

May 1, 2011

“THE WEIGHT, GLORY, & PERIL OF WORKING WITH THE YOUNG”

Dear Friends & Family,

(4/3) I headed out early yesterday morning for an inner city kids’ rally that I was invited to do about 8 months prior. With the huge mountain of “Via Dolorosa” preparation lying on top of my spirit, I struggled at times to focus on this very important rally. It was so very important because it involved little children, ages 5-12 to be exact, who, if the Lord so permits, would have decades of life ahead of them. It has been said that by the time a child is five, his personality & character is pretty much developed. I’m not sure I believe that, but I would definitely concur that they are hugely impressionable at this very tender age. To have the honor of sowing the Word of God into their hearts, is like no other on earth. O, how very “softly & tenderly” one must approach this sobering task! The Scriptures declare that teachers will be judged more strictly than the pupils (Jam.3:1). Jesus solemnly warned that a fate worse than a millstone being wrapped around one’s neck and thrown into the Mariana Trench (“the deepest parts of the sea”) awaited those who stumbled or led astray these little ones. Hence, anyone who says ministry to children is “easy”, or far worse, “not important”, either by word, actions, attitudes, philosophy, or ministry approach, is ignorant of the Savior’s heart & words. Hence, the angst, burden, & stress I carried the week before in preparation was one of the most heavy duress. It was not a demonic heaviness nor oppression, just a weight of burden that I trust was the Holy Spirit’s intercession occurring through me (Rom.8:26,27). It was hard to study. I often felt all I could do was “lay & pray”, trying to meditate on the Word as I did. “But Michael, what’s the big deal? These are just children.” Exactly. It has been my pattern & experience for over a quarter of a century to have much more “ministry-prep ‘angst” for children’s meetings than for adults! Willie George, a.k.a., “Gospel Bill”, said many years ago that if you can effectively minister to a child, that adults are “easy”! With this I would concur.

"AN EARLY MORNING “RUSH OF GRACE”

(4/6) I just came from the kitchen to sit down & eat one of my favorite fares—sausage, toast, & eggs mixed together in a bowl; I thanked the Lord for it as I sat down at the computer. I thanked Him for the beautiful weather, our lovely home, & the beautiful music I was listening to. After I went through this list re: thanking our Lord for them, I ended it with, “...when You should have killed me”. I wept & instantly broke inside. And that’s *exactly* what grace is intended to do! All of us, dear brothers & sisters, should have been justly & righteously slain by God years ago.

And yet, look—He gives us instead all things richly to enjoy. Oh, Father, what else, Your Only Son? Yes. Yes.

(4/26) “STUFFING MY CANNON W/THE CANON”

Speaking of children & young people, there is a pretty popular statistic that has been floating around & quoted by preachers for sometime now, i.e., that **57%** of the American populace

are biblically illiterate. I would safely surmise in the light of that that percentage is acutely higher among young people. This past winter, as it typical for me during that season, I minister at a number of youth retreats. For any preacher, one of the most difficult aspects of preaching is determining *what* to preach. In the light of the above statistic, that dilemma for me re: teens & children has been considerably reduced. They desperately need to be stuffed with the Scriptures & sound theology. They all already *have* a theology! The issue is whether it is biblical or not! It's often the case that it is not. Years ago, I was greatly motivated & inspired for ministry by the movie "Gettysburg". The parallels I saw between that warfare & spiritual warfare were numerous & significant. The movie's score would often inspire me. I would "psyche myself up" listening to it. I don't do that anymore, as I discovered over the years that it resulted in too much "Michael" & "human effort" being added to the mix! Back then, I even bought a model "limber & battery" from a gift shop in the Gettys-burg area. I did so to remind myself visually what my inner ache was for ministry deep inside. I wanted to blow my audience & of course, the devil who was harassing them, away. Well, that model/visual aid has once more become important to me, but for a different reason: I want to so stuff my preaching "cannon" with the inspired Word of God, i.e., the "Canon" of Scripture, that the kids/teens *will* feel "blown away"—not by me & my presentation, but by the weight of the Word itself. I love studying myself into the awe & fear of God. I love it when His Spirit's illumination brings me to the place that I tremble at the truths of it that I'm meditating on (Isa.66:2). Often, before I preach, I pray, "Father, if You would stir Your people today in hearing it, as You stirred me in receiving it, I would be grateful".

"VIA DOLOROSA 8: IN THE HISTORY BOOKS"

Our church just completed its 8th year of producing its annual "**Via Dolorosa**" dramatic/reflective walk-through.

