

Youth Group Devotionals

February Special Devotional Series

Counselor Conglomeration

Introduction to the February Special Devotional Series

A new year is always a harbinger of all things new. It brings new mercies and graces of God, but it also brings changes. Of course, within the life of WCAC, this year will be a year of great change. We speak, of course, of Pastor Ben's new calling as the English Pastor of the St. Louis Chinese Gospel Church (SLCGC). Indeed, our loss will be to SLCGC's great gain. Yet, we must always remember that the church never revolves around certain individuals. God's church is always God-centered, not pastor-centered. WCAC will continue to move on and maintain her ministry to all people in the community with new people in leadership who will continue the story of how God continues to work through his people at the church.

Notwithstanding, Pastor Ben's departure to his new calling will not feel good to all of us. For all of us he has been such a great blessing, a faithful pastor, and awesome friend. Many college and even post-college students still come to him for advice regularly. No doubt, Pastor Ben has been an indelible participant in so many of our lives, having witnessed during his tenure as Youth Director and then as Youth Pastor the graduation of 8 high school senior classes. As a possible testament to the efficacy of his ministry, many of those who have graduated are now serving in various capacities not just in our church, but in churches across the country and, in some cases, outside the country. Thus, we think it'd be especially fitting to commission a special devotional series in thanksgiving to what God has revealed about Himself through Ben.

This month's devotional series, therefore, features many of us who have been with Pastor Ben in different seasons of his ministry life. It is important to remember, however, that the devotionals are not about Ben. They are not about how amazing Ben is – even though he is amazing. They are not about how important Ben is – even though he played important roles in our church and lives. They're not even about Ben himself, even though it is a special devotional series in thanksgiving to his service. They're about Christian truths that we read about in the Bible, which we have witnessed in Ben's life and ministry. It is our hope that when you read the Scriptures, reflect on it, and see how it has been lived out in Ben's life, you may be empowered to live the Scriptures out even more within your life, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, we commend this month's special devotional series to you.

With blessings,

The WCAC Youth Group Teaching Ministry

Shining for God

By: Ben Lowe, former Youth Group Counselor (2003-2008)

Read Matthew 5:14-16

What do people see when they look in you? I'm not asking about what people see when they look *at* you (many of us obsess far too much about this already), but what they see when they look *in* you; not just your physical appearance, but the whole witness of your life.

My brother has been in Haiti for almost a week now, but before that he was living the American Dream. He landed a well paying engineering job right out of college and, while the work wasn't meaningful to him, he enjoyed having all the money to buy fancy toys like a fully loaded Mazda 6 and a big plasma TV. But God recently got to my brother in a big way and transformed his life. He began spending his free time serving the youth at church and building relationships with homeless folks in Boston. Then he quit his nice job to live in an orphanage in Haiti for the next six months, with few comforts and a sprawling refugee camp out back. On returning he plans to study urban youth ministry in seminary.

In the past, when I looked at my brother, I used to see someone who liked to party and was focused on making himself happy. Now I see someone who serves those around him and is living all out for God. When I think of him, my heart is full of praise to God.

This is how we are created to live. Not necessarily in an orphanage in Haiti, but in complete devotion to our Father, whatever that looks like for us. [Who knows, it may even compel you to run for Congress someday ;)] Simply put, there is no lukewarm compromise (see Rev 3:15-17). In Matthew 5, Jesus teaches that God has made us to shine like lights, illuminating the darkness, so that by our lives others may see and praise Him. Remember, our lives or "good works" are not the focus and shouldn't call attention to us; they should point to God.

Pastor Ben points me to God. It has been a joy and privilege to serve with and learn from him over the last seven years. I have seen his devotion to Christ shine through his life, and one manifestation of this was his decision to leave a well-paying career for seminary and full-time ministry. When it comes to Pastor Ben's many strengths and gifts, I know other people who are more dynamic preachers, more creative teachers, more professional worship leaders, more connected advocates, and so on. But I know few others who shine for God (and not themselves) as devotedly and authentically as Pastor Ben does. When I see Pastor Ben, I see God alive and moving, and my heart is full of praise.

So what do people see when they look in you? Do they see yet another person living for themselves and blending into the darkness? Or do they see someone filled with the light of God and shining brightly for Him? Is there anything holding you back from living more fully for God right now? We have only one life. Give it all to the one who gave all for us, and may our lives shine ever brightly for Him each day.

"Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. Submit to death, death of your ambitions and favorites wishes every day and death of your whole body in the end: submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ, and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in."

- C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

To Be Filled with the Spirit!

By: Cheryl, YG Counselor and Intern (2009-Present)

In my life there are days I wake up and wonder if it is worth getting out of bed because the temptation to roll over and go back to sleep sounds much better than facing what I know will be a difficult day. Instead I opt for a compromise of hitting the snooze three times before coming to terms with the inevitable realization that I'm late and it actually is time to get up. Sometimes the day ends up just as terrible as I thought it would with the seeming endless list of things to do, but other days I find a little of that promised peace and joy from the Holy Spirit.

