the first century for children was a little better but not a whole lot. Children were prized, again especially boys, but were expected to stay far in the background of life, especially public life. Their father was the absolute authority over their lives, although he did not have the same level of power of life and death as did his Roman counterpart. The girls were taught at home by their mothers, and the boys attended the synagogue where they received education in the Torah as well as in Greek philosophy etc. This was especially true in Diaspora Judaism and in northern Palestine, Galilee, where Jesus grew up. The boy's father was expected to train his son in his own craft and the son would pursue the same career skills as his father as he moved into adulthood. But for Jewish children to be an object of attention in public was highly unusual, and typically viewed as negative.

With this background one can better understand the attitude of the disciples, when they "spoke sternly" (ἐπετίμησαν) to the people who were seeking to bring children to Jesus for a blessing. None of the gospel writers specifically identify who were bringing these children to Jesus. The common assumption -- and its just that, an assumption -- is that they were the parents, or perhaps the mothers of these children. The terminology used for 'children' (παιδία and τὰ βρέφη) gives clear indication of the age of these children. Both Greek terms can denote children from birth to puberty, although τὰ βρέφη usually denotes infants, which Luke highlights to make the point of the extreme unusualness of this action by the adults. The disciples simply reflected common attitudes about children among Jewish people of that time. Jesus was busy answering questions from adults, they were making their way to Jerusalem for Passover -- there were far more important matters than to be interrupted and disturbed by noisy children gathering around the Lord.

Why would the parents break social norms in order to bring their children to Jesus? To be sure, Jewish writings from this period suggest that sometimes parents did bring their children to either a well known rabbi for a blessing, or, more commonly they brought their children to the synagogue leader for a blessing.<sup>5</sup> With the children facing a very uncertain future, particularly with the extremely high infant mortality rates of the ancient world, parents with concern for their children's future would seek to insure that future as much as possible. The blessing of a rabbi or synagogue leader could help secure that future. And so they were seeking to bring their children to Jesus as he was making his way to Jerusalem with the throngs of Jewish pilgrims streaming out of Galilee headed for Jerusalem and Passover.

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were you arguing about on the way?" 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

<sup>5</sup>There is no need to suppose any formal ceremony in the requested touch, and in the blessing by laying his hands on them in v. 16. To request such blessing from a distinguished visitor and 'holy man', especially one who already enjoyed a reputation as a healer in the area (3:7-8), need be no more than natural 'folk religion'; indeed, it need not necessarily be particularly religious. The later evidence for a custom of bringing children to rabbis for blessing and prayer on the Day of Atonement (*Sop.* 18:5) is an example of this natural tendency, but there is no reason to suppose, with J. Jeremias,<sup>15</sup> that it could happen on no other occasion and that therefore this incident must have taken place on the Day of Atonement." [Source: R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark : A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 2002), 395.]

The disciples, however, evidently felt that these parents were wasting Jesus' time with such actions, and thus they rebuked the parents (οἱ δὲ μαθηταὶ ἐπετίμησαν αὐτοῖς) with a verbal reprimand to not bother Jesus with such trivial matters. But when Jesus saw what was happening, "he was indignant" (ὁ Ἰησοῦς ἠγανάκτησεν) and rebuked the disciples for hindering the children from coming to him. The ingressive function of Aorist tense of the Greek verb is better translated as "he became indignant."<sup>6</sup> Jesus didn't often become angry during his public ministry,<sup>7</sup> but on this occasion he did, and at the disciples. Their actions reflected attitudes contrary to his toward children. And so he spoke rather bluntly to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." (Ἄφετε τὰ παιδία ἔρχεσθαι πρός με, μὴ κωλύετε αὐτά, τῶν γὰρ τοιούτων ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ).

What we discover here is that Jesus deeply cares for children, and for small children. He publicly reprimanded his disciples for their attitude and actions, so that the people standing around them could clearly understand his concern and care for children. Here we need to learn something important. Jesus had no children of his own. But he cared deeply for other people's children. From that model comes the challenge to us as a church to care for children as well. Quite naturally, as parents we care for our own children, but Jesus challenges us to care to children beyond our own. We are in the midst of developing a strong Children's Ministry in our church. I challenge you, as both men and women, to consider getting involved in this work. In many churches that I've had connection to over the past half century, some of the most effective children's workers were men. Several men work in the children's ministry at First Baptist Church in Shelby, NC, our home church in the US. And God blesses them in having a powerful impact through touching the lives of the children. Thus, I challenge you to prayerfully consider getting involved. Jesus set the example. We need to follow it.

