

From the Pulpit of the Japanese Baptist Church of North Texas
February 11, 2018

Training of Solitude

Mark 1:35-39

1:35 And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.

1:36 And Simon and those who were with him searched for him,

1:37 and they found him and said to him, “Everyone is looking for you.”

1:38 And he said to them, “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out.”

1:39 And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and casting out demons.

Do you know the most frequent phrase in Mark? It occurs over 60 times in the Gospel, and 10 times in chapter 1. For example, in Mark 1:20, “and immediately he called them.” In Mark 1:29, “and immediately they left the synagogue, they went to with John to the home of Simon and Andrew.” It’s a phrase of “and immediately.” It describes that Jesus was working so hard and tried to fulfill the mission given by God.

However, in today’s verse, Jesus was away from his disciples and people and alone before God. The source of Jesus’ energetic work is “solitude.” If we would like to work for God and fulfill the mission of our life, we shall learn “solitude.” In other words, if we don’t learn “solitude,” we can not fulfill the mission given by God.

1. Solitude and Japanese People

But, the training of “solitude” is difficult for Japanese people. It is often said, the Western people are “individual behavior oriented” and Japanese people are “group behavior oriented.” Scholars believe that we have this character because we used to be agricultural people. Agriculture, especially rice crop requires communal work. It was prohibited to occupy a source of water for your rice field. If you did not follow the communal rules, you were punished very severely. However, as long as you follow the communal rules, you were not judged no matter what immorality you had. For example, you are alcoholic and your family is really struggling but you are not judged for it. But, if you do not attend the ceremony of your village, you are out-casted even though you have fine character, kind to everyone.

Japan is the only “non-Christian country” among the developed countries because of this kind of spiritual background. If you live in a rural village of Japan, you have to be a worshiper of the same guardian deity automatically and pay the offering to the Shinto shrine through the neighborhood council. Shinto is “Religion of Community” and the Buddhism is the “Religion of Family.” Most family is the supporter of Buddhist temple so that you have to carry on the denomination of Buddhism no matter what you believe.

If Shinto is “Religion of Community” and Buddhism is “Religion of Family,” the Christianity can be “Religion of Individual.” Compare to the Shinto and Buddhism, the faith in Jesus Christ is established when individual stands before God and has relationship with God. Even though all family members receive baptism at the same time, each one of family members has to conduct the testimony of faith.

Even if you grew up in a Christian family, you are required to show the clear conviction of salvation. Sometimes in a youth group, a member wants to be baptized together his/her friends. However, he/she cannot receive baptism only because of his/her friend. No matter who you are, you have to stand before holy God by yourself and confess “your” sin. You have to ask “your” salvation to the God of mercy.

Japanese gods and goddesses and the teaching of Buddhism never require us “solitude.” In Japan, people don’t define faith as “decision based on your will.” Faith means to follow the tradition as others do. If you are extreme than this, you might be said, “You are crazy about your religion” and people give you a wide berth. Why only few Japanese believe in Jesus Christ? I think one of the answers is that Japanese people do not understand that God is a Person, and faith is the personal relationship with God. God is not just an idea or an imaginary friend of animation movie for kids. He is a living Person who has mind, heart, and will. “Faith” means to have the personal fellowship with God, and “solitude” means to deepen the fellowship.

Those who were led to the faith in Christ can witness how important is such “personal faith” through the training of solitude. There is no salvation, if we water down the gospel of Christ so that Japanese people can easily accept. Let us believe that God make Japanese people understand the gospel of Christ, and work to draw Japanese people to the gospel.

2. Solitude and Current Generation

Comparing to Japanese people, people of Judea, the people of the

Bible, had been taught to be solitude from their childhood because they were pastoral. The youngest one of their family was in charge of pastoral work; so he was taking care of sheep by himself and seeking grasses. If they came far away from their home with sheep, they camped out. Through the night they were solitude in the wilderness with complete silence and no stuffs around. Well, in fact they heard the roaring of wild animals trying to kill and eat their sheep. However, children of Judea knew how to get rid of such animals and even how to survive in the emergent situation – they were taught how to slay and eat sheep in the case of emergency. They knew how to live by themselves and to be solitude before God.

