

April 1, 2010

Dear Friends & Family, "YOU EITHER LOVE 'EM OR HATE 'EM!"

(3/7) I returned late last night from my 2nd youth retreat in a row, having preached 3X within the space of 24 hours. This weekend it was our own church's Jr. Youth. There is an old adage re: this age group that has circulated among teachers for years: "You either love 'em or hate 'em". I have always tended toward the former heart-disposition. Perhaps it's their obsession to play; perhaps they're less likely to have become too encrusted with pride via the pressures & hardships of life. Whatever it is, I really relate to them! One glorious aspect of this age group is

that their God-ordained physical development is in progress— to be sure! Yes, their hormones are flowing throughout their bodies! While this is often referred to in a negative light, it is also glorious to observe! God is preparing their bodies to be able to propagate the race, as He commanded Adam & Eve at the dawn of human history. These precious young are "on their way out" of childhood, & at the threshold of man & womanhood. Yes, the devil can & surely has ravaged this strata of the human race in the light of God-given hormones, to get them to "race & rage" in these adolescents, but there is tremendous potential & a "beauty" about them, that is marvelous to behold. I thanked our son in law, Nathan, who led the retreat, more than once for the privilege & honor to be there.

I highly treasure these precious opportunities to lead the young into more depths of God's Word, systematic theology, & a deeper understanding of the gospel of grace. There is nothing like it to me on earth. When you see the Spirit of God come upon these precious young, after having heard His Word, & see them soften & melt before Him, it truly is a place of "holy ground". After having preached to them Friday night (re: "The Value Of The Soul" {This is a theology outline by the late Charles Hodge, penned on Feb. 7, 1864; I've have deleted some of Dr. Hodge's material from it (making it age-appropriate) & added some of mine), & on Saturday morning re: Imputation & Propitiation, & then having "rough-housed" with them in the gym for over an hour & a half, I was pretty much "done"! J But, Saturday evening I had another session scheduled. I was to preach on "High Places", re: King Josiah's reforms, & how it applies to today's Christian.

"TO EAT, OR NOT TO EAT: THAT IS THE QUESTION."

With every summer camp that I direct, & every youth retreat I minister at, I always face the same dilemma: to eat, or not to eat! I prefer not to eat before I preach, for purposes of focus (MUCH needed with me!) & power. And yet, one of the most precious times with God's people is around the table. One of the major reasons I don't "like to" preach while at camp, is that then I can't "play with the kids"! And yet, given the ultra-importance of the ministry of the Word of God, there is work to be done! I decided to eat with them last night: too much (always the case at camp!).

"HERE 'I AM' ...READY OR NOT!"

Whenever this happens, a fear always "creeps" into me: God won't use me as much in the service as He would have if I had chosen not to be with the kids, eat, & be before Him instead!

This mindset is very hard to be delivered (?) from! As I usually do, I called Kim to pray with me before I preached last night. I told her my fear—I didn't feel prepared or "ready". She simply replied, "God is ready". Whoa! It was a simple but powerful & profound statement of faith in God's overabundant grace! (Rom.5:17). I've often prayed in such cases, "Oh Lord, show us once again Whose ministry this is". And, once again, He so kindly, graciously, & faithfully did! I felt more "fluid" & anointed than the previous two preaching engagements! Oh, isn't it just like Him, Beloved? I constantly remind others that "the weaker the vessel, the more glory God gets for using it". And yet, it seems so hard for me, myself to "receive" & believe! The Spirit of the Lord once again filled the room & moved upon the children to surrender to the Lord in different "high places" that they had erected in their hearts & lives above Him, His pursuit, & His Kingdom. We just sat there when it was over, just enjoying Him & His presence. I had my arm around one boy, who smelled so much of cigarette smoke, which I'm sooooo sensitive to! (No, it wasn't from his cigarettes!) I'm sure it was from his home situation. And yet, I spoke to the Lord in my heart while I held him something to the effect of, "O Lord, isn't it with cases just like this, that You so graciously & sovereignly move, & apprehend little boys like this, for Your glory & service?". May it be so. I will never forget this same young man just a few weeks prior while in youth group during a small-group discussion, said he couldn't remember a time when he thought girls had "cooties". That is, as far back as he could remember, he was always "interested" in them! Wow. Uh, I just sat there & thought to myself, "MOMMY"! I have to be honest, one of my deep hopes & daydreams (?) with kids like this is that, many years from hence, when hopefully they're serving the Lord & dream of all dreams, they're in the ministry (?), that maybe, the Lord will bring me to remembrance. Perhaps they'll say something like, "I can't remember his name, but I'll never forget the night Jesus so very deeply touched me as a kid, & there was a guy there who had a funny name (I can't remember now what it was), who just loved on me & held me as we sat in the Lord's presence". Beloved, I can think of very few things in life I would rather have remembered about me. O Father, may it be so!

