**WELCOME A LITTLE CHILD IN JESUS’ NAME**

Mark 9:30-50 (K. V.: 9:37)

**“Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.”**

Thank God for the wonderful Founders Day Celebration 2023 on Friday! We could relish what God has done through us in Europe, North America, and Korea as we listened to P. Ron’s message and four precious testimonies! Now, we come back to our Mark’s gospel study where we are at the peak of it. Through Sh. Rob and Msn. Gideon for the last two weeks, we learned the very essential lessons of our Christian life: glory through suffering and faith that overcomes the world. Surely, heavenly glory is our ultimate hope and Jesus helps every generation to have faith one person at a time. In today’s passage, we are shifting our mental gear to see Jesus’ discipleship training again this time more closely. For that, we get to the bottom of our human nature, that is, trying to be first or at the higher position. How can we overcome such a nature but have servant leadership and have a right stance toward fellow gospel workers? The short answer is by Jesus’ help, but we will touch base the basics first. May God help us to be the servant of all to be truly great and to stand unified against the same foe so as to win the victory together with others and be rewarded with Jesus.

1. **The Very Last, and the Servant of All (30-37)**

Look at verse 30. Finally, Jesus and his disciples left the site of the transfiguration mountain. It was a sweet but regretful place, after all. There, the top three disciples witnessed the amazing transfiguration of Jesus and yet were rebuked for their easy-going mindset and directed to focus on listening to him. There, the remaining nine disciples tried to prove themselves but were rebuked for their unbelief and taught to pray more. In some sense, they all learned their respective lessons and came back to the ground-level altogether so that they might start their cohort again. Then, Jesus began teaching them this time with no crowd around them. What did Jesus teach? Verse 31b reads. “‘The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.’” Comparing this verse with Mk 8:31, it seems he taught the same thing except one new revelation; that he would be delivered. Being delivered means being betrayed according to another version (NIV ’84). Jesus knew he would be betrayed and even knew the person who would do so. In human history, many great leaders were betrayed and killed. If Julius Caesar knew Brutus would betray him, he would have done something to prevent it. What about John Booth, the Ford Theatre actor, who killed Abraham Lincoln or Kim Jae-Kyu, Korea CIA director who killed Park Chung-Hee, then Korean president? Would they not have done something? Remarkably, Jesus did not do anything. Rather, he bore the brunt of the heartache of being betrayed along with other afflictions and even crucifixion so that he might experience every possible pain as a fellow human being. How did the disciples react to this crucial teaching that included the painful revelation? They did not understand what he meant and were even afraid to ask him about it. Why so? It was because their hearts were somewhere else. Or they had selective hearing. In the ensuing verses, we see where their hearts were. Look at verses 33-34. On their road to Capernaum, the disciples were arguing with each other. It was so loud that even Jesus noticed it and asked them about it. They argued about who was the greatest. Note their response to Jesus’ questioning. They kept quiet. It means they knew it was not right for them to argue about it. Even after hearing the core part of Jesus’ teaching, because of their mind being somewhere else or their selective hearing, they could not help thinking only about which position they could get at Jesus’ new kingdom. Peter might have boldly claimed to be the greatest and thus the most fitting prime minister. James and John objected it, claiming that their master called him as Satan and as such he was disqualified. They possibly tried to oust him from his top-disciple position like the House of Congress ousted Speaker Kevin McCarthy from his speakership. Other disciples vouched for themselves to claim their respective positions like Nathaniel for Attorney General and Simon the Zealot for Secretary of Defense. Climbing up to the ladder of success and grabbing important positions seems natural human nature. It is quite tempting. What did Jesus say to the disciples about that?

Look at verse 35b. “‘Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.’” This saying of Jesus shows us the paradoxical but spiritual truth that is quite against our human nature. Again, what is our human nature like? In this world, we truly want to be first. Not many people remember second-place, like who the runner-up was for the past Super bowls. Surely, because of that, like or not, we are competing with everyone else, trying to be at the higher place than the next guy. It is like playing musical chairs, with the better place or the higher place being limited. In the Bible, there was someone who always tried to pull someone else’s leg to be at the higher position than the other guy even from his birth. He was Jacob. Jacob grabbed his own brother’s hill not to lose the firstborn’s position and yet still lost. After that, he never lost in a positional fight, until God came down and had an all-night wrestling match with him to teach him what it means to be truly great. Later, he changed from a leg-grabbing, high-position-taking competitor to a blessing-sharing benefactor who even blessed Pharaoh of Egypt. During the Founders Day celebration, P. Nehemiah Kim from Gwangju UBF of Korea testified he went through a Jacob-like, an extremely competitive life, from early age on, even from Highschool freshman year. When he was only 16 years old, he was put under so much stress about competing that he fell ill with a disease and had to be hospitalized. On his hospital bed, he despaired so much that he felt completely dark and lost. At that moment, miraculously, one of the nurses there, an UBF shepherdess, invited him to 1:1 Bible study and worship service. He received so much grace through her care and UBF shepherds’ hospitality that he wanted to grow as a diplomat missionary. After getting into one of the top three universities, he briefly went through some competition-motivated ministry work but was changed through Apostle Paul’s spiritual desire, “I want to know Christ…” Now he was appointed as the coordinator for the entire Korea UBFs, coworking with P. Ron and serving many guests from all around world as he serves UBF history museum at Gwangju UBF.

