



ERSKINE
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Letter to our Students

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Provost of Erskine Theological Seminary

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To our precious students at Erskine Theological Seminary:

Isaiah 53:5–6 (ESV): *But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds, we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*

My beloved students in Christ:

I will never forget the message of that day.

I was the pastor in the Kansas City area. I had been called to attend a board meeting — or a committee of the board meeting, I cannot remember. I journeyed to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, for the meeting. It was the Tuesday of Holy Week. As I entered the gathering at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, I was greeted by my old mentor, Dr. D. James Kennedy, in the executive meeting area. Dr. Kennedy shook my hand and then stepped back as if observing an alien from outer space. With wrinkled brow and a look of astonishment, the great preacher spoke: "Mike, what are you doing here?" The staccato cadence in his question sounded as if each word deserved its punctuation: "What? Are? You? Doing? Here?"

I had worked alongside Dr. Kennedy long enough to recognize when he was joking and when he was not. I sensed very clearly this was no game. I replied, "Well, Dr. Kennedy, there is a committee meeting that I am to serve on. So, I am here." My response did nothing to shake his look of astonishment. If anything, my response created an intensification of his foul demeanor. However, within a minute his, facial expression turned into one of "wise sage speaking to the stupid young clergyman." I had encountered this particular *look* from Dr. Kennedy's repertoire of teaching expressions. I also understood very well that Dr. Kennedy was unimpressed with my explanation. I knew that much. But why? I did not have to wonder too long about the answer to that question. Dr. Kennedy let me have it, "Mike, we trained you, here, to announce the gospel of Jesus Christ. The centerpiece of the gospel is the death, burial, and

resurrection of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. This is Holy Week. You should be preparing for Maundy Thursday services, Good Friday noon devotions, a vigil of prayer on Saturday, and a series of services on Sunday to herald the greatest news that has ever been spoken: Jesus has risen!"

I wanted to respond that, in fact, one of his elders, a fellow committee member, and chairman, had called the meeting for today; but I knew that retort would fall flat as a half-cooked pancake on Shrove Tuesday. So, I went back into my old "intern mode" and listened.

"Son, you are a pastor in the Church of the living God. Let others' wait on tables' but you must be about the word of God. That means you should be in this study and with your people to prepare them and the community for the gospel of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday. You cannot correctly study in a hotel room next to this Church. I will not be at that meeting, and I live here. I know of very few meetings that could cause me to be distracted from the centrality of my calling this week. When is your flight?" I responded with a voice that was breaking somewhere between upper baritone and tenor, or soprano: "I think— I coughed to adjust my voice to a normal range—I think that it leaves this afternoon, Sir." He smiled. "Good. You get on that plane and head back and prepare for Maundy Thursday through Easter Sunday. This is our time. *We were called for this week.*

I reflected on Dr. Kennedy's charge to me — the following week, not that week! For, in that week — Holy Week — I thought about nothing but what Dr. Kennedy had said and how I heard it: "*We were called for such a time as this. Let nothing divert your attention from proclaiming the unsearchable riches of Christ in his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, the betrayal, the Last Supper and the institution of Holy Communion, His passion, His death and burial, and His glorious resurrection.*"

My beloved in Christ, you are preparing yourself for the ministry of the gospel. Some of you are studying in our master of theology or our Doctor of Ministry programs. For you, there have probably been many Holy Weeks to come and go. I, also, had experienced a half dozen holy weeks by the time I received this word from Dr. Kennedy (which I took as a word, rebuke, from heaven). So, it may be that you don't need to hear what I had to hear. If so, I'm sure that you can give an "amen" as I address all of our students:

Always remember, you were called as a preacher of the gospel for such a time as this. From Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday, the Church has historically emphasized the centrality of Jesus Christ's resurrection to our faith. Let it be so with you. Let it be so with you as you plan for your ministry after you graduate from Erskine Seminary. Let it be so for you as you carry on your ministry even as you are a student at Erskine seminary. Let nothing divert you from planning and preaching the supreme message that Mary proclaimed on that Sunday morning: "He has risen!"

The truth is, the rest of the church year—no, the rest of eternity—opens and closes on the golden hinges of this one week. The message we bear in this time is so important, so vital, and so powerful that we dare call it: "holy."

May you and your families know the joy of the presence of our risen Lord in your worship services, in your homes, and your hearts.

Commending you all to Jesus Christ, our risen Savior, who lived the life we could not live and died the death that should have been ours, I remain,

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael A. Milton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "M".

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