

Your Concrete Weekly Devotionals

December 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!

December 7 – It’s Not Good to Be Fine



When I asked my son if he was okay, and he told me he was “fine,” I knew that he was far from it. He had just competed in a Taekwondo forms tournament, a risk in itself for any fragile 9-year old ego, and was knocked out in the second round. He stood next to me, keeping on a brave face, not looking me in the eye. After he told me he was fine, I motioned for him to come closer to me, where I let him sit in my lap. His arms quickly snaked their way around me, grabbing me tight as he fought back tears.

“What did I do wrong?” he asked. It was a fair question, so I reassured him that he had in fact not messed up his forms at all. Maybe some of the other kids just had tighter forms or louder snaps, I told him. He had

done his best, and I was proud of him, but for that moment, his disappointment was all too palpable. He was doing his best to hide it and to root for his friends who were still in the running, so he repeatedly professed that he was okay, but for him, those were just words he could use to hide behind.

When people claim that they are “fine” or “okay,” they rarely are. In fact, they are usually quite the opposite of those qualities. And the more we claim to be fine and okay, the more those words betray our steely facades. Almost always, people who claim something just a little too loudly and often are those who are the most insecure inside. Hence, as an example, comedians are often times the saddest of all individuals. Or when someone’s looks or personality are attacked, and they claim that they don’t care just a few too many times, it’s because they really do care and are trying to hide it. Say it once, and it’s probably true. Repeat it often, and you’re trying to not just convince others, but yourself, as well.

So, people who make tremendous claims about themselves publicly are doing so because they in fact do not possess that quality and are trying to make it seem so. An individual who claims they are very smart probably isn’t. Someone who is very smart has no need to prove to other people that they are: their actions speak for themselves. More show, less tell.

While reading an article in the newspaper the other day about hypocrisy among some Christian politicians, I saw an interview with Omaha pastor Rev. Eric Elnes, who claimed that those who speak loudest often have something to hide: “Blazing with self-righteous indignation toward others is often what people use to hide their own sins in the shadows,” Elnes said. “This is probably why Jesus’ biggest problem — by far — was with the self-righteous. When it came to those whom society cast away as ‘sinners,’ Jesus was repeatedly gentle, gracious, encouraging, and forgiving, but he continually castigated the self-righteous.”

Quite true, as evidenced by the multitude of rejected individuals that Jesus would often tend to. Some of his closest friends were those who had outwardly sinned for the whole world to see (prostitutes, tax collectors, thieves), those who never claimed to be good people. For Christ, he would rather be with a sinner who was easy to spot than one who secretly sinned but professed righteousness and was clean on the outside. Christ knew that those were the people that had real sin to hide.

In Luke 11 (and in Matthew 23), the authors of these two books recount Christ’s specific teachings against people who were more religious than faithful, in sections now known as the “Woe of the Pharisees.” In each section, Jesus criticizes and chastises the Pharisees, a group whom professed great faith publicly on a number of points. On one occasion, Christ is invited to dine with the Pharisees, so He takes the opportunity to speak out against such self-righteous people, revealing them for who they really are. As was religious tradition, individuals were to wash before eating, not for the purposes of cleanliness but as a result of excessive, man-made ceremonial tradition that was seemingly based in the Torah (it isn’t). So, Christ chooses to forgo the washing of hands to draw a comparison: “But the Pharisee was surprised when he noticed that Jesus did not first wash before the meal. Then the Lord said to him, ‘Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness’” (Luke 11:38-9). Like those who profess that they are fine, okay, and don’t care, their outside is seemingly clean, but inside they are rotting away.

Christ desires just the opposite, that we be sinful on the outside, because we are made human, and clean on the inside, by believing in Him as our salvation. We shouldn’t pretend that we’re perfect because we aren’t. We are a chosen, fallen people, individuals who are loved and saved by Him not through our works of seeming perfection, but through His love for us. Yet we are so afraid of imperfection, that like the

Pharisees, we hide behind showy, outward actions and language. This week, instead of pretending to be perfect, be imperfectly loud. Don't hide behind words that put forth a put-together exterior. Say what you mean, and mean what you say. Christ loves us for our imperfections, as most likely others will, too. With genuine words and actions, let your sincerity shine forth, and be the wholly imperfect being that you were made to be. Amen.

