

“I am less than the least of all God’s people” Matthew 2:1-18 / Ephesians 3:1-12 (1/5/24)

Because South Korea is officially under a ceasefire with North Korea, all Korean men have to do their military service duty. Most of the troops are placed along the northern border to protect the country. So, most Korean men do their military service duty in the Army to protect the border of the country.

I also had to decide where I should do military duty after graduating from the seminary. While I was concerned about my military service, one of my church members, who was an Air Force officer, told me that I could do military service near my home and church if I applied to be an Air Force officer. There was the VIP airport near my home and church, and the airport was protected by the Air Force. So, he said, if I had a good rank and score during the officer training, I could choose the place where I hoped to serve as an officer. I thought his suggestion was so nice because I could continue my ministry experience while I was doing military duty.

So, I applied for the Air Force officer position, and thankfully, I passed all the tests to become a candidate. Then, I enlisted in the officer training center as an officer candidate. I was full of hope and expectation about being able to serve in the military close to my home and church.

However, my hope was destroyed during the first week of the training program. There were 524 candidates in my class. Most of the candidates were from the elite of South Korea. Some people were lawyers in the United States, and some people were officers in the Army – They re-enlisted in the Air Force to be pilots. And most of the candidates graduated from very famous universities. All of them were talented candidates who possessed both physical and intelligence. If some people did not have any concern about the competition and did not have any talent, those candidates were big companies' CEOs' or generals' or colonel's children. In the training center, everyone showed the same reaction when I introduced my school to candidates. "Methodist Theological University? Was there a school like that in Korea? I have never heard about that school."

For me, the worst problem was that about half of the candidates came from near the VIP airport. That was a true possibility because the VIP airport was in Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, and most of the elites lived in Seoul. Other talented candidates who were not from Seoul also hoped to go to the VIP airport because they hoped to have Seoul life during their military service. I was so discouraged, and I had no idea how to compete with those talented candidates to be placed in the VIP airport. I was less than the least of all candidates.

There is a person who described himself as less than the least. He is Paul. In Ephesians, Paul said, “Although I am less than the least of all the Lord’s people, this grace was given me.” Paul explained himself as the less than the least. However, Paul was not the least person like me.

Paul was a descendant of the tribe of Benjamin, which means he was a true Hebrew. He was very professional about Judaism and Jewish tradition. He was born in Tarsus and has had citizenship of the Roman Empire since birth. He was a student of Gamaliel. He was a very well-trained Pharisee who was passionate about protecting Jewish law and tradition. So, he was very passionate about persecuting the Christians in the early church.

This is Paul’s bibliography, which was well-known to people. In his bibliography, to know more about Paul, we should know more about Tarsus, where Paul was born, and Gamaliel, who was Paul’s teacher.

Tarsus was the intersection of Eastern and Western cultures. Yes, most cities in the Bible were the intersection of many cultures and a very important trading point. However, Tarsus had a special characteristic compared to other cities. Tarsus was the center of philosophy, study, and education. There were

many famous schools in Tarsus. Some people say that Tarsus's education quality was much better than that of Athens and Alexandria. Paul was born in a city with a very high quality of education.

Then, let's talk about Gamaliel, who was Paul's teacher. Gamaliel was a very famous and respected Rabbi at that time. He was not just a good Rabbi. He was Hillel's grandson. His grandfather, Hillel, founded the Hillel School, which was one of the two main branches of the Pharisees. So, simply, we know that Gamaliel and his family had an important influence on the Pharisees. Paul was a student of Gamaliel. So, Paul was the elite of the elites in the Jewish world.

Then, why did Paul describe himself as "less than the least of God's people?" We can see that Paul wrote a lot about what God did in his life. He said, "the prisoner of Christ Jesus," "the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you," "God made me know the mystery by revelation," and "I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power." Throughout his life, he showed who God is to the people. Throughout Paul's life, Paul, who had a lot of talent, was not revealed, but God was revealed. Paul humbled himself and showed God.

In the Bible, there is one more person who humbled himself and showed God through his life. This person was Jesus. I shared that Jesus probably came to us as infants to show us the way of sanctification. And through today's Gospel Scripture, we can see why Jesus humbled himself as an infant.

Matthew wrote the Gospel for the Jewish people to show that Jesus was the Messiah and the King of the Jewish people. And today's Gospel Scripture is not a good story to show the glory of the King. Jesus was born in a manger and was in danger when he was a baby. We cannot know if Jesus was a baby with some superpower to defeat Herod. However, no matter whether Jesus had superpowers or not, Jesus could not survive without Joseph and Mary when he was a baby. However, when Jesus humbled himself as a baby, God's work was revealed. The readers of the Gospel of Matthew could see that God's prophecy and promises were fulfilled through Jesus's life. People could know the faithfulness of God when Jesus humbled himself.

Today is Epiphany. Epiphany is the first day of Jesus's divinity was revealed. However, we cannot read any superpower of Jesus in the Epiphany story. Jesus was a small and weak baby, but God sent the Magi to him, so Jesus was worshiped by the Magi. God sent angels and people to fulfill God's promise.

Since Jesus came to us as a baby, we could see the greatness of our God.

The virtue of being humble is understood differently depending on the culture. However, I believe all Christians should have the purpose of being humble. Like Jesus and Paul, the meaning of being humble for Christians is revealing God in Christians' lives. Jesus revealed his divinity through being humble. And I am sure that God will reveal Godself through our lives when we humble ourselves.

Today is the first Sunday of the year. Through this Sunday of Epiphany, I hope to encourage us to humble ourselves. And I hope that God reveals Godself through our lives in 2025. Amen.