

Your Concrete Weekly Devotionals

November 2017

by Rob LoAlbo

Join us in spirit every Thursday at 9:00 PM, and pray with us for 10 minutes. These devotionals are posted on Facebook every week to assist in that prayer and commitment. For those not on Facebook, below are those posted weekly devotionals. Use them with us as a way to join our prayer group.

We look forward to “seeing” you there!

November 2 – Resisting the Urge to Prove Them Wrong



As my nine-year old son grows up, I’ve noticed not only a streak of independence developing in him but also a mild streak of defiance. I’m told this will only get worse as he enters his teens. As such, we will tell him to do something at a certain time, and he will try to maintain his enjoyable activities as long as possible before he has to do what is needed of him. His desires for what he wants to do are stronger than what he has to do: typical youth. I can’t really complain: he’s a great kid. In fact, he’s more compassionate and thoughtful than most others his age. It’s just that sometimes, at that age, they want to have all the power with none of the responsibilities.

For example, the other day he was told that he could have 15 minutes of play time on his computer tablet playing games, watching videos, whatever he wanted to do to unwind. Of course, 15 minutes came and went, and just like anyone that age, he didn’t alert us to the fact that he had gone over his time limit.

Giving him a few minutes of grace time, I went into his room to let him know that his time was up. I was greeted with an argument about how much time he actually had.

“Okay, 15 minutes are up. It’s time to put your tablet away.”

“You and mom said 30 minutes.”

“I’m pretty sure it was 15.”

“No, it was 30. I’m sure of it.”

At this point, I walked out of the room, as I didn’t want to get into a back and forth argument that was clearly not introducing any new evidence to the discussion. As I walked down the hall, I heard a young, squeaky, but frustration-filled voice yell, “Fine! You win!” That exclamation was then followed by several slamming of materials around the room with a few stomps of the feet. It was clear that he was upset, and my first inclination was to respond by addressing his escalating behavior and faulty logic. My inner voice wanted to engage him about how this wasn’t a contest, that I was right in telling him how long he had, that he was wrong to get mad, along with a host of other indignities I had suffered at the hand of this small human being. Yet, I decided to choose a different approach, one of non-confrontation, as a power struggle wasn’t the answer.

We are challenged for power daily in a multitude of situations. The grocery store customer in front of us who has 22 items in a 10-item line, the car that slowly pushed into our lane when we were doing the speed limit, the co-worker that leaves the office microwave dirty when we just cleaned it – all of the situations have the same setup in common: we are doing what we are supposed to be doing, and someone else is challenging the system at our expense. We are in the right, and they are not, and they are daring us to try to do something about it. Although the situations are common, it is our reaction to those situations that often define our character and who we are. We desire to correct them and show them how they are wrong and we are right; we want to feel the cathartic pleasure of knocking them down a peg and feeling better about ourselves because we were the ones who were sticking to the rules and staying on the right path. Righteous indignation, indeed.

However, being right doesn’t always mean that we should speak up and correct. Often times instead of bringing logic and righteousness to an argument, we end up just bringing a bigger mallet. Suddenly, the rude driver becomes the angry, dangerous driver, arguments break out in the supermarket, and office relationships become sabotaged. Righteousness doesn’t always bring peace and often times just makes a situation worse. When someone confronts with power, a confrontation in return isn’t rooted in love, just in our own ego.

Christ also knew this fact, and followed that advice when he was brought in front of the Sanhedrin to be charged with crimes. Instead of proving everyone wrong, Christ chose another way: “Finally two came forward and declared, ‘This fellow said, ‘I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.’” Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, ‘Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?’ But Jesus remained silent” (Matthew 26.60-2). Christ chose to not get into a power struggle with these men, as He knew that nothing good would come out of it. He saw the bigger picture, that a fight here would detract from the larger issue at hand: man’s salvation.

He may have had the desire to prove them wrong and present His glory right then and there, but He knew that choosing love over righteousness was better.

So instead of fighting with my son, I came back in a minute later, eating a big bag of Cheetos, and I offered him some. He stopped, pondered the offer, and dug in. Peace was achieved not through confrontation but with an offer of snacks. It was not a fight to be had. What would I possibly gain by proving him wrong and verbally engaging him in a power struggle where tempers would flare and love would most definitely not prevail? The bigger picture is the love I would like to cultivate and maintain with him, not a daily struggle of who's right and who's wrong. And when someone conversely tries to engage him in a power struggle, I want his first response to be rooted in a desire for love and forgiveness, not dominance and personal victory.