December 14 – *Don't Stuff Yourself*



Despite that the wise in our society advise us to take “everything in moderation,” it sure is hard to follow that adage around Thanksgiving and Christmas. Being surrounded by so many delicious treats, along with lots of lovingly-cooked dishes, it's easy to want to stuff your face. Having just celebrated Thanksgiving, I can most definitely relate.

This year, I told myself that I wouldn't indulge, and that I would take just a little bit. I didn't want to dismantle a fairly-regimented eating design. So, I took a little bit of everything. That was my *first* mistake.

After *filling up* my plate with a little bit of everything, I took note of the large pile of food I had collected. I wasn't sure how I had gotten to that point. Not a single spot of plate could be seen, and the height achieved was somewhat admirable. To rectify, I then determined to not finish my plate. I would only eat three or four bites of each item, giving the rest to my three dogs. That was my *second* mistake.

The suggestion to eat only 3-4 bites was an issue, as I had about 10-12 different kinds of food on my plate, the size of 3-4 bites each. I couldn't neglect any one food, now could I? After 10 minutes or so, I was regretfully staring at the clean bottom of my empty plate. Not that it was bad (that was clearly not the problem); it's that the food was so good. I had eaten too much of a good thing, and all before dessert. As most people know, that overstuffed feeling is never pleasurable. No matter how good something is, overdoing it never leads to satisfaction.

Additionally, overdoing it leads to a quick burnout, despite your good intentions. I watched this idea take shape while we were exercising as a family. We had decided to complete two rounds of a series of exercises (squat thrusts, lunges, jumping jacks, etc.). My son decided that this amount of exertion wasn't enough for him, so he went for the hand weights. Standing at 90 pounds, he managed to hold a 10-lb weight in one hand and clutch two 5-lb weights in the other. I didn't say anything, wondering how long this was going to last. He made it through about 15 lunges before he decided against this course of action. He had burned out quite quickly, despite his good intention to get stronger.

Overdoing it never leads to the intended result. We end up instead getting too much of what we wanted with none of the satisfaction or results. Think of it this way: you have to cook a turkey for 1 hour at 425 degrees. To save time, you do some math, and decide that you could cut that time down significantly by cooking at a higher temperature for a shorter amount of time. So, you decide to cook your turkey at 1700 degrees for 15 minutes. Makes sense on a logical level, but try biting into that turkey, and you'll see the reality of your inept cooking.

Solomon tried this approach, too. He decided that since he was king, he could be happy by giving himself everything that he wanted. "I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor, and this was the reward for all my toil" (Ecclesiastes 2.10). However, the more he dove into what he enjoyed, the more diminishing the returns were: "Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun" (verse 11). Everything in moderation. If we don't overdo it and temper ourselves, we enjoy life more, growing more in the process.

Finding that sweet spot of moderation is key, the point at where you've achieved what you wanted but didn't go too far and ruin it. It's the same concept for the things we enjoy as for the things we work so hard at. We desire to grow and develop, but if we take it too far and overdo it, we end up doing more harm than good. Athletes work hard to grow stronger and develop skills, but at some point, they risk pulling a muscle. The same can go for our spiritual lives. I've seen many young Christians get heavily involved in as many Christian aspects as they possibly can, only to get sick of it quickly and reject everything shortly from there. Just because it's good, overdoing it doesn't mean it will be better for you.

Years ago, a fellow teacher taught me that when teaching your students, you want them disappointed that the bell rang, not grateful that it did. You always want them to ask you to continue to read something when stopping, instead of being thankful that you stopped. You want them to want more, but if you give them too much, they won't want more, anymore. For the things we enjoy, more doesn't make it better. God created these things for us to enjoy, but taking them all in at once doesn't lead to more enjoyment. And growth, like cooking a good turkey, takes time. Overwatering a plant doesn't make it grow faster. So, don't go all in all at once; leave yourself wanting more. Pace yourself and plan out over time. God gave you a heart that wants; now ask for a spirit that is patient. That way, you'll avoid burnout and stuffing yourself, and instead will enjoy the things that God meant for you to enjoy, growing at the speed at which God wants you to, without all of the exhaustion and fatigue. Amen.

