

My daughter's wedding vows made me think about what it means to receive

Taking is possessing. Receiving is a gift.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [November 4, 2020](#) issue



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When my daughter requested some sample vows to look over for her wedding, I sent her the customary sheet I give to all couples. The eight vows I've compiled on that sheet reflect a diversity of traditions and linguistic styles. If a couple seems interested in writing their own vows, I encourage them to consider phrases from these samples, mixing and matching however they wish. "If you write your own vows from scratch," I tell them, "just don't make them too long or too syrupy. Remember: these are promises, not sentimental love poems."

When Rachel and Dave returned their 43-word draft, it was the opening line that caught my eye: "I receive you, Rachel/Dave, to be my wife/husband." I've performed nearly 400 weddings, and this is the first time anyone has suggested using the verb *receive* in their vows. Nor have I ever thought to consider it an option. Every one of the sample vows on my sheet begins with the words, "I take you."

When we take something, we feel possessive about it. If I'm standing at the Dunkin' Donuts counter selecting a baker's dozen for my officemates, I point at the trays on the sloped shelves and say, "Let's see. I'll take two chocolate frosted. I'll take three blueberry glazed," and so forth. And there's nothing wrong with feeling proprietary about the donuts I choose and then pay for.

But a spouse or partner for life isn't something we possess. In truth, they're more like a gift we receive.

Receiving is a virtue that most of us struggle with on a daily basis. When we give, we're in control. I can give you a compliment, a letter of reference, a Starbucks gift card. In each case, I'm setting the terms. I have power and options and discretion. When we receive, that's not the case at all. We're vulnerable and not in control. That's why receiving something can make us feel uneasy, dependent, or under obligation. Especially when we receive something for nothing, we often calculate how to return the favor. "The next lunch is on me," we say. Who wants to be indebted?

"Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it," said Jesus. If this passage baffles, don't look to the cuteness or sweetness of kids, as if our Lord were drawn to their dimples and innocent eyes. Think rather of children as champion receivers. By necessity. They're little bundles of need, totally dependent on the grace of grown-ups willing to look out for them. They happen to be much better at receiving than the rest of us.

"What do you have that you did not receive?" Paul writes to the Corinthian Christians. "And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" When I hear Paul talking like this, I think of the peculiar deliberation of some people in church wondering whether or not they should take communion. You don't take a gift any more than you take a spouse. Both are lively realities that we graciously receive, even when we don't comprehend or approve of every aspect within them.

As of yesterday, I have revised my template for wedding vows. The verb *take* is officially gone.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "From taking to receiving."