

FROM THE PASTOR

My dear brothers and sisters,

Today we finish looking at the **Spiritual Works of Mercy**. Remember, there are seven of them: forgiving wrongs willingly, bearing wrongs patiently, consoling the sorrowful, praying for the living and the dead, counselling the doubtful, instructing the ignorant, and admonishing sinners. This week, we will look at **Admonishing Sinners**.

Admonishing sinners may be the most misunderstood work of mercy. In fact, many would say that it is not merciful at all! This attitude, I would guess, comes from a couple of different places. One is that many times when people correct us *it is done not out of love*, but out of a sense of superiority or frustration. When this is so, the good that may have come from the correction is often lost, no matter how true or needed the correction is. The work of mercy without love *ceases to be merciful*. Correction of the sinner must always be done in love.

Another reason admonishing sinners may not be seen as merciful is due to the relativism that permeates our culture. Relativism is the belief that there is no objective, absolute truth (but this is too big a topic for this article!). Relativism would say that there is no “sin,” but that what is good for me might not be good for you; what is bad for me might not be bad for you. Under this philosophy there is no such thing as sin, only opinion. (If this were the case, one could only say, “We don’t like what Hitler did,” not that it was *evil*, as it truly was.) How can you admonish a sinner if there is really no such thing as sin?! Some of what spurs on this understanding is that we have to encounter our frailty and brokenness – how can I, who am a good person, do something that I believe to be evil? The erroneous response to this question is either: a) it really is evil, and so I am a bad person; or b) I am good, so this isn’t really evil. We have lost a sense that a good person *can* really do evil things, and so need to repent.

In this tension is where we have the opportunity to meet God’s mercy. If we know and believe God to be a loving Father, we can run to Him for mercy. The analogy of a child is helpful. Take for example a child who is rejected by his parents. He will certainly not run to his parents to tell them his faults, and thereby intensify their rejection. But if you take a child who knows that she is loved by her parents no matter what she does. She can throw herself into her parents’ arms when she has done something bad or stupid, because she knows that she is loved! You see, if we understand the truth that almighty God truly loves us unconditionally, we don’t have to reject that there is real, objective sin. Nor do we have to reject that we are good, amidst our mistakes and sins. We can run to our God, facing our sin with His love, and be embraced by His infinite mercy.

I have gone far afield, so let’s come back. Admonishing sinners is a work of mercy because it is a way to draw people back into God’s loving embrace, **warning** people of the danger they are in. What do I mean by this? Have you ever seen the movie *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* with Steve Martin (Neal) and John Candy (Del)? (SPOILER ALERT!) At one point, Neal and Del are riding on the highway at night, but, unknowingly, in the wrong direction. Across the highway, there is a couple in another car trying to get their attention: they shout, “YOU’RE GOING THE WRONG WAY!” Del replies, “How would he know where we’re going?” and ignores the correction. They shout again, “YOU’RE GOING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION!...YOU’RE GOING TO KILL SOMEBODY!” Del thinks they’re crazy and brush them off again. It is only as the two semis are on top of them that they realize how close they are to death.

The Del and Neal couldn’t see the danger they were in and thought the couple were crazy, off base, and rude. Yet the correction of the couple was the most loving, merciful thing they could do for Del and Neal – to save them. And so it is with correcting sinners. **SIN IS DEATH**. There is no other way to say it. It is not breaking rules or playing around...it is death. This death is not just in this life, though, but ETERNAL DEATH (which is infinitely worse!). When we see someone on the road to death – going in the wrong direction – the most loving and merciful thing to do is lovingly to correct them. The cautions from above taken into account: the correction should not be done in a spirit of superiority or pride, but out of a sense of care for the person we’re correcting. On the other side, we must also strive to be open to the correction of those who love us, even when we don’t want to hear what they have to say.

Let us pray that in this Year of Mercy, we may learn how to give proper, loving, merciful correction to sinners, and to receive correction with humility and openness.