For us, the desire for harmony needs to overcome the desire to prove ourselves right. We need offerings of peace when others test our resolve. It is important to see the larger picture at hand, one where Christ's example is seen through our response and His love is continued through our words and actions. This week, when tested by others' wrongs, when you want to offer conflict, make an offer of peace. Christ is not seen when we seek to dominate with righteousness, but instead when others bring a sword to a fight, and we bring an offer of love (or Cheetos). Amen.

November 9 – *When Limited Evidence Limits Our Decision-making Ability*



The other morning, I was awakened to the sound of hammering from next door. I really despise the lack of consideration when it comes to noise in the early morning hours. Nothing burns me more than someone doing construction while the rest of us are trying to sleep. I imagined going over

there in my self-righteousness and yelling at that person, mentioning how thoughtless and selfish they were being by making that much noise at so early a time. I begrudgingly opened my eyes in anger and annoyance, only to notice that the clock read almost 10:00 AM, and that my neighbor was not in the wrong: I had overslept.

Incorrect assumptions based on limited evidence often incorrectly drive our actions and decisions to misguided ends. We take what we have in front of us and figure we know the best course of action based on that evidence. As a result, we end up making such wrongheaded decisions that we end up looking silly or foolish in the process. When we make uninformed decisions, our word is tarnished, our reputation sullied, and the amount of trust we get in the future is limited. There is almost no situation or turn of events that benefits from a decision that doesn't consider all of the facts and scenarios.

Sometimes it's easily chalked up to the sweet, endearing innocence of our age, such as when I am playing basketball against my 9-year-old son and his two friends, the three put their arms out to measure them against each other to see who has the longest arm, as that person must be the best at basketball. Or when they decide to "huddle up" before a basket and give each other code names when passing, thinking that I'll be so confused by the changes that I won't know which way to turn. (You can imagine that I figured it out fairly quickly.) It's adorable to watch at that age, but when age is no longer an excuse for our uninformed assumptions, we need to rethink our approach.

For example, the other day, I mentioned to my class that I often participate in a podcast about superhero culture, and that I had recently recorded an episode that delves into the Spider-Man mythos. I encouraged them to listen to it, as it was relevant to the unit we are currently tackling, the role of superheroes in our culture. A few hours later, I was called down to the office by my assistant principal and principal to attend a closed-door meeting. By the tone of their voices and looks on their faces, I could tell I was in trouble. I sat down and was told that a few students had come to administration and told them that I was maliciously writing about the school in an online blog, which is nothing close to a podcast about superheroes. After revealing all of the evidence to my bosses, they sheepishly closed their laptops and apologized, as they had received incorrect information. Apparently, the students who came forward did not have all the correct facts, and had emotionally reacted to a situation where further investigation was needed, and the administrators who listened to them just assumed that this information was true. Being a generally good-natured person, I laughed off the experience and now recall it as a funny story.

Yet, other times, we are not as lucky. Assumptions can have detrimental, sometimes catastrophic results. Assumptions in manual jobs can result in faulty, even dangerous construction. Assumptions by an athlete can develop into a missed score or even a loss. Assumptions in our relationships can lead to missed connections and breakups. And possibly most dangerously so, assumptions in our faith can lead to breakdowns of trust, churches that split, and salvation opportunities lost. To an extreme, assumptions can cause fanaticism and wars.

The author of Proverbs, in addition to the multitude of other common-sense suggestions, offers sage advice when it comes to how to avoid assumptions and acting without the proper amount of evidence: "To answer before listening—that is folly and shame... In a lawsuit the first to speak seems right, until someone comes forward and cross-examines" (18.13, 17). To avoid failure, embarrassment, and wrongheaded decisions, the author encourages us to listen and wait. Patiently *listening* to all of the evidence first and avoiding responding immediately can help us make a fully-realized, informed decision or statement. Additionally, *waiting* for more evidence instead of being the first to jump into the argument allows for a fully-formed decision or statement, one that reflects age and wisdom. By taking our time, we can spare ourselves the embarrassment of foolishness and instead reflect thoughtful consideration.