December 21 – *When Love is Found in the Trash*



Despite her strong streak of neatness and order, my wife leaves trash all around the kitchen, and I'm pretty sure she isn't the slightest bit aware of it.

I noticed it many years ago, that when she would open something that had a tear-off part to it (like the corner of a bag of chips, the pull-strip to a frozen box of peas, etc.), she would pull it, throw it on the counter, and then put all her attention on whatever she had just opened. I've observed this behavior several times, testing to see if she could even see the garbage that she was leaving on the counter, but after a few days, she still seemed to not notice it. It was as if the trash became invisible once it hit the marble top.

Since I tend to be wrong in most matters in my marriage (or at least that's what my wife tells me), I was anxious to point out this flaw of hers and finally be right about something. I've been waiting for just the right moment, but that moment never seemed to come. So, instead of alerting her to this behavior and attempting to change its course, I decided to do something different: I would change myself.

Instead of seeing her strewn trash as an annoyance, I decided to allow it to endear her to me. Her refuse-tossing then became a cute flaw of hers, a little secret that only I knew. Even to this day, I've never told her about it, so she still has no idea of her deeds or how it makes me smile to see it. What was once something that irked me regularly, I now get joy from every time I throw it away myself, because it reminds me that I am happy that she is in my life.

When in a relationship, romantic or otherwise, we are often told to love people despite their flaws, because if we were to take the ill-advised time to see others for all their faults and misgivings, we would all run

from one another, and the institution of marriage would collapse. So, we choose to overlook a great deal in one another for the sake of the relationship. We decide to focus not on what makes one another undesirable but what make each other special. Yet when the annoyances come up, and they do come up, choosing to put up with them is an act of love. Love is a choice, and when we choose to see them for who they are, not for who they might be, that is choosing love.

Our sinful nature easily makes us distasteful to one another, so we can only imagine how repulsive it must be to a perfect being. However, as the Bible repeats to us over and over, God inexplicably sees us for our flaws and loves us even more. Paul, the writer of Romans 5.8, fully encapsulates Christ's unreasonable love for us in this statement: "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." God looked at us, and seeing our despicable nature, decided that He would do the most selfless, loving thing He could do: die for us so that we could be saved. The purity of His view on our nature displays a deep devotion to us, one that goes far beyond any flaw we might have. He looked beyond our flaws, beyond our heart, and chose to love us more than we could possibly love Him back.

Christ puts forth a model in how we should love one another, yet is it really enough for us to just look past each other's flaws and appreciate one another despite them? Yes, the act of looking past each other's misdeeds and imperfections is our choice, but if it is from us, then all the credit goes to us. So, how can we see God in the other person if we are busy patting ourselves on the back for seeing the best in our significant others?

Seeing past my wife's inability to find the trashcan helps me appreciate her more, but it also sends me a deeper message about my place on this earth. It is a strong reminder that even the best of us are flawed, that we all make mistakes, and that none of us are alone in our imperfections. When we frustratingly seem to be repeating the same mistakes in our lives ad nauseum and become frustrated with the way we are, a little trash on the table is an acute reminder that we are all in this together. There is a commonality amongst us all that reveals our humanity, reinforcing the idea that there is not even one of us who is perfect, which isn't a bad thing.

Realizing that we are not perfect and never going to be can be a humbling and sobering thought, yet there is a surprising amount of comfort to be found in it, as well. Too often, we strive for perfection in our lives, an unattainable concept, when we should be putting forth efforts to strive to more carefully and deeply love on another. The debris on the table is a reminder to me that I should avoid working towards a perfect life, which only leads to self-righteousness, and instead work towards a loving life, one where I will never confront her about her garbage. This week, don't let the annoyances of others and the faults of their character exasperate you, but instead, let it be a reminder of how much this world needs love, and then start fulfilling that need in others. Amen.