## II. Jesus blesses the children, v. 16

16 And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Once Jesus finished rebuking the disciples, he not only 'touched' the children as the parents desired (v. 13, ἵνα αὐτῶν ἄψηται), he took the children in his arms and embraced them and laid his hands on them in blessing them (ἐναγκαλισάμενος αὐτὰ κατευλόγει τιθεὶς τὰς χεῖρας ἐπ' αὐτά). He did much more than the parents expected; certainly much more than the disciples expected. Two key points emerge out of this: 1) touching, and 2) blessing

**Importance of touching people.** In our world today, touching other people is very common and matter of fact. We do it without thinking about it. Especially is this true of young people in our city. In fact, as Claire and I travel about on the trains we often see kids 'touching' inappropriately with their public displays of supposed affection.

But in the world of Jesus, and in particular the Jewish world of Jesus, one used extreme caution in touching things and other individuals.<sup>8</sup> The danger of the other person making you ill was very real, even though why it could happen wasn't understood in that day. For Jewish people, however, the far more important reason had to do with their religious tradition. Before one could worship God in the temple at Jerusalem, he had to be ritually pure or clean. An unclean person would not dare approach God in worship for fear of being struck down instantly by divine wrath. First century Judaism, especially the Pharisaical branch of it, had developed elaborate interpretations of the OT purity codes in the Pentateuch that limited physical contact with other people rather severely. Thus, whenever a Jew touched someone else, he was taking a huge risk that the other person was 'clean' and wouldn't contaminate him religiously. This was why the Pharisees severely criticized Jesus for eating with 'tax collectors and sinners,'<sup>9</sup> since these people



<sup>6</sup>“But Jesus, having observed this, was indignant and said to them, ‘Permit the children to come to me. Do not forbid them.’” Jesus is indignant (ἠγανάκτησεν) over his disciples' behavior. The disciples themselves will a bit later be indignant at James and John for requesting the prime seats in Jesus' new government (10:41), and they will again be indignant when the woman anoints Jesus' head with expensive perfume (14:4).” [Source: Craig A. Evans, vol. 34B, *Word Biblical Commentary: Mark 8:27-16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 87.]

<sup>7</sup>“This is sometimes said to be the only example in the Gospels of Jesus being angry, but see 3:5 and the comments on 1:41 and compare the accounts of the cleansing of the temple. The variant reading in 1:41, however, employs a different Greek verb from the one here; and the cleansing accounts do not explicitly state that Jesus was angry.” [James A. Brooks, vol. 23, *Mark*, electronic e., Logos Library System; *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001, c1991), 158.]

<sup>8</sup>See the 157 instances of the English verb 'touch' in the NRSV translation as one example. In the Greek New Testament four separate Greek verbs can be translated as touch: 1) ἅπτω; 2) θιγγάνω; 3) προσψάύω; and 4) ψηλαφάω.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Matt. 9:9-13 as one of many instances in the Gospels.

were understood to be unclean and contact with them, even indirectly at the meal table through eating from common dishes, would bring down God's wrath on the person since he would have become unclean through table fellowship with these unclean people.

When these parents brought their children to Jesus for him to touch the kids, they were putting Jesus at great risk according to Jewish tradition. Perhaps this was part of the disciples' motivation for not allowing the children to reach Jesus, along with the rather negative attitude toward children interrupting adults in a public setting. From the existing Jewish literature regarding the emerging Jewish tradition of rabbis and synagogue rulers blessing children, we can detect frequently a motivation that bordered on the superstitious. Folks at times were convinced that the mere touch of a well know religious man would instantly insulate their kids from disease and guarantee a long, healthy life. In some mysterious fashion supernatural power would be transferred from this religious figure into the body of their children merely by touch!. Although none of the gospel writers infer such motivation by those bringing the children to Jesus, this seems to have been a dominating motivation for such actions during this time. And very likely was present in these parents who approached Jesus.

Thus Jesus faced a real challenge here. The request was merely to touch the children. But to have only done that could very well have signaled wrong understandings. It would have conformed to emerging Jewish traditions of the day and thus would have signaled that Jesus was just an ordinary Jewish rabbi.