So how can we steer ourselves into that direction? First, we need to be less rash. So many times, our decisions and statements are driven by emotion. By taking emotion out of the equation, we can thoughtfully and carefully consider the situation. Lessening the effect that emotion has on us helps us to make clearheaded, informed decisions. To establish that practice, we need to work on our meditative life. Taking the time to quiet ourselves and listen to what God has to offer helps us to be informed. Quieting ourselves and our surroundings leads to a meditative life, one where we speak less and listen more. This week, take a few minutes out of each day to just sit and be still. Quiet your surroundings and yourself. Build up patience and develop your listening skills. Through stillness and calmness, we can avoid the trappings that come with assumptions and be led towards a less foolish, more informed life. Amen.

November 16 – *Little People, Big Wisdom*

This being the fall, my seniors are now in the college application process, which puts me square in the middle of letters of recommendation writing. It's not a required task for teachers but a courtesy to their former students. Thus, it's work in addition to my work. However, I'm happy to be a part of the process of seeing them getting accepted into their dream colleges and embracing the unknown futures before them. Also, it allows me to gently reminisce about how these students contributed to my class in a meaningful way, as I have many that have made a lasting impact.



In the letter, I traditionally break up the recommendation writing duties into two areas: academic and personal, how they are as a student and how they are as a person. In the first part, I discuss their writing abilities, how they contributed to discussions, and an anecdote or two about their experiences in my classroom. The second part of the letter addresses what their character is like, who they are when no one is seemingly watching. With the select few, I also discuss how they socially and supportively interact with others and how they balance their life, time, and efforts towards a number of commitments ranging from academics, athletics, extra-curricular activities, volunteer work, and possibly job employment. What often develops from these observations is how they are a tremendous role model for others. People look to them

for example and can't help but follow as a result. They become public figures not by means of self-promotion but through true leadership: they work harder than anyone else does.

Now, it's very easy to look at these high school seniors and think that it's adorable that they are great models for their peers and to proudly smile at how hard they are working, but perhaps we are too shortsighted in seeing it that way. Perhaps there is much to be learned in these teenagers' examples. Maybe we should look at how these individuals are role models for us adults, as well. Maybe their example is one being set not just for the building, but for the community and beyond. We claim that children are the future leaders, but maybe they are the current leaders, too.

In our house, my nine-year old son has an infinite more amount of wisdom than I do when it comes to comforting his mother, my wife. When she becomes stressed out and at her wits end, I try to cheer her up in all the wrong ways, sometimes with choices that just exacerbate the situation. However, when I observe my son approach her during these times and model a different, more empathetic approach that considers other aspects of her personality, I see her façade melt as he helps her forget her troubles with just the right words and actions. Despite his age, he sets forth a model for me, showing me that wisdom can come at any age and that leaders are not always those with experience but are those with insight.

We too often confuse age for wisdom and youth for foolishness, but I know plenty of old foolish people, so by default, there must be young wise people. We quickly dismiss young wisdom and example, as it seems to be our jaded nature to do so. We think that if the bearers of ideas and concepts are young, then they must not know what they are talking about. When we do, though, we then miss out on the blessings that are being offered in their examples when we can't see beyond their age.

Similarly, when the apostle Paul took young Timothy under his wing in his ministry, Paul could see not only the potential in him, but also how tremendous a leader he currently was, too. Being twenty years his senior, Timothy looked up to Paul as a leader and mentor, but what Timothy often failed to realize was that despite his age, Paul looked up to him as a leader as well, a result of Timothy's model-like behavior that was on display for everyone. In 1 Timothy, Paul encourages Timothy to not let his age be a stumbling point for others, as his ministry was strong and worth listening to no matter what age Timothy was: "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity" (4.12). Timothy was only around thirty-five during this key part of his ministry, and as his teaching flew in the face of so many of the elders, Timothy was looked down upon, usually because of his age and lack of life experience. Paul's words to Timothy encourage him to overcome the discouragement that sometimes comes with being young and trying to be a leader.

Young people have just as much to offer as their older counterparts do, sometimes even more. They possess a wisdom not tainted with pessimism that settles in as a result of our own experiences and failures. The problem with us, the older generation, comes from the lack of humility we possess, as we feel that we know better. If we can take a moment and swallow that pride, we might be able to open ourselves up to wisdom that can significantly benefit our lives. If we can spend time examining the given wisdom, and not the age of the carrier of that wisdom, we can grow as individuals and draw from the leadership of those that we too often overlook. This week, ask God for humility and wisdom and be prepared to receive great gifts in very small packages. Amen.