December 28 – *Working Hard is Hardly Working for You*



I'm really busy, lately. I won't bore you with the details, but what is most telling during this time is how cluttered my home desk gets, and not with work. Instead it's filled with materials that I find relaxing, items that help me get away from it all: comic books, enjoyable readings, Sudoku puzzles, newspapers, and magazines. Since they have nothing to do with work, they are not a priority, and are left untouched until I am no longer busy. One can usually get a sense as to how busy my life is by how chaotic this area is: the more there is, the busier I am (and conversely, when fully empty, it means that I have time for leisure activities). So, during this time of heavy work, there gets to be quite the pile.

In mentioning this scenario, most people don't really see a problem. For those of us who prioritize well, we know that we get done what needs to get done first, looking to escape later when there is time to escape. Yet, look at that word: "escape." Why do we call these activities escapist if we don't get to them until there is nothing from which to escape? Why do we wait until everything is finished before we start them? The obvious reason is because there is work to do, but I would like to make a case that excessively working without these escapes is nothing more than a futile exercise in entropy.

Put simply, one of the laws of entropy (or thermodynamics) suggests that for some tasks, the more effort you put in, the fewer results you will get in return; the harder you try, the less you'll succeed. For example: a student has a test tomorrow, and when he gets home, he tries to read the relevant chapters, scanning them several times. He then takes notes on those chapters, filling out several pages worth. Next, he chooses to stay up late and quiz himself on those chapters, creating flashcards and diagrams to help with his studying. He sets an early alarm to review all the material. On the bus in, he works towards memorizing all his notes and reviewing his flashcards. He continues to study up to the minute that the test is given, yet when he gets his grade back, the grade is not as high as the other student who studied for a few hours when she got home, had dinner with her family, made one set of flashcards and reviewed them twice, watched a little television, got lots of sleep, and didn't study at all when she got up the morning of the test.

I've seen these two scenarios play out thousands of times. The one who tried hard ended up burning himself out, where the one who worked, but took breaks with activities she enjoyed, ended up renewed, filled with energy, and performing at a higher capacity. More isn't necessarily better. There exists, in each of us, a point where going beyond said point has diminishing returns, and we are then not of any use to anyone, including ourselves. However, when we stop before we get to that point and then couple it with times of leisure, we are more productive despite the less time devoted to work. God gives us opportunities for rest for a reason, and if we don't take them, we become overworked and overstressed.

When the work is piling up, we seem to think that we need to tackle it right away and continue to tackle it even when we are exhausted. We don't take time to do the things we enjoy, activities that renew our spirit. Christ felt this way, too. After a long day of preaching to the crowds, despite their demands for more, Christ decided to get away, even though there was still work to be done.

That day when evening came, he said to his disciples, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd behind, they took him along, just as he was, in the boat. There were also other boats with him. A furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped. Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion. The disciples woke him and said to him, "Teacher, don't you care if we drown?" He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves, "Quiet! Be still!" Then the wind died down and it was completely calm. - (Mark 4. 35-39)

Even though the storm raged around them, Christ ignored it. Even though the work was piling up, He was in need of renewal (and more than likely, the only reason He calmed the storm was so that the disciples would leave him alone and let Him rest). Often, it's more important to rest and be renewed than it is to tackle the work. Christ knew that there is always time for work, but there will not always be time for rest. And the more rest He got, the more productive He could be later. By accepting these God-given occasions for rest and renewal, we are allowing God to grant us the rest we need, so we can continue to work for Him in all things.

This week, despite the work that may be piling up for you, stop after a reasonable amount is done, and start to do the activities that refresh your mind and renew your spirit. Whether it be time for yourself, time with God, or time with others, take time to make the time. The work will still be there when you get back, but by taking the time to do what nourishes your soul, you will be able to tackle the work that much more productively. Overworking yourself won't get as much done as you might think, but by breaking up that work with activities that renew your spirit, you can be ready to tackle more later, being the full-charged person that God desires you to be. Amen.