**Nature of blessing children.** The parents just wanted Jesus to touch their kids, but Jesus did much, much more than that, as verse sixteen indicates: "And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them" (καὶ ἐναγκαλισάμενος αὐτὰ κατευλόγει τιθεὶς τὰς χεῖρας ἐπ' αὐτά). Two actions preceded Jesus pronouncing a verbal blessing on the children. First, he took them in his arms. That is, he put his arms around them and most likely they either sat in his lap or else stood next to him. He did much more than merely touch them. Second, he laid his hands on them. This action signaled invoking God's blessings on those whom the hands were touching. The language of the Greek text suggests, but doesn't clearly say, that Jesus placed his hands on their head in the fashion of the Jewish anointing of individuals found in the Bible.<sup>10</sup>

When Jesus blessed the children (αὐτὰ κατευλόγει), what did he do? Was it some sort of ritual? Did he speak a magical word to change the kids? Just what did he do? Quite interestingly, Mark uses a verb form that is only found here in the entire New Testament: κατευλογέω. It is an intensive form of the very common verb εὐλογέω, which is often used in the New Testament to refer to a petitionary prayer asking God to take positive action toward an individual. The other religious use of κατευλογέω comes in the Jewish apocryphal writing called the Book of Tobit two hundred years before Christ, and 11:17 records the use of this verb in a way that helps us understand better what Jesus did in blessing the children:

Before them all, Tobit acknowledged that God had been merciful to him and had restored his sight. When Tobit met Sarah the wife of his son Tobias, *he blessed her saying*, "Come in, my daughter, and welcome. Blessed be your God who has brought you to us, my daughter. Blessed be your father and your mother, blessed be my son Tobias, and blessed be you, my daughter. Come in now to your home, and welcome, with blessing and joy. Come in, my daughter." So on that day there was rejoicing among all the Jews who were in Nineveh.<sup>11</sup>

From this use one can see that the compound form κατευλογέω carries the same basic meaning as the root form εὐλογέω. The essential difference is that it merely intensifies the meaning of the root verb. What Jesus did in blessing the children was to asked the Heavenly Father to shower down His love and grace upon these children, along with their parents, so that they might ever honor God in their lives. Nothing magical. Just a simple prayer for God to bless these kids.

**Significance of the ceremony today.** Thus today we have conducted a Child Dedication Service in our church. What did we do? And what does this accomplish? First of all, we have sought to follow the example of Jesus in blessing the children. My holding the kids in my arms symbolically affirms that Jesus holds them in his arms and embraces them with love and grace. The prayer of blessing offered for Dinela and Yeri each in no way changed them through some mystical, magical process. What it did, instead, was to ask God to shower these precious children with His love and grace and to guide them and their parents to walk in the ways of the Lord all the days of their life. Our litany of dedication openly affirms our commitment as a church to stand with Edward and Monique as they seek to raise these two children in the ways of God. They have pledged before God and the church to be good Christian parents. We have promised them and God to help them do just that.

Hopefully we have begun a new tradition today in our church. We want to say openly and publicly that

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<sup>10</sup>In particular see 1 Tim. 4:14 ("Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you through prophecy with *the laying on of hands* by the council of elders."); 2 Tim. 1:6 ("For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through *the laying on of my hands*;..."), and Heb. 6:2 ("Therefore let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith toward God, 2 instruction about baptisms, *laying on of hands*, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. 3 And we will do this, if God permits.").

<sup>11</sup>Tobit 11:17 καὶ ὡς ἤγγισεν Τωβίτ Σαρρα τῇ νύμφῃ αὐτοῦ, *κατευλόγησεν αὐτήν* λέγων Ἔλθοις ὑγιαίνουσα, θύγατερ, εὐλογητὸς ὁ θεός, ὃς ἤγαγέν σε πρὸς ἡμᾶς, καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου καὶ ἡ μήτηρ σου. καὶ ἤγγισεν Τωβίθ Σαρρα τῇ γυναικὶ Τωβια τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ καὶ εὐλόγησεν αὐτήν καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῇ Εἰσελθοις ὑγιαίνουσα, θύγατερ, καὶ εὐλογητὸς ὁ θεός σου, ὃς ἤγαγέν σε πρὸς ἡμᾶς, θύγατερ, καὶ εὐλογημένος ὁ πατήρ σου, καὶ εὐλογημένος Τωβιας ὁ υἱός μου, καὶ εὐλογημένη σύ, θύγατερ, εἰσελθε εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν σου ὑγιαίνουσα ἐν εὐλογίᾳ καὶ χαρᾷ, εἰσελθε, θύγατερ.

we care for children and value them as precious gifts from God. To others outside our church we say in both word and deed, “We are a church sincerely seeking to follow the example of Jesus in embracing children.” Know that if God leads you to become a part of us, this is an important aspect of belonging to the IBC church in Cologne. We are deeply committed to family and seek to nurture family life in our church.

