

This weekend's Gospel from St. Matthew is a challenging passage in a number of ways. First, on the level of translation, different manuscripts have slightly different wording of the passage translated as "If your brother sins against you...". Some of the oldest manuscripts omit the "against you" rendering the verse "if your brother sins..." This has significant implications because the former translation seems to indicate that we only have to worry about someone if they sin against us. The latter translation would indicate that we have responsibility for all of our brothers and sisters in the family of God. This latter translation is also more in keeping with our first reading from the book of the prophet Ezekiel.

The Lord tells Ezekiel that He is appointing him a watchman over Israel, "when you hear me say anything, you shall warn them for me". What we are talking about here is fraternal correction. Those who preach, deacons, priests, and bishops, have a special responsibility in this regard, but it is also part of our Christian discipleship. Why; because sin kills by destroying the soul. The Lord goes even further and tells Ezekiel that if he fails to speak everything the Lord asks of him and the sinner dies, the sinner will die because of his sin, but Ezekiel will die because of his failure to warn the sinner. These are strong words!!

In speaking about fraternal correction, St. Thomas Aquinas describes it as a work of love and a work of justice. Fraternal correction is a work of love because its object is the salvation of the sinner. It is an act of justice because conversion cannot occur if the truth is not proclaimed. Unfortunately, we live in an age that has reduced sin to something abstract. Pope Pius XII noted that the greatest sin of our time is not to believe in sin. This is a deception of the evil one. It is also the result of a hesitation on our part to look deeply at ourselves. When we take a hard look at someone else, we cannot fail to take a good hard look at our own lives as well. After all, we cannot be concerned about the speck in our brother's eye if we fail to remove the plank in our own.

The Gospel presents the manner in which this fraternal correction is to take place. First, you speak one on one with the person. If this fails you bring along others. Finally, if this fails, you refer the matter to the Church. If the sinner refuses to even listen to Christ and His Church, then the Gospel instructs that the sinner is to be treated as a gentile or tax collector; that is, he is to be separated from the community. This is one of the Biblical supports for the Church's practice of imposing penalties, especially excommunication. Such a decision is not made without a great deal of dialogue, pleading and praying. Yet, in the end, if the sinner refuses to repent and turn away from his sin; then, the Church has the obligation to speak the truth with authority. Even then, an excommunication is called a *remedial* penalty because its goal is to save to the sinner, *Wake up! Turn around! Repent!* In the end though, only the sinner can choose. God will not force anyone to love and serve Him. As the Scriptures remind us, *if you love me, keep my commandments.*

The reality is that sin is destructive. Failing to repent can result in the loss of salvation and the eternal reality of hell. While perhaps not popular in this day and age, it is nonetheless an eternal truth that needs to be taught and proclaimed because the loss of one soul is too much. There are so many things that hold us bound and destroy souls today. These things very often are the topics that preachers refuse to preach or avoid preaching. Abortion, contraception, homosexuality, adultery, and pornography are only a few of the topics that destroy souls and families today. All too often in an attempt to placate or avoid conflict, no one says anything about these issues. This, however, is not being faithful to the Gospel message which must always be proclaimed with charity and truth.