We had 1,000+ visitors come this year over a span of four nights. Over these nights, approximately 49 episodes were performed by the actors in each station. For me, this translated into **98** performances, as I continue the drama I begin as Pilate in The Fortress Antonia, following the audience (which changes every 15 min. or so) into the next station, a.k.a., **The Dungeon**. These performances followed 2+ weeks of setup, which included everything from sets, to lighting, costumes, & countless other details right up to the opening night's first performance. On **Good Friday** evening, immediately after my 98th performance (total), I proceeded to start tearing down the rooms & hallways. I left around midnight, got to bed around 1 a.m., awoke before 6 a.m., then drove to VA for my father in law's **80th** birthday party. I was there about 6 hours, then drove right back home. On **Easter** Sunday morning, I went into church early & continued to tear down & pack up before the service. After the service, I spent another hour or so tearing down more, then spent all day yesterday doing the same. It is *almost* finished! Via is a huge mountain every year on my heart & mind, perhaps more stressful than summer camps. It is a labor of love, but comes with a price. I listed some Via 8 praise reports below, which greatly encourage the effort. Note: while some may seem "self-congratulatory", I will share with you what my experience was each night driving home after doing a number of performances: I would repent before our Lord with heart-sickness, as I knew too often my flesh was rising up & taking the occasion to be "the motivating factor" in my

acting, rather than for the glory of Jesus. Via is bittersweet each year because of this. It's an ache I carry to one day do it wholly & completely as unto Him. May it be so.

"We were more especially moved by the performance tonight **than ever before**. We noticed many tears, ours being part of them. As I looked around the rooms there seemed to be many girls in their twenties & they were deeply moved. There were some Asian folks who seemed to be deep in thought. The performers and costumes were quite professional I thought. *Everyone* put their all into making it very realistic. We loved it so much & want to say "A very well done *by all...*"

It is really a professional enactment of our Savior's last hours on earth.

Thank you for all you do to spread the Word in our community and around the world..."

"...thank you and all of your brothers and sisters for bringing Via Dolorosa to life for the rest of us. It was powerfully done, true to The Word, and just an all out tremendous undertaking. The closing was perfect, taking some time to contemplate before the final act. The only thing that could make it better is Jesus clearing the market place with a whip of cords! Public safety prevents that however, I am sure....

"Thank you and all who worked so hard to touch lives this week for the Glory of God & the building of the Kingdom. Seven of us were there Thursday and we were all amazed & blessed; you did a wonderful job, very convincing..."

"Chris and I were blown away by the set, performance, and passion displayed by the Via Dolorosa cast and crew. WOW! Praise God for every one of you - you are part of something very special and so important. The show glorified God and delivered His message - HE IS PROUD. We only wish there was another night to bring our boys back. ...They know all these stories and would have truly enjoyed it. We discussed it with them before we went and they were telling us things to watch for...then when we got home they wanted all the details! =) Next year!"

"We had a great time and it was very well done. Originally we were supposed to have 15 come down but only made it with 8, but those 8 really enjoyed it. **One of the teens struggles with cutting and so I had a great illustration of Jesus to talk to her about later regarding that.** Well worth the trip...!

"Great job last night! You could tell all the hard work and dedication you guys all put into the event!

As usual you were amazing and I knew you would be :-)) but the people with us were blown away. And you didn't startle me as much as you did the teenage boy with us who happened to be standing next to me when you came up. (He didn't know I had an in with Pilate himself)... Have a blessed Resurrection Day and again thanks for all you did to make the Via Dolorosa incredible!"

"Guerty, Hey, just wanted to say thanks again for allowing me to minister with you, and also for continually refining the costumes and the drama overall. Your passion for presenting accurate, high-impact dramas has a huge impact on hundreds of people every year! (as proven

by all the testimonies) The analogy that comes to mind is that we are "tilling the soil" for them to receive Jesus in the sanctuary --- lots of good soil and seeds being planted..."

"Hi Guerty, this is from a devout Catholic...'Hi Lisa, My husband and I were amazed at the Via Dolorosa. We went Friday night at 7:45 PM. The man who played Pilate was amazing. We felt as if we were there. I always have a tough time with the cruelty to Jesus. Seeing it live was very sad and I cried a lot...God Bless you..."

Beloved, I can only reply to these praise reports that, given my incredible weakness, & even secret sins of the heart I was battling during the performances, our God is gracious, our God is gracious, & places His Treasure & gifts in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of Him, & not of us. Amen.

Kim & I are grateful for you reading this, & for the encouragement, prayer, &/or support our God may lead you to give, that His work might continue through us.

Sincerely,
Michael