Do you ever feel like that? Generally if I can pull my attention off myself and what I want for a few minutes then I can look around and really see and hear people. I can see the heartache, the brokenness, busyness, and fatigue which overwhelm the people standing right next to me. It is at these moments I feel the Spirit cry out within me, filled with love and compassion.

Read Ephesians 5:15-20.

Now read it again and take some time to reflect.

Paul calls us to be filled with the Spirit. To speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Not only that but to sing and make music in your heart to the Lord while always giving thanks to God the Father for everything! Take a moment to think about what it means to be filled with the Spirit. Have you ever felt it? Can you describe it?

For me, when I am truly filled with the Spirit the fruit of the Spirit can barely be contained. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control rush out of me like a whirlwind consuming anyone or anything in my path. I feel like singing, dancing, weeping with joy, and hugging everyone around me. That is my response to the love of God as His Spirit fills me. No wonder we are called to be filled with the Spirit! I just wish I could get out of the way more often so God would fill me. But much of the time I do live unwisely, filling my life with so much busyness and noise that I just let the Spirit fill me when it seems convenient or when I can't seem to control what is going on in life.

It was in one of these moments of brokenness, where I felt like everything was overwhelming me and falling apart, that I found myself talking to Pastor Ben after a staff meeting, but He did much more than just listen. He went and got his guitar and we spent a few wonderful moments worshiping God together with spiritual songs. I will never forget that moment. You see, it was much more than just listening to everything and saying 'I'll pray for you', he helped me turn towards God and be filled with the Spirit.

God gave us many wonderful ways to worship Him. How often do we sing and make music in our hearts to the Lord? How often do we speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs? What our brothers and sisters need is not for us to just listen and say they'll be praying but for us to direct them to God, to be filled with His Spirit. So I ask you: how do you do this? What are ways you can encourage those around you or even allow yourself to be so filled with His Spirit you can't help but lead others into His presence? It is only when we are filled with the Spirit that we will always give thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

More than God: Our Responsibility as Children.

By: Henry Kuo, former YG counselor (2002-2009)

Read: Matthew 10: 34-49

Recently, on BBC.com, there was a news article about China making it required by law for children to visit their parents. Elderly parents can now go to court to require their children to take care of them! Apparently, children have been moving far away from their parents to pursue work in metropolitan areas like Beijing, Shanghai, or Guangzhou, but have often been too busy to visit parents regularly, especially those living in interior cities such as Lanzhou, Wuhan, or Harbin. This seems quite unseemly to those of us Chinese who live in America, but in today's passage, we seem to see Jesus *endorsing* such behavior! Look at verse 37: "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me [Jesus] is not worthy of me!" And Jesus goes on: "Any parent who loves their children more than me [Jesus] is not worthy of me!" Wha... wha... isn't Christianity all about the family? How could Jesus say something like that?

But if we read carefully, we notice that Jesus was not advocating anti-parentalism, or advocating child abandonment – something practiced in ancient cities such as Sparta. No - Jesus was saying, essentially, that children should love their parents, *but they should also love God even more so!* This is not about choosing between your parents and God – this is about loving *both* your parents and God. And not just your biological parents. In the Church, biology does not matter. This is loving your biological parents *and* the church parents who were important in instructing you in spiritual truths. And the same applies to parents – they should love their children, but they should love God even more than them! And they should not just teach their own biological children, but not be afraid to instruct other children of the Church on Christian truths. As I've said before, in Christianity, theology trumps biology.

Not long before I moved to Singapore (this was probably August 2009, if not July), Pastor Ben shared with me the possibility of leaving. He was indecisive at the time; he felt God calling him to a different church, but WCAC was going through a lot of exciting changes which he would very much love to be around to witness. I should remind all of you that Ben loved WCAC, the church he grew up in. Furthermore, his parents lived in the area. All of you know as well as I do that Ben took great pains to take care of his parents, and moving to St. Louis was particularly a worrying step of faith. After all, doing so would put him 5-6 hours away from his parents. But I think it is a testimony to the above passage that he willingly decided to take the plunge and accept God's calling for him St. Louis, even if it meant a 5-6 hour drive away from his parents. Indeed, he loved his parents very much and wanted to be nearby to ensure their well-being, but he loved God even more so.

Most of us are young – and by "young", I mean, below 25 – and perhaps we have better things to worry about, such as PSATs, SATs, GREs, college applications, job searches, grad school applications, getting married, etc. But this passage teaches us that there are two groups of people we should always love – our parents (church and biological), but on top of that, we should love God even more so. The BBC.com article reveals that children are often preoccupied with their own goals and dreams that they've left their parents behind; that is an example that we Christians cannot follow. Indeed, this is what the famous Fifth Commandment to honor our parents was about – that we take care of them in whatever way we can, even if from a distance. But we are called to go beyond that. We are called to love God even more without sacrificing our love for our parents. Such is the responsibility all of us have as children of our parents, and as children of God.

