

Fraternal Correction Gospel Reading

Lectionary: 127 (23 OT A)

Matthew 18:15–20

Jesus said to his disciples: “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector.

“Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again, amen, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

Discussion Questions

1. Why is it so hard to talk about sins in the way Jesus commands—privately, face-to-face? What are we tempted to do instead? Why?
2. What does Jesus *not* tell us to do when we are telling another their fault?
3. Jesus says, “If he listens to you, you have won over your brother.” Notice that He does not say, “You have justified yourself,” or “You have proven yourself right.” What does this tell us about what Christian correction ultimately trying to accomplish?
4. What is the difference between fraternal correction and criticism? venting? gossip? “calling someone out”? What are the internal qualities in our hearts and the external qualities of the correction itself that must obtain for it to be a true act of Christian charity or justice?
5. Jesus prescribes a gradual process: one-on-one, then a small group, then the whole community. What is the wisdom of this progression? What dangers arise when we skip a step and go directly to a larger group? Conversely, what dangers arise when we fail to involve others when the situation requires it? Which tendency do you think is more common today: avoiding necessary correction, or correcting others too quickly and too publicly?
6. When are some contexts in which it may be prudent to avoid or delay making a fraternal correction? When might it be obligatory to make a fraternal correction?
7. How does excessive emphasis on individual autonomy make us reluctant to accept or offer fraternal correction? How could one intentionally seek communion with the other person when in a situation of needing to accept or offer a correction?
8. What does it take to be open to correction?

Living Tradition

“He does not say ‘accuse him’ or ‘punish him’ or ‘take him to court.’ He says ‘correct him.’ ... The one who is healthy must go to the one who is sick. ... Make your cure easy to accept.”
—**St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 60 on the Gospel of Matthew* (c. AD 407)**

“Consequently the correction of a wrongdoer is twofold...” One kind of correction addresses the harm of the sin to the sinner himself, and is directed toward the sinner’s own good and amendment; “this is fraternal correction properly so called,” and it is an act of charity. The other addresses the wrongdoer’s sin insofar as it “is hurtful to others, and especially to the common good. This correction is an act of justice.”

—**St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 33, a. 1***

“[Fraternal correction] is a matter of precept [i.e., is obligatory], [only] in so far as it is necessary for that end [the sinner’s amendment], but not so as we have to correct our erring brother at all places and times.” —**St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST II-II, q. 33, a. 2***

“Christian admonishment, for its part, is never motivated by a spirit of accusation or recrimination. It is always moved by love and mercy, and springs from genuine concern for the good of the other. As the Apostle Paul says: ‘If one of you is caught doing something wrong, those of you who are spiritual should set that person right in a spirit of gentleness; and watch yourselves that you are not put to the test in the same way’ (Gal 6:1). In a world pervaded by individualism, it is essential to rediscover the importance of fraternal correction, so that together we may journey towards holiness.” —**Pope Benedict XVI, Lenten Message, 2012**

Weekly Challenge

Be open to correction.

This week, ask the Lord to show you where you yourself need correction. Ask Him to provide you with brothers and sisters who will help you discover that need.

When someone offers feedback, provides a suggestion for improvement, or even points out a fault, first give thanks to God for having answered your prayer. Resist the temptation to defend yourself, explain yourself, or dismiss what they say.

Instead, pause and ask: “Lord, help me to understand what you want me to see with this person’s help.”

“If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.” (Ps. 95:8)