### (3/23) "MY BOULDER & JESUS' CROSS"

By the time most of you receive this, I will be in head over heels in our annual Via Dolorosa performances. I'm guessing I myself will do 90 of them, between the two rooms that Pilate is involved in, aka, the Fort & the Dungeon. Far more than the previous six years of doing Via, this one has been the most stressful & burdensome. I have wanted to walk away from it many times. My thought was that if by doing so, it wouldn't hurt so very many people involved, I would. I have lost sleep, wrestling with, "angst-ing" over this gargantuan event. The warfare this year has been some of the most severe I've ever encountered. Of course, my hope is that this is a good sign—that our God plans to use it! Because I'm in it over my head each year with three rooms & three hallways to set up, over 20+ men to direct & costume, etc., it feels like I'm towing a massive rock mountain each year behind me. In the light of that, I feel like I need every single person on board with me, with no glitches, resistance, etc. Yes, I know. I'm hallucinat-ing. But, that expectation not being fulfilled was doing me in. Via would be overwhelming to me even if everyone were on board! In my distress while lying in bed one night churning over this & crying out to the Lord from my heart, I felt Him so clearly impress to

my heart, "I had a cross behind Me that I was towing, & no one was behind Me, encouraging Me. In fact, while I was trying to tow My cross, everyone was against Me". I felt firmly, but sweetly rebuked. I had nothing to say. I did feel comfort, faith, & gratitude swell up within my heart, which is what usually happens when Jesus speaks to me. If Jesus' motivation to carry His cross/burden was dependent on the encouragement of men, then He would have no motivation. His primary motivation (unlike the lyrics of the famous song, "Above All", which asserts that it was "me" He thought of above all else) was the will & good-pleasure of His Father, whether or not men approved or condoned it. Even Jesus' Own friends & followers "were not there" to help Him.

### "BEING 'SHEEPISH'"

In this context, I recently visited a close friend. He & his wife had returned home not long ago from a six week vacation to Australia & New Zealand. I saw the number of pictures he took on his computer: 4,559! One set of pictures that struck me later was that which showed their country's sheep-shearing industry. Men hung through spring-suspended harnesses to protect their backs while they bent over all day shearing countless sheep naked. What saddened me to see were all of the bloody cuts on the sheep after this process was over. Once beautiful, here they stood helpless, naked—their rich, full coat of wool gone—in a matter of seconds. One could not help but notice thin blue streaks & lines running down their backs. My friend told me this was antiseptic, to keep their wounds from getting infected. This once proud sheep with a rich, full coat of wool was now standing helplessly before his shearers. "Like a lamb that was led to the slaughter, & like a sheep who before its shearers is dumb, so He opened not His mouth" (Isa.53:7). Here our Jesus was—the stately, honored & adored Eternal Word & omnipotent Creat-or of all that is seen & unseen, standing before His enemies, allowing Himself to be shorn of any dignity He might have left. He had already laid aside His divine prerogatives at the incarnation, & only did as He saw His Father doing. Now, here He began the ultimate humiliation & degradation—death on a cross.

### "WOUND TO WOUND"

I was recently given the classic book, "Abiding In Christ", by a dear mother in the faith, who saw my need to know Jesus' love & friendship better. The book is rightly called a classic. When the author, Andrew Murray, discusses us being "grafted in" to Jesus, the True Vine as His branches, he said both the Vine & the branch needed to be cut, i.e., "wounded" in order to be grafted together. In order to "have us" for Himself, Jesus' wounds via His sufferings on our behalf were necessary. There is a wounding of our pride, our will, etc. that is necessary, before we can be grafted into Him. These are some relative thoughts to this beautiful season of Easter. Kim & I pray it is a blessed one for you & yours. If there is any way you could grace us by your presence at this year's Via Dolorosa, we would be blessed & honored. Praise the Lord, as you can see by my itinerary below for next month, last year's relative "dearth" of ministry work is over ! J  
For Jesus' sake & glory alone,  
Michael & Kim