On Men in Ministry

By: Jenn Carver, YG counselor (2003-Present)

Read: John 13:34-35

Ben has done a lot of things in the past decade as youth pastor at WCAC. One of the most important lessons I learned from him he probably doesn't even know he taught me. I don't think I've ever mentioned it to him, though I've told others. Ben was really instrumental in redeeming my view on men in ministry. How you ask? By being a living example of God's love as a male leader in the church.

To put it very mildly, up until I first came to WCAC and started helping in the youth group back in 2003 I had never had a good experience working with men in ministry. Over the last several years it's probably been a combination of things that God did through him to change my perspective. He's been very encouraging: as a leader he's been encouraging us to bring up new ideas for ministry, he's good at giving feedback, and he's been flexible enough to allow other leaders freedom to pursue new activities within the youth group when they felt God was leading them. As a pastor I knew that he really loved and cared about the youth in our church. He cares about their growth and development as Christian young people, as future leaders in the church, and it shows in the time that he spends on a weekly basis, in all the little details of ministry, and in the lives of the youth. For me, I could always tell that Ben's faith was legit because of the love he showed to others which overflowed from his love for Christ.

One of the other ways God used him to change my view of men in ministry was his openness to the leading of God as a visionary. Watching him in the last several years I see that God has used him to put a lot of new things into the way youth ministry is done at WCAC, things that I think have really helped benefit the youth. Stuff like from the way we do Coffeehouse, to our focus on in depth Bible discussion in BDG's to his push for discipleship in the youth group, to mission trips and retreats. I've seen God do a lot of work through Ben's willingness to listen to Him.

Read 1 Timothy 4:12

One of the most influential things about Ben that God has used to teach me this lesson is through Ben's integrity. I almost can't say how important this has been in words, because it's just *that* important. Ben is a righteous man who loves God and cares for others. Until coming to WCAC I didn't think that combination was possible in men on a continual basis. I'm glad to say that God showed me I was wrong; and I'm glad that he used such a good older brother in the faith to show me this. To say that working with Ben over the last several years is a privilege would be diminishing the significance of his impact on my life. Working with Ben has been a redeeming blessing that has shaped and will continue to shape my life and my views on ministry. Thanks God for Ben!

Full of Fruity Goodness – Galatians 5:16-26

By: Jon Mann, YG director (2007-Present)

Writing a devo based on something I've learned from Pastor Ben was possibly the most difficult devo that I've ever written. This wasn't because I hadn't learned anything in my four years as Intern -> Sidekick -> Youth Director. Rather, I've learned so much from Ben it was really hard for me to zero in on one particular lesson to write a devotional on. After much thought, I decided to write on one of the most difficult lessons I learned from Ben.

Read Galatians 5:16-26

Now you might be thinking, "Jon didn't know about the Fruit of the Spirit until he started interning under Pastor Ben?? What are they teaching at that Moody Bible Institute???" I want to assure everyone Moody Bible Institute is a quality institution of learning and in so many ways prepared me for the rigors of full time ministry. But what I learned from Pastor Ben was that the fruit of the Spirit wasn't something that magically appeared in my life, but it rather it was something I had to actively pursue and remind myself to produce. Paul gives this incredible list of the "works of the flesh" and let me tell you, it is a daily struggle not to produce that in my life. Yes, I am saved by the grace of God through faith and freed the chains of sin, but every day I seem to be fighting the urge to give in and just produce the works of the flesh. The fruit of the Spirit and the fruit of the flesh can't come from the same tree. So Ben was reminding me that every day I had to decide what kind of harvest I wanted to produce. But deciding to produce fruit in my life daily is not enough. It's called the Fruit of the Spirit because it's the Holy Spirit that does the growing and producing in us. Our decision is whether we want to be yielded so that the fruit has good soil to grow in.

Another thing that Ben constantly reminded me of was that Galatians 5:22-23 lists the fruit of the Spirit, not fruits plural, but the singular fruit. That means you're not producing fruit if you you're not producing all the things Paul lists there. Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control. Sure on any given day, I might be producing one of those. But producing the singular fruit of the Spirit means having all of these things present in my life. I remember one particular day that Ben came in to my office after a particularly rough weekend. I was upset and frustrated by circumstance and the difficulties of ministry. Ben walked in and handed me a sheet of paper. On it was printed part of this passage with Galatians 5:22-23 bolded. Ben just simply reminded me, "Jon, ministry will not be easy and dealing with difficult people and situations will test us. But we are called to produce the Fruit of the Spirit." And then he made me tape that sheet of paper to my wall as a daily reminder to let the Holy Spirit be producing the right fruit in me. Not just the easy ones (for me) like joy and faithfulness. But the ones that didn't always come naturally for me, like patience, gentleness, and self-control.

Take sometime to reflect on the fruit of the Spirit. Is it evident in your life? Are all these characteristics evident or just some? Ask God to fill you with the Holy Spirit so you can be producing this fruit daily. And if necessary, maybe print them out and stick it on your wall as a reminder.