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## SHARING YOUR FAITH WITH ASIAN AMERICANS (PART THREE)

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In Part Two of this series I considered three important characteristics that distinguish many Asian Americans from other ethnic groups: *indebtedness*, *shame*, and *saving face*. Understanding how these instilled attitudes affect Asian Americans will not only help you build friendships with them, but also provide you with insights in how to share the gospel with them more effectively.

Theological difficulties might emerge while sharing your faith because of these characteristics. In this article I will discuss a few of those difficulties and possible solutions.

**True Indebtedness.** As I mentioned previously, many Asian Americans feel indebted to anyone who does them a favor, gives them help, or acts kindly toward them. They feel compelled to reciprocate. Doing these kinds of things can be a good first step in developing a friendship with them.

There is, however, a downside to this indebtedness. Many have difficulty in accepting a religious doctrine that teaches that salvation is a *free gift* from God to those who believe in Jesus Christ. To proclaim how wonderful this gift is, and yet say there is nothing they can do to merit it, is for them incomprehensible.

For many of my relatives this doctrine of grace is the biggest stumbling block in accepting the Christian faith. They cannot understand how a religion that repudiates any effort to achieve God's grace can effectively promote ethical behavior. What further causes them to dismiss Christianity is that they see many Christians who, from their perspective, proudly declare their Christian identity but demonstrate few of the Christian characteristics they talk about.

What they must come to see is God's great love for them — not because of what they can *do* for Him, but because of what they *are*: His creatures created in His image, and, though fallen, capable of being fully restored to that image through faith in His Son. And, it will help them understand God's love if they can see this love working in our lives, motivating us to do good deeds, not because we are trying to earn our way to heaven, but because we are grateful that God loves us so dearly.

**Overcoming Shame.** In Part Two I discussed how — because they are extremely group-conscious — shame seems to have considerably more affect on many Asian Americans than does guilt. Bringing any kind of disgrace to their family would be worse than committing any kind of private sin.

The Christian doctrine of the Cross is particularly repulsive to them. In Shusaku Endo's great novel *The Samurai*, Rokuemon Hasekura, the main character, is initially disgusted when he sees a picture of Jesus on the cross, because he sees Him as a weak god nailed to a post. This pathetic image possessed none of the Japanese qualities that he admired, such as serenity, strength, and honor. But as Hasekura came to know Christ through his own suffering, he realized that Christ is a living God who conquered death and who died in this way because of His great love for him.

Many Asian Americans possess similar misgivings about identifying themselves with someone who died so shamefully and dishonorably. They must come to realize what Hasekura finally realized — that only a god who has suffered as He had can identify with their inner torments; only a god who really cares for them would allow himself to be so cruelly afflicted; and only a god who *truly* is God could rise from the tomb and give eternal life to those who believe in him.

And so, we should not be ashamed of the Cross. As Paul said, some will certainly stumble over it (Gal. 5:11). But how else will people see Jesus for who He truly is? Besides, I have known several who at first loathed this image of Christ but in time came to fall on their knees before this man and God on the cross.

**Saving Face.** What saving face really comes down to is refusing to admit we're wrong. Of course, this tendency is not unique to Asian Americans. And there are some Asian Americans who will freely confess their mistakes. Nevertheless, this kind of stubborn pride can be an important factor when you are sharing your faith with some Asian Americans.

I have observed that when Christians encounter this kind of pride in otherwise responsive Asian Americans they either argue that they must publicly repent of their sins if they want to become Christians, or they ignore the issue of repentance altogether. I think both approaches are incorrect. A better way of teaching the importance of public confession of faith is committing time and energy in studying the Bible with them and discussing from personal experience what certain statements of Christ mean to you — such statements as: "And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man shall confess him also before the angels of God, but he who denies Me before men shall be denied before the angels of God" (Luke 12:8-9).

But, of course, you can only have this kind of study after you become friends. So, make a friend with an Asian American non-Christian, and in time you may be blessed with a dear brother or sister in Christ.

*-- J. Isamu Yamamoto*