

I am so very proud of all of our students and their accomplishments which we are recognizing today. Some of our students have completed at least four years of study and I wish to speak to them about their journey. It is my hope that all of our students will be able to relate to what I share with these soon to be graduates.

I would like to bring your thoughts to what is shared in The Shema. The Shema is a prayer that devoted Jews pray each morning and evening. It is based upon a passage out of Deuteronomy 6: 4-9, it says,

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 5 You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. 6 And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. 7 You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. 8 You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. 9 You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

I bring this passage to you as it points us to why we study Theology. I did hear when different students groaned as they made their way through the Theology courses. I want to affirm that these courses prove to be difficult as students internalize the material that is presented. Lots of new vocabulary. Lots of new concepts to consider.

I remind you that Theology is defined as the study of God. Our God is mighty, complex, confounding and amazing! It should stretch us as we consider who He is!

Throughout your courses, I have referred to you as Crossing Theologians. It is my sincere desire that you will remain Theologians for the rest of your lives and remain hungry to study and learn more about God.

Jesus answered the Pharisees when they asked Him to tell them the greatest commandment in Scripture by saying in Matthew 22:37-40, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

You can see how Jesus was quoting the Shema to the Pharisees and He reminds us that God deserves our utmost devotion and focus. Our love for Him is demonstrated when we spend time with Him and spend time studying to understand more about Him.

You have studied Theology I, II and III where you learned that God reveals Himself generally to everyone and specifically to each one of us as believers! You learned more about Him and His character and His attributes. You learned about the Trinity and can describe the three persons of the Trinity to anyone that asks.

You saw how important mankind is to God and the lengths He has gone to reach us and maintain a relationship with us. You learned there is only one creator and learned of His creation, and His created ones.

You read how the created Angels rebelled and became demons, who seek to destroy us because God loves us.

You learned many very long multi-syllable words that describe specific theological concepts and we encouraged you to refrain from using these in conversations with your friends.

You studied Church History to understand how we got the different forms of religion in Christianity and the mistakes that were made before that we should recognize and work to avoid ourselves.

In that study of History, you saw the heresies that arose and how people corrected those heretical ideas by diligently studying God's Word and seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit.

You reviewed other religions and saw a bit of how they came to their beliefs in other gods or no god at all. You gained perspective that people have been misled by what seem to be crazy ideas to Christians, yet they commit their lives and their eternal life to these ideas.

You studied Biblical Counseling and Marriage Counseling to know how to speak life into other's lives when they are hurting. You also learned how to speak to yourselves when you experience tough times.

Spiritual formation classes addressed your identity in Christ, what it means to live a Spirit filled life, and how to engage the great commission by having a lifestyle of evangelism and discipleship,

You have learned how to put into effect spiritual disciplines in your life,

You have learned how to study God's word using hard won skills to exegete the Scriptures and understand the context as well as the content that is provided there,

And you have learned to manage the resources God has placed in your hands to have impact in His kingdom,

You understand the God given authority you have as a child of God to speak against the enemies in the Spiritual realm, and you have learned how to become free from sin, to remove burdens that have attached to you, and to minister to others to find the same kind of spiritual freedom.

You have studied various forms of Apologetics. These courses helped you consider how Scripture has answered and continues to answer the arguments of skeptics against the truth of God's Word.

You have wrestled with Ethics and have most likely been challenged as you found what God's Word states that is in direct conflict with man's conventional wisdom.

You have spent a good amount of time considering how to apply God's principles to your life and wrote those thoughts in your discussion boards.

Our hope was that you would become comfortable with having dialogues about what God has asked of us and you have learned how to explain to others the ways to apply those commands to our lives.

It is likely some of your classmates exposed ideas you had not considered and that you found their explanations valuable.

The spoken Word is powerful and you can bless many as you explain God's Word to them. I encourage you to use this voice that you have utilized in your studies to instruct and encourage others. They desperately need God's wisdom.

Along the way, you may have heard me mention the Great Commission in Matt 28:19-20, where Jesus said "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

I wanted to share with you that this passage is one of the places where the King James translation did not serve us well. The Greek participle was translated an imperative to "Go", when it would have been more appropriate to translate it to be "as you go". The imperative should be correctly understood to "make disciples" rather than on "Go".

This small difference has led our churches for centuries to encourage believers to leave where they are and GO to minister to the world elsewhere. I believe this has discouraged many from picking up the responsibility to make disciples where they already live. Many have believed that only the super saints are able to become missionaries and to reach the lost world because of the challenge it was to GO.

Instead, I would encourage you to embrace this passage and "As you go, make disciples of all nations". I contend that your mission purpose is to make disciples where you are, with the people you know. As you make disciples, and minister to them, they will make disciples, and so on and so on. Before we know it, we will reach our region and beyond. Of course, some will be specifically called by God to become foreign missionaries, but I assert that all of us are called to be disciple-makers where-ever we are, according to this Great Commission.

Another significant concept in this passage is the idea that we are to teach them to obey all of Jesus' commands. If any of you have children or have taught others new ideas, you can appreciate that it is very difficult to have someone place such importance on new ideas that they actually put the concepts into practice.