November 23 – *When the Hits Just Keep on Coming*

I never had a dog growing up. I was never really close with animals, either. So when I married what was clearly a dog person, I knew my canine-less days were numbered. That's when we brought home Elinor, our rescued black lab. When we first met, she walked over to me and flopped right into my lap. We were best friends from the start, and my heart quickly melted as I immediately learned the joys of living with

man's best friend. That was sixteen years ago.



Surprisingly, Elinor is still around, even if she isn't all there. She still likes her walks, although at a moderate speed so she can arthritically hobble down the road. Her eyes are a bit clouded over and can't quite see the way she

used to, and her hearing is nominal at best. Dementia seems to be settling in, so she has her good days and her bad ones. Yet, she's still with us, and we still love her, although her life for us can be quite difficult at times.

You see, because of the shape she's in, she doesn't always respond to her environment as she should. We've found her in a corner waiting for a non-existent door to open, begging for food immediately after dinner because she forgot that she just ate, and following us around the house for hours getting to know us because she doesn't remember who we are. Yes, we love her, but it's a constant test of that love to see how far and deep that love goes. We try to laugh a little when she's having "an Elinor moment," because our appropriate choices for emotionally dealing with her are limited, but our hearts are with her, as we know she loves us despite what she does.

We would never let anything happen to Elinor. She's our family, and we'd do anything for those close to us. But what happens when those close to us test the boundaries of that love through the choices they make? For Elinor, she's clearly not aware of the error of her choices and how they affect those around her, but what about those people who are capable of awareness? More specifically, how do we deal with those friends and family members that repeatedly make the same mistakes over and over again, and we are forced to accept them for who they are?

We all have those friends and family members that we keep at arm's length because there's something in particular about them that we just can't deal with. Perhaps it's a differing political opinion or lifestyle that doesn't complement our own. Maybe it's just that Uncle Harvey tells us the same joke every Christmas, and we're expected to laugh at it every time. But, what about those who we keep close to us that keep hurting us over and over because of the choices they make? Is it right to cut them loose for the purposes of self-preservation? Or should we give them another chance, knowing that they're going to blow that one, along with the next ten?

When Christ was delivering His ministry to the people, He gathered together twelve disciples, but among them He had a few that He kept even closer. Peter was one of Jesus' closest brethren, someone in whom Jesus could confide. The night before Jesus was arrested, He held a dinner for His disciples to reveal to them everything that was going to happen. He told Peter that he would deny Christ three times the next day before the crowing of the rooster. When Peter heard this statement, he was flabbergasted, as Peter would never do something so disloyal and hurtful to Christ. Peter really loved Him, so the thought of turning against Him was foreign.

After Christ's arrest the next day, Peter was questioned by many people about how well he knew Christ. Since he didn't want to get arrested, Peter swore that Christ was a stranger to him. On the third time, Peter "began to call down curses, and he swore to them, 'I don't know the man!' Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: 'Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.' And he went outside and wept bitterly" (Matthew 26:74-75). Christ knew not just that Peter would deny Him, but that Peter would do it repeatedly. Yes, Christ appeared to Peter after His death and built His church on him, but the fact that Christ was willing to not just forgive him, but forgive him knowing that Peter would betray Him repeatedly suggests something about the way Christ viewed him.

So, how do we see past the choices our closest confidants make and view them the way that Christ sees them, similar to the way Christ viewed Peter? Remember, Christ judges the heart, whereas we tend to judge more external evidence. Although Peter denied Him, his heart was still with Him. It's easy to be dissuaded by the outward appearance when someone close to you makes repeatedly hurtful decisions that cut through our own heart and feelings. No one ever said that forgiveness and understanding were easy. Seeing past their words and actions and going directly to what lies in their heart helps us to value them not for what they do but for who they are. However, to get this type of eyesight, we need to rely on God to grant it to us. Only through His heavenly power can we overcome this earthly outlook. We need to ask for His eyes when we can't see correctly with our own. When we are tempted to look away because our eyes don't like what they see, with His power we can overcome that temptation and see others as He sees them, keeping those that mean the most to us close to us, seeing instead what lies in their hearts. Amen.

