These readings call us to be mindful of situations in which we, as Christians, have a duty to confront one another. They don’t make for comfortable reading because we often put such a high value on keeping the peace and minding our own business.

Now Ezekiel was both a prophet and a priest, entrusted by God to teach the People of God the ways of the Lord and the distinction between virtue and vice, holiness and sin.

Remember that we interpret Scripture according to four different senses: literal, spiritual, allegorical, and moral. The moral sense of this Reading primarily applies to those who are in a similar situation to Ezekiel in the Church, namely, the members of the hierarchy: the pope, bishops, and priests. One of the roles of the hierarchy is to warn the Church and the world of wickedness that leads to our death.

It is the responsibility of the bishop and the priests who assist him clearly to warn the Church—and the world, too, if it is listening—of dangers, of sins which lead to death, which is precisely why they are called mortal sins. I can understand why this is not done more than it is—it is a very uncomfortable thing for a parish priest to speak openly about sins which are widespread and popular. The parish priest, like anyone, would prefer to be liked by everyone. After Mass it’s awkward to stand at the back of Church and shake hands with a whole bunch of people you have just strongly rebuked against sin.

This weekend poses a good opportunity for us to pray for courage on the part of the hierarchy. We need leadership that is not afraid to speak out about the favorite sins of our age, which all seem to be offenses against matrimony. These offenses are widely practiced and tolerated and frequently not even recognized as sins. They need to be addressed clearly and publicly. It ought not to be possible to be especially raised a Catholic and never hear a clear explanation of why these activities are unacceptable and lead to spiritual (and sometimes even physical) death.

The First Reading does not simply apply to the hierarchy, however. All who are baptized do have a prophetic role in our society. You don’t “get off the hook.” You do need to warn family members, coworkers, friends, and neighbors about behaviors that are leading to their ultimate death. Obviously this takes a great deal of love, tact, and prudence—but if we remain silent we are tacitly condoning evil.

The Responsorial Psalm puts the shoe on the other foot. We don’t hear a call to rebuke the sinner, but to accept the rebuke when we are the sinner.

The Second Reading is another installment in our continuous reading through Romans and we can see two implications to this important and difficult Christian practice of fraternal correction:

First, we need to remember that sin is a lack of love. This definition really hits home when we
think of the popular/celebrated sins of our society, which tend to be sexual in nature, are failures of love, failures to act in others’ best interest and to treat them with their full dignity as people created in the image and likeness of God. Even if we think, in the moment, that we are “loving” someone by committing or condoning one of these acts. Love has an objective aspect. It’s not just a subjective, personal feeling. You may really like someone, but if you mistakenly give them poison rather than medicine, your act is not truly loving. Love is now confused with “niceness,” with agreeing with whatever a person wants.

Secondly, a rebuke, when made with a correct intention, is also an act of love. It is not loving to overlook the fact that people are in sin. Of course, it is also quite possible to rebuke people out of arrogance and self-righteousness. And, sometimes, we may have a right intention in offering a rebuke, and nonetheless be perceived as arrogant, which is painful. We understandably want to avoid the risk of appearing self-righteous, so we avoid confronting others. Sometimes our failure to rebuke is motivated by self-love. We want to avoid the pain of possibly being rejected. We commonly sacrifice The Ultimate Truth and being authentic for the sake of social comfort.

In the Gospel Jesus provides us with instructions about the proper way to confront others within the Church:

Jesus’ words takes the message of Ezekiel and directs it to, as verse one tells us, to the “disciples”, which Tradition has taken to mean the Twelve, who are the proto-hierarchy of the Church. The guidelines Jesus gives are intended to inform them in their roles, as those who govern the Church, and those who will dispense the forgiveness of sin in the sacrament of confession.

When confronting sin within the Church, the keywords are private and personal. One begins by going to the person in private, and making a personal appeal. The goal is reconciliation, not condemnation.

This principle applies to all life within the Church. When we are offended our tendency is first to go and tell all our friends and anyone else who will listen about how so-and-so did something terrible to us. This makes no progress towards reconciliation and justice. It also starts a cycle of gossip and escalating exaggeration.

If personal dialogue does not resolve the issue, Jesus instructs us to bring along one or two others. The Lord makes reference to Deuteronomy 19:15:

“A single witness shall not prevail against a man for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed; only on the evidence of two witnesses, or of three witnesses, shall a charge be sustained.”

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the Church.
This would be a public ecclesiastical rebuke for grave sin.

*If he refuses to listen even to the Church, treat him as you would a tax collector or sinner.*

This teaches that the judgment of the Church is the final court of appeal on earth. Treatment as “a tax collector or sinner” means a withdrawal of recognition of the person as a member of the Church, which later in history would come to be called “excommunication.” The person is “outside of” (ex) the *communion*; hence, *excommunication*.

But Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners (Matt 9:10). So one does not give up on the excommunicated member. The excommunicated person is moved into the category of persons who need to be evangelized, who need to embrace the fullness of Jesus Christ, and to turn away from sin. If they “won’t listen even to the Church,” they do not realize that the Church is the mystical Body of Christ that acts with Christ’s authority on earth, which is a central truth of the Gospel. So they have not truly grasped the Gospel, and again must be re-evangelized.

Excommunication is not a permanent status for anyone. Even excommunicants have become Saints! Hippolytus was a priest in Rome in the 3rd century; and he felt that the Church was too quick to give absolution to grave sinners, such as adulterers, and so he allowed himself to be elected as a rival bishop of Rome, termed an anti-pope, of a schismatic sect. Under the persecution of the Roman Emperor Maximus Thrax, Pope Pontian was arrested sent to a labor camp on the island of Sardinia. Hippolytus too was given the same treatment. And then a beautiful thing happened, good came out of evil, while they were in the labor camp, Pope Pontian heard the confession of the Anti-Pope Hippolytus and Hippolytus reconciled with the Church, no longer excommunicated, and died a martyr of the faith.

*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.*

This authority to establish the correct interpretation of divine given personally to Peter, which he heard in the Gospel again at Mass just a few Sundays ago, is now also conferred to the Twelve as a body, including Peter. The Catholic Church has understood this to mean that the Church speaks authoritatively either through Peter (and his successors, the popes) or the Twelve (that is, the bishops united with the Holy Father, i.e. an ecumenical council).

*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.*

This does not confer power to any group of Christians that agree together about something,
parents you’ve had this experience I’m sure, when your children come up to you and tell you that they’ve all decided that they don’t have to go to bed yet. Just because the four of them have reached that agreement doesn’t change the rule that they must go to bed at 10.

This address to the Twelve reminds us too here that the assistance of the Father is promised to the Apostles and their successors who will be responsible for establishing the New Israel (the Church) and also for dealing pastorally for those who have difficulty accepting all the demands of the Gospel. God will guide them through these difficulties if they seek his will in prayer.

*For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.*

Christ is present in his Church: Jesus is the source of all her wisdom, love, and authority. Jesus gives Her the ability to speak the word of warning to individuals and society as a whole—but always with the intent that we may all learn to act in love (Rom 13:8).