### III. Children become models of faith, v. 15

“14c for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. 15 Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

When Jesus rebuked the disciples, he based his desire to embrace the children on two inner connected foundations, which are expressed in verses 14 and 15.

**Children become models of faith to those desiring to enter the Kingdom:** “it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (τῶν τοιοῦτων ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ).<sup>12</sup> How does one enter the Kingdom of God? Not as an arrogant, self-assured adult! Rather, as a child. Just as a child looks to his parents in total dependence on them, so must we come to the Heavenly Father. We turn to God in absolute trust and reliance on Him for everything. We are fully persuaded that Almighty God loves us and will take care of us. We depend on Him for everything.

Such is hard to do. Our pride and self-centeredness often get in our way. We don’t want to humble ourselves before anyone! We cling to a false sense of self-assuredness that deceives us into thinking that somehow we can make it into Heaven on our own, without anyone’s help.

But Jesus blasts such delusion right out of the water. When a person genuinely comes to God, he must come like a child. God must be given freedom to take over complete control as our Lord and Master.

So my friend, do you wish to know God authentically? Clinging to your pride will forever prevent you from knowing Him. Humble yourself, and come to the Savior in childlike trust and dependence! That’s the only way possible!

#### **Welcoming the Kingdom as a child is also an entrance requirement:**

“Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ὃς ἂν μὴ δέξηται τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ ὡς παιδίον, οὐ μὴ εἰσέλθῃ εἰς αὐτήν). The further affirmation of the symbolical meaning of children for the Kingdom of God is set forth in the axiom of timeless spiritual principle in verse fifteen. It is couched from the negative, opposite angle to the previous declaration. And it is expressed in the original Greek by Mark in the most emphatic of ways possible. Ways usually not fully translatable into modern Western languages. In essence Jesus solemnly declares that whoever is unwilling to accept the demands of the Kingdom of God in childlike commitment has utterly no possibility of ever entering the Kingdom of God! Tones of intense seriousness permeate this statement of Jesus. No loophole around this is possible. Only one way exists to enter the Kingdom: childlike faith in God.



So my people, we must become children! Not childish! But child-like! We reach out to God in childlike faith and dependence on Him! We seek to please our Heavenly Father, just like a child wants to please his parents. We love our God just like a child loves his parents. We know that our God loves us and cares for us as a Father cares for his children.

### CONCLUSION

Wow! What a day today! We honor the mothers in our church. We say to them, “We esteem you. We value you! We treasure you as God’s gifts to us! We commit ourselves to pray for you. We stand ready to help you become all that God wants you to be.”

To the children of our church, we pledge to embrace them and seek to nourish them in Christian faith and commitment.

May God help us as a church!

<sup>12</sup>“Jesus’ views were not necessarily unique, for in later rabbinic literature there are some approximate parallels. According to *b. Sanh.* 110b Israelite children will enter the world to come: “Rabbi Aqiba said: ‘They [the children] will enter the world to come, as it is written, “The Lord preserves the simple” [Ps 116:6].’” On the diction *הַלְוֵיָהּ* *ḥā.ōlām habbā*, “the world [or age] to come,” compare Jesus’ statement in v 30 (τῷ αἰῶνι τῷ ἐρχομένῳ, “the coming age”); the terminology is identical. In some rabbinic traditions, children are regarded as pure, even without sin (*b. Yoma* 22b; *b. Nid.* 30b); “children meet the Divine Presence” (*Kallah Rab.* 2.9); indeed, God’s Presence follows them (*Qoh. Rab.* 1:5 §32). On Jewish traditions regarding blessing and laying hands on children, see Abrahams, *Studies* 1:118–20” [source: Craig A. Evans, vol. 34B, *Word Biblical Commentary : Mark 8:27-16:20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 87.]