November 30 – *Fallen Idols, Shaken Foundations*

I am now sorry to say that I grew up with Bill Cosby as my tv father.

In the 70s and 80s, I thought Cosby was a comedy god, and as a child, it was impossible to escape him. Whether he was telling me to eat my Jell-O pudding pops or making me laugh with the rest of the Fat Albert gang, I thought he was the funniest person ever. As a huge fan of comedy, I can remember watching



“Bill Cosby: Himself,” his quintessential stand-up special from 1983, over and over, trying to memorize his jokes and imitate his cadence, movements, and especially his voices. On Thursday nights, my parents and I would gather around the television to watch sweater-clad Cliff Huxtable teach his children

another valuable lesson about life, and really, he was teaching me, too. We probably ended up watching all 197 episodes, so it was a real honor when I saw him perform in person in 1994 at my college when he came to do a concert there.

He also managed to be such a role model in his act. He never cursed or spoke negatively about anyone (except maybe his children). He also used his celebrity status to speak out about young black men and the role they play in society, how they needed to take responsibility for their actions and words. So, it was with a heavy heart and a tremendous amount of sadness when, in November 2014, I learned that Bill Cosby may have raped and sexually assaulted as many as 60 women over the course of his career.

As a country, we went through a variety of reactions to the news, from disbelief, to anger, to sadness, and so on. How could someone we trusted so much with our time and invested so much with our hearts betray us in such a way that was so disgracefully awful? To this day, we still shake our heads in disbelief at the allegations: not that we think they are false, but that they are so shamefully unbelievable.

Role models and idols play a big part in our lives. Ask anyone who their influences were growing up, and they will most likely name a celebrity, athlete, or musician. Some name a person closer to them, like a sibling, parent, or teacher. Then, and sometimes even now, we look to these people for guidance and

example; we think they have the answers and their lifestyle reflects that wisdom. Yet when these role models misstep and fall, we are deeply shaken, as if our foundation has crumbled from beneath us. We spent so much time building our belief system and moral code on their teachings and examples, that to see them fall is detrimental to our support system. When Lance Armstrong battled cancer and fought his way back onto his bicycle, we were inspired to struggle. When he won 7 consecutive Tour de France competitions, we thought him a hero. And when he admitted to taking performance enhancing drugs the whole time, we didn't know how to continue.

For Christians, our role models are those who walk in Christ's footsteps and in His word. Hebrews 13:7 tells us to "Remember your leaders who taught you the word of God. Think of all the good that has come from their lives, and follow the example of their faith," while in 1 Corinthians 11:1, Paul advises us to "imitate me, just as I imitate Christ." For us, Christ is the only true role model, as He will never fall. Humans may, but He won't. Yet what happens when they do?

Recently, I've directly experienced leaders and role models who were looked up to by many and guided by several, fall quite hard. What has been left in their wake are people who are now just as lost as I was when Cosby's accusers came forward. So how do we overcome these catastrophes and rebuild? How can we recover from such a loss of faith?

For those who are directly affected, you can start by talking out your emotions when you're ready. Finding someone, or a group of people, who will listen without judgement or interruption is extremely cathartic and cleansing. Express your every thought and feeling: how angry, sad, or alone it made you feel. Deal with the emotions head-on instead of bottling them up inside. Also, listen to others who similarly idolized that individual. Hearing their grief may help you to realize that you are not alone. Additionally, petition God for healing and comfort, allowing His love to wash over the deep wounds that seem incurable.

For those who are not directly affected but know others who are, you might be the one that can walk them through this difficult time. When they are ready and willing to talk, listen in the same way as mentioned above: without judgement or interruption. Offer allowable emotional support, meaning that you ask permission to touch or hug them. If they are willing to, give it. If not, let them know that you understand. Just the knowledge that it's there is sometimes comfort enough. Finally, be the role model when other people's role models fall. Model how to respond in a crisis like this one. Be a good listener and supporter. Your example can set a new foundation where the previous one lay.

Obviously, putting faith in another person can be a risk, as our only perfect faith recipient, the one that will never fail, is Him. But being human, we tend to put our faith and trust in others, and that faith can be betrayed because we are human. The only thing we can do is be ready for when that failure happens and have a plan for recovery. Although the fallout as a result of our fallen idols is emotionally unpredictable, what we can predict is how to heal from it. Amen.

