

**COMMENTARY ON READINGS FOR SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 3, 2006
(Twenty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B)
(Deut 4:1-2, 6-8; Ps 15; Jas 1:17-18, 21b-22, 27; Mark 7:1-18, 14-15, 21-23)**

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This Sunday's readings have to do with God's "Law," really, divine teaching on how we should live. Actually, I now say "we," but originally, a major purpose of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch or "Law of Moses" (Torah really means "teaching," especially that of the Jewish priests) was the separation and distinction between Jew and Gentile. Mixing up of these two categories of people, as by intermarriage (see Solomon's fondness for foreign, that is, non-Jewish women, and what it led to, in 1 Kgs 11), inevitably led to idolatry. Thus a major purpose of the Torah was to create barriers between Jew and Gentile (non-Jews). We should keep in mind how important it was to teach Jews to stay away from pagans when they were all too eager to be with them and adopt their ways; had Jews done so, and assimilated, we might all be worshipping Caribbean, Mexican, Celtic or deities other than the God of Israel, whose worship would have disappeared with his people, or been adulterated and corrupted (see 2 Kgs 17:24-41 on the origin of the Samaritans).

The first reading is from Deut, the last book of the Torah. It exhorts to very strict observance of all the commandments; Jewish tradition would count 613. Many Christians take what is said about the Pharisees in the Gospels too uncritically, not taking into account that the beginnings of Christianity marked a bitter separation from Judaism, whose leaders were largely Pharisees. The Pharisees wanted to protect Jews from the kind of assimilation that led to loss of their distinctive identity. Jesus had a very different approach, that of gathering in the "lost sheep" ("sinners") of Israel. This was very radical, and lest we become "puffed up," try to remember the last time you invited prostitutes to dinner. We tend to protect *ourselves, our possessions and comfort*, the same way that Pharisees protected their religion, although all of us are prone to self-interest in any case.

The gospel reading demonstrates the bitter difference in outlook between Jesus and the Pharisees. Jesus goes to the heart of God's original will, but we should stop to think how "radical" this was. It was too radical for most Jews; Mark's audience was mostly Gentile.