In the “Advent Devotional” on December 12 Brother Armour wrote a conversation with his wife when they looked over the wilderness of Judea. At the time, his wife had tears on her eyes, so Armour asked her, “What have you thought about?” Then she answered, “I was just thinking that this was probably John’s last view of the world.” Once John started his ministry of prophecy, lots of people came to him and he had some of disciples; before that, however, he had been solitude in the wilderness eating locust and honey He was solitude before God and listened to Him.

We are surrounded by the results of civilization and numerous communities, and I sometimes wonder we cannot listen to the Word of God because of them. People have the emptiness of soul because they do not encounter God and listen to God’s word. They try to fill out the emptiness by seeking the fellowship with people, and they get attached to it too much. As the result they became controlled by them. It is important to have fellowship with people; but we can’t keep

healthy faith when we forget the relationship with God and get attached to people as if we rely on God.

Dr. Chuck Swindoll wrote, “Insecure people need to stay busy. They need the constant attention of a fawning multitude.” Many people try to support themselves by others’ evaluation and reputation, not by the Word of God. They concern how other people look at them. They don’t see themselves in the eyes of God. Most of them are unconscious about it, but they make so much effort to be praised by others rather than working for God’s pleasure, helping others, or growing in personal characters. Then, after all, they become exhausted, and lost their eyes on God and on themselves.

In present time, people focus on communities in any countries and in any generations. In Japan, people found “bond” very important after 3.11 Earthquake. Young people keep their eyes on cellphones whole day and night, to be connected to someone else. It is important to be connected, to have fellowship and to build communities; but it is the fact that the “communion with God” are disturbed by the “community of people,” and it became the “addiction.” People sometimes believe in the church, as a community of believers, instead of believing in God. We need to know the value of solitude and have the training more in this generation.

3. Solitude and Its Blessings

Lastly, I would like to end my sermon by preaching the solitude and blessings.

Firstly, being a state of solitude (by being alone), we can ask God to examine ourselves. We sometimes ask general questions or give

plenty of excuses, saying “what about this problem in the world? What about the sins of those evil people?” Needless to say, God would answer these questions, but He takes care of us at a personal level. He would say “I want to hear YOUR problem not the problem of the world. I want to discuss about YOUR sins, not other people’s sins.” Therefore, we are required to be alone.

It requires courage to be alone. Hebrews 4:12-13 says, “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”

God’s word makes us alive but at the same time it pierces our inner self. People tend to avoid God’s word or just skim it through because if they listen to God’s word in a real sense, they will be pierced by His word. Indeed, God’s word is a sharp blade. But it is not to stab or kill people but heal and make them alive just like a surgeon’s blade. When we are alone and stand in front of God, it will be a blade to make us alive. Hebrews 4:16 concludes as follows, “Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” We will be brought to the throne of God. It will be a fearful moment for us sinners. But the throne has been changed from the throne of judgment to the throne of grace by Jesus Christ. While it is the throne of grace, we would like to stand in front of God.

The second blessing of “solitude” is a fellowship with God. There is a difference between “solitude” and “loneliness”. In fact, by being

alone, we will be with God, not be ourselves. We can monopolize God and enjoy the fellowship between just two of us. At the seminar and retreat, many people try to have a personal conversation with a speaker or leader, so they compete to sit next to them. Likewise, if you really want to monopolize God and be alone with God, then the training for solitude should be an easy one. Conversely, by training yourselves for solitude, your passion to God will grow.

The third blessing of “solitude” is that it makes people better serve for others. Solitude means to temporarily drop the interaction with other people and go to God by yourselves. But you just temporally distance from the people, not to hate them. Jesus rejoiced the time with God alone in the early morning or lonely place where nobody could disturb them. But He did not stay there forever. There, Jesus stood up and said “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also” and tried to look more at people’s need and serve for them. By putting ourselves in solitude, we can reset our interactions with others. We can look ourselves and others with fresh eyes. There, we can serve for people in a true sense.

God wants people who can put themselves in “solitude” for His work. When we work for the church ministries or activities, we tend to have too much concern about the result of our works or the reputation of others. But God wants those who are apart from such things and long for God. Those who can abandon everything for the fellowship with God, will be able to serve for God in a true sense.

(Prayer)

Dear God the Father, your Son Jesus has shown us how important it is

to have solitude in front of you, and even how essential for us to be alone with you. In these 40 days of Lent, give us the training of solitude. Help us to be an independent Christian, free from dependence and addiction to worldly things. We pray this in the name of Lord.