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Lawrence E. Frizzell, Seton Hall University

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Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ

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Lawrence E. Frizzell

What would you do if you suddenly became aware that a family member or close friend had embarked on a path toward ruin? How would you touch on the subject so that the person would recognize the danger? Direct confrontation might bring defensiveness and denial, and perhaps even a violent reaction. A more subtle approach is required. Admonition is perhaps the most difficult among the spiritual acts of mercy.

The prophets of Israel, like other great teachers, tried to admonish their contemporaries about trends toward evil and to encourage them to practice fidelity to the Covenant. Isaiah wanted to warn the leaders of Jerusalem and Judah that God expected a faithful obedience to the commandments which accompanied the gift of the Covenant at Mount Sinai. Knowing the power of music to create a mood favorable to his message, Isaiah sang about a friend's careful attention to his vineyard so that the vines he planted would bear fruit. Alas, the produce was inedible! Then Isaiah asked his audience to judge between him and his vineyard. After threatening that disaster would come upon the ungrateful vines, the prophet shocked them by declaring that the vineyard belongs to the Lord of hosts (his friend) and represents the house of Israel! The cherished vine represents the men of Judah (5:7). Drawn into an appreciation of the song and its lyrics, the listeners suddenly realized that they were called to judge themselves! This self-knowledge of limitations and sins should be the first step in a process of responding to God's gifts.

Unlike the oak or olive tree, the vine is fragile and needs constant care and protection. The trunk and branches of large trees have many uses, but a dead vine does not even make good firewood. So prophets and psalmists often depicted the chosen people as a delicate vine planted by God, under the protective care of their Redeemer. The grapes produced by the vine symbolized the deeds of loving service rendered to God by his people. At the Last Supper Jesus developed this image to emphasize that union with him is essential. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5).

Probably the most difficult people to reach with an admonitory message are the leaders of a community, political or religious. Jesus addressed two parables to "the chief priests and elders of the people" who challenged his authority (Mt 21:23-27). It was their prerogative to ask for a teacher's credentials; Jesus wanted them to look as well at their own use of authority. Like all others, they too stand under the scrutiny of divine judgment. The measure of their reward or punishment will be the manner in which they dealt with others.
"The kingdom of God will be taken away from you (the leaders) and given to a people that will produce its fruit" (21:43). All authority in the human order is a participation in the royal authority (kingship) of God (Jn 19:11). Leaders whose work does not produce fruit worthy of divine approbation will lose their prerogatives. This parable does not judge the Jewish people as such, nor does "a people producing fruit" refer directly to Gentiles. Rather, the message is a warning that the leaders of Jesus’ day must recognize that God's cultivation of the vineyard challenges them. They must reflect on the surprising way in which the divine purpose is achieved and exercise authority accordingly. "The stone that the builder rejected has become the cornerstone" (Ps 118:22-23). This statement echoes the same principle as expressed by the prophet: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord" (Is 55:8).

As proclaimed in the Sunday liturgy, these passages of sacred Scripture invite us to examine our conscience. How do we act as individuals and as members of the Church when someone puts a finger on our flaws and faults? Do we approach the task of correcting others in a spirit of prayer and circumspection?