Look at verse 35. Jesus teaches us to be the last and the servant of all to be the first or great. Surely, P. Nehemiah became the servant of all according to Jesus’ teaching. The keyword “the servant of all” represents “servant leadership.” It is hard and challenging. That is why Jesus demonstrated “servant leadership” through a little child. Taking the child in his arms, Jesus said to the disciples, “‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.’” Welcoming little children takes time, effort and patience and does not seem to pay back. One of our missionary friends, Dr. James Won from Mississippi went back to Korea because of the visa issue and after returning to Korea, he and his wife were blessed with the twin boys. But he was surprised that other people, like his friend, gave up the hope of having children because of the skyrocketed cost of childcare and education. Welcoming natural-born children is this much hard and welcoming little children in Jesus’ name requires double portion of care, understanding and patience. We are talking about spiritual children. However, when we do welcome such spiritually little children in Jesus’ name, that makes us changed people who work not based on success, fame, or a position but the children’s well-being we become like Christ. No one in the world recognizes us just because we welcome such little children and yet our Heavenly Father would remember it and recognize us as great people. So, that is our comfort and vision, and may God bless us to be truly great people who bless others, welcome children and serve them.

1. **Whoever Is Not Against Us Is For Us (38-50)**

Look at verse 38. We saw that there had always been many issues with the discipleship training program among the disciples. In this verse, however, we see an issue which we never saw before. John brought it up to Jesus, saying that he and other disciples saw someone driving out demons in his name and they told him to stop because he was not one of them. Here, we see John and other disciples being territorial like lions in wildlife or the corporates in the business world claiming their exclusive rights or trademarks. This is another aspect of human nature. We would like to be inner circles or special people that require special attention and treatment. Or we do not want to share with others what we put so much time and energy into (that is why we apply for patents). What did Jesus say about it? He asked them not to stop him. He said that no one who did a miracle in his name could in the next moment say anything bad about him. His saying, “whoever is not against us is for us,” further guides us what our stance should be like in our life of faith if we happen to have that type of incident. In a nutshell, we are not like operating a baseball team that tries to win the world-series championship alone, like 2016 Chicago Cubs. Rather, we are like the allied forces in WWII, extending the battle fronts wherever possible against the same foe. The other day, I was touched by a story that in 1950s, Volvo patented its three-point belt design but allowed anyone to use it, which could have saved millions of lives (over financial gains). Even a car company knows this “for-us” mentality that still charms us. Look at verse 41. “Truly I tell you, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to the Messiah will certainly not lose their reward.” Our dear Lord is better than the Volvo car company, giving us even an incentive when we do our “for-us” work. When we work for the gospel and fight against the dark forces as one, those who encourage us or strengthen us with a small favor would be certainly rewarded. That is the reason why after the ISBC, many of the servant received the gift cards and some of our shepherds and missionaries from other countries, like Korea, South America and even Ukraine received very special reward and treatment from LA UBF, participating in LA Glory Camp, with which they visited many good places like Grand Canyon and Disney Land.

Look at verse 42. “‘If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them if a large millstone were hung around their neck and they were thrown into the sea.’” In this verse, we see how much Jesus cared (and still cares) for little ones and how serious sin it would be for those who cause them to fall. The little ones would possibly be new believers who just started their life of faith in Jesus. They were vulnerable to many things like a newborn deer being vulnerable to predators of all types. Apostle Paul once told the Corinthian believers that if meat (previously offered to the idols) could cause some new believers to fall, he would never eat meat again. That much he cared for the flock of God. What about seriousness or a consequence of accidental or non-accidental stumbling-causing? A large millstone hung around your neck will definitely drag you down to the bottom of the sea. That is awful. Verses 43-48 depicts an even more dire situation you would have, like maiming your limbs and gauging out your eyes, which would be better than going into hell where there would be an unquenchable fire and super worms that withstand the fire and thus continue to eat our flesh.

With such a terrible description about the hell being aside, Jesus now talks about salt being salty and salt losing saltiness. Salt is essential in our daily life. Salt works as a preservative to keep food fresh and gives us a flavor of food, particularly good with meat. However, if it loses its saltiness, there is no need for salt. It is no different than sand. This analogy of salt shows us what kind of life we need to aim for. Instead of worrying about or being afraid of negativity such as stumbling-causing or going into hell, we need to think more about positivity, such as making every effort to be at peace with each other. The world is going from the worse to the worst as we woke up to the news of the terrorist groups attacking innocent Israelis in addition to the Ukraine situation. Outwardly, being at peace with others seems impossible. Still, the dying world needs more preservative than ever to decay any further and the mundane and bleak world needs more flavor than ever to be meaningful and joyful.

In conclusion, we learned our natural human nature wants to be first and at the higher position like Jacob did. However, a blessing-sharing life, servant leadership and a child-welcoming life are much better because our God would recognize us and change us Christ-like. Jesus cares for little ones; so, no falling or stumbling is very strongly advised. May God bless us to be salt in this dying and mundane world to preserve and to flavor!