This word "Obey" is exceptionally challenging. As theologians you will explain to others what you have learned about God, you will have access to information and concepts. I

feel it is important that I share with you that providing good information to others will not be sufficient to see them “Obey”.

The burden you will have to see them accept this information as truth will be that they will need to see you “Obeying” the commands Jesus has given. Your actions are what support the truth that you share with them. They will quickly discount your words if they see that you do not actually believe them enough to live by the concepts that Jesus has given to us.

In the Great Commandment, Jesus added what is called the New Commandment when he said, And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ You will need to develop a love for those around you, as this is our greatest tool as theologians.

When we demonstrate self-less love for others, they respond by becoming open to our words. They naturally come to respect us, because we prove our concern for them and our actions communicate that we want what is best for them.

You might be wondering why I am focusing on talking about how you should behave going forward from this date of graduation. I earnestly hope that you have recognized that you are a child of God and are part of His royal priesthood.

As priests for God, you have a God-given purpose to minister to those around you. You have prepared your mind and your heart for ministry through your studies. Now is the time to listen closely to God and to put into practice all that you have learned.

We use different metaphors to describe concepts, so consider if we had built an amazingly powerful race car. We had poured great expense into developing and building the engine and lovingly crafted the chassis. Upon completing this amazing vehicle, we simply rolled in into a garage and never took it to the race track.

We would never see the car realize its potential. The time and expense would be wasted and purposeless. Consider the fact of all your effort and study to complete your degree. That effort you have expended has created momentum in your life and you can use that to serve God well as you live a holy life.

Remember, that word Holy does not mean perfect. I suppose it does mean to be weird in the rest of the world’s eyes. God calls us to be separate from the world by choosing to live according to His commandments. It is weird to live a life that is focused on God and focused on loving others. People do not understand such behavior when we act that way. Yet, they are influenced by it.

Something inside them yearns for God’s ways and when we demonstrate our devotion to God by our actions, they are drawn to Him. What you do matters to others. Remember, they are desperate in their need for God, they just don’t know He is the answer they are looking for.

If you are like me, you struggle with maintaining momentum. It is easy to get distracted and find yourself aimlessly existing each day. Momentum carries with it the idea of direction. Momentum is headed somewhere.

Utilize the spiritual disciplines you have learned about to maintain your momentum. Seek God constantly and listen to what He tells you. God has purpose for you each day and He will give you direction. Yet, He speaks softly to most of us. You have to lean in to hear Him. It seems every action He takes encourages us to come nearer to Him.

To continue this metaphor, you need fuel for the race. Not just a bit of fuel, but you need to be Topped off. Completely full. Some of you may have seen when racers have lost the race because they had to pull off at a critical time to refuel.

Even though they had the fastest car and the best driver, they weren't properly fueled, so they lost. In the same manner, you need to be filled with the Holy Spirit's power. What is amazing about His power is that it is always sufficient!

If you try to do ministry in your own power, you will find yourself limping to the pit at critical times. You can find yourself "out of the race" because you have not properly maintained your relationship with God. I tell you this because I have experienced it. This is not **an** important thing to know. It is the most important thing to know as a minister for God.

As Scripture tells us in John 15: 4-5, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing".

As a priest for God, you can do nothing without Him. Now, don't misunderstand me, you can do lots of things. Everyone may even know your name. But God's Word tells us that we will not bear fruit with only our actions.

I don't particularly like math concepts much, but I was always impressed with the ideas of Proofs. You might remember they always had a pattern of "if, then". This passage is a perfect "if, then" statement. If you abide in Him, and He in you, you will bear much fruit. Do you hear how directly the Lord is speaking here? If you, then I. I tell you, this is where power comes from. Remember to keep your tank full!

So, I have been speaking about you being a minister for God. Just to clarify, I am not talking about all of you becoming engaged in full-time ministry as your vocation. I am talking about doing ministry "as you go". It might be that God will move you into a paid ministry position, because He give you specific gifts to equip others to do ministry.

Or, He might need you to go into the marketplace, and do ministry to those you do life with everyday. It might be that you have a lifetime of work just to reach the family and friends in your life. I contend that being a relational minister is truly being on the front lines of this spiritual battle we are all engaged in.

To wrap up this metaphor, I encourage you to “as our pastor likes to say” Drive it like you stole it! Be excited for the opportunity to be in the race, prepared to run full speed, and disciplined in your approach. Maintain your vehicle diligently and make sure you are topped off with fuel.

I have shared four key concepts as I have talked today.

One, embrace the ideas conveyed in the Shema. There is one God, He deserves our devotion, study His Word constantly and share it constantly with others.

Two, The Great Commandment. It reminds us again to be completely devoted to God

Three, The New Commandment. It adds the idea that we should love others as we love our selves.

Finally, The Great Commission. This commandment encourages us to make disciples “as we go” and to teach them to obey Jesus’ commandments.

Jesus reminds us in John 14 “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, 17 even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.”

That is a promise from Jesus to you as His joint-heir in the Kingdom of God. You are not alone in ministry. You are saved, healed, set free, discipled, empowered, equipped and ready to serve.

I am so very proud of you and am excited to see how God uses you to make a difference in others’ lives.

Crossing Theologians, May God’s Blessing be upon you and your ministry.