

“I am not ashamed of the Gospel”

Romans 1:14-17

¹⁴ I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. ¹⁵ That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. ¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. ¹⁷ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.” (Romans 1:14-17)

The book of Romans is a letter address to the Romans. Paul wrote this letter, and I explained about his personality and life before he became a Christian two weeks ago. To tell the truth, Paul had not ever gone to Rome before when he wrote this letter, but because he heard the gospel is spreading in Rome, he wrote this letter to them. There are many theories as to how the gospel was reached in Rome, but the Bible mentions “visitors from Rome” in Acts 2:10 when Peter was evangelizing in Jerusalem, so they probably took the gospel back to Rome.

To the Romans who Paul has never met or visited, he says in Romans 1:8 “I thank my God for all of you” and in verse 9-10, “I remember you in my prayers” and in verse 11-12 “reveals his love for them”. Paul even says in verse 13 through 14 that he “feels obligated to them”. And in verse 15, he expresses his desire to “visit and meet them”. Today we would like to examine verse 16 where Paul says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel”.

Paul states, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel”. When we interpret the meaning of these words, we are led to believe that there is a premise, “a possibility of being ashamed of the gospel”.

First we must remember that this letter is written to Rome. As you all know, Rome had the one of the biggest military in the world, had conquered large amounts of land, and had cities that were home to many famous artists and philosophers. Paul is talking about a Jewish born man who possessed no worldly things, Jesus, to citizens of a great and powerful country.

There is a trend found in civilizations around the world. Colonization happens when a larger powerful country overtakes another. Often times, the country that colonizes forces their culture, language, and religion on the colony. This has happened many times and is evident in how many countries speak English, Spanish, Portuguese... However, the reverse of this never occurs-where the colonized country influences the colonizing country with their culture, language, and religion.

However, the reverse of the colonizing effect occurs with the spreading of the gospel to the Romans. From the time of Paul, Christians are persecuted for a long time, but in 392 A.D., Christianity becomes the established state religion of the Roman Empire. Christianity stemmed from the God of a small country, but the Romans became dominated by this religion. This phenomenon is parallel to Jesus's promise, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."(Acts 1:8)

Paul understood "the people who he was trying to reach", and "the position he and the gospel was in". At the time, Paul worked as a tent maker while sharing the gospel. He did not have a high social standing by any means. Furthermore, Paul had to proclaim that Jesus-who the Romans hated so much-was there true hope. Paul further proclaimed that Jesus was resurrected from the dead, to Romans who had a love for mathematics and science, as seen in their creations and architecture. From a logical standpoint, it may have been

embarrassing to share the gospel to a country abundant in wealth, wisdom, and power.

However Paul, despite this circumstance that may cause one to shy away or shrivel proclaims that, “I am not ashamed of the gospel”. This was because Paul was conscious of God and not the eyes of people.

In 1944, when World War II was ending with the defeat of Japan, the US government prepared for a postwar strategy to study about the Japanese. The US Army commissioned Ruth Benedict, a famous cultural anthropologist, to prepare a book on Japanese culture. She wrote “The chrysanthemum and the sword”, a famous treatise on Japanese culture.

In this book, she characterized Japanese culture as a “culture of shame.” Why do Japanese people care so much about what others think of them? We are often asked this question. One answer to that question is this “culture of shame.”

In the book it is written that our behavior is dictated by how other people see and judge us. How others perceive us determines how we live. The Japanese moral creed says that we never do anything that will cause trouble to others around us. This culture of shame tells us to care about surrounding people and their eyes. Considerate, modest, and cooperative – these are Japanese virtues.

We tend to agree with what Benedict had pointed out. Our culture emphasizes others opinion about us. Christian population in Japan stays below 1% even after 100 years of ministry. Christian faith is based on the personal relationship with God alone. However, Japanese people worry if others have accepted Christianity yet. This is one of the reason why the Christian population does not grow in Japan. In our culture of shame, even our most personal decisions –like one’s

faith— are dictated by what others think of us. Unfortunately, deep within us, we all carry this DNA.

We are given one life, should we not be living more proactively? What a person believes in, that is the most important thing to anyone born a human. This is not a matter of him or her but our self. The awareness of judgment is an intangible entity that will not take responsibility for our lives.

It is as Jesus said,³¹ To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (John 8:31-32). These words speak about the freedom from the cultural awareness of others and the blessing of the ability to live proactively in accordance to God's will.

At the time, Caesar's power in the Roman Empire was great. Any order he made would be implemented in every corner of the empire. Caesar's force and intensity was so great, it may have stopped children from crying. However, this meant nothing to Paul. Even with all the powers and military against him, Paul was not ashamed of Jesus, the one who was born in a manger, and crucified on a cross. This was because Paul lived proactively before God.

In Romans 1:1, Paul describes the gospel as "the gospel of God". Why would Paul be ashamed to share the Gospel of God? How does Caesar even compare to God? I have met countless people who have said that, "Jesus Christ has changed my life". But I have never met a person who has said that, "Caesar has changed my life", and I probably never will meet such a person.

We often look at life from a self-centered view. If this happens it will be embarrassing, what is that person thinking of me, we think like this all the time. However when we are thinking in this way, we forget

about one more perspective we should consider. That is the perspective of God.

If God truly exists, and if God has created us and we possess a sinful nature, God is the one who should be in shame and regret.

The people who were given life constantly find faults to trip others, and insult others and verbally attack God’s creation. Not only by mouth but also with legs and arms, with physical attacks. People use incredible amounts of money to create weapons of mass destruction. Even worse, the creations live in ignorance to the creator.

If humans are creatures such as this, it is rational for God-the creator of humans- to be ashamed in his creations. God is also justified in giving us suffering. Although, God gave Jesus suffering for our sake, and that is how our shame was taken away.

The book by Ruth Benedict, “The chrysanthemum and the sword” also talks about the Japanese concept of “Onn” or debt of gratitude. For us Japanese who value this moral obligation, the gratitude we owe to Jesus who took all the shame of the world is tremendous and transcends any obligation or debt that dictate our actions.

Thankfulness for the presents we are given on Christmas is important, but the eternal life we are given by Jesus’s crucifixion is something that is irreplaceable to us. Paul must have understood this when he wrote that he was not ashamed of the Gospel.

25 years ago, one missionary conducted his roadside ministry in the busiest station – at Shinjuku. Wearing a bright red suit, he delivered his message at the street crossing in front of Shinjuku Station. He spoke the gospel quickly to people waiting for the traffic signal to change. This was right next to Kabuki-Cho, crowded day and night with people. Even many drunkards roam these streets at night.

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You have probably heard of this missionary -- Arthur Hollands. He has an American father and Japanese mother. One day, one youth stopped and listened to this eccentric missionary's message. A businessman next to him said "This guy believes in something so strongly he can speak about it openly to the world. Do we have anything like that? I envy this guy."

We do not know identities of this youth and businessman. We do know, however, that they were typical Japanese people just like you and me. What this businessman said rings true in the heart of us Japanese. We all share this feeling.

To live worrying only about others, to end up living an entire life without any individual conviction. How can we say that is a truly meaningful life? Do we have some conviction we can truly believe in, that we would not compromise no matter what? Did we live in the freedom of believing what we choose to?

All of our shame is taken away. By the cross of Jesus, he took all our shame upon himself. "I am not ashamed of the Gospel". When this statement is made, it creates a sturdy foundation for our lives. I believe it is a blessing to continue to stand upon this foundation. Let us pray.

Translated by Kou Okura