

“How do you say ‘I love you’ in Japanese?”  
A Difficult Question of Culture

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An older American widow once asked me, “How do you say ‘I love you’ in Japanese?” My first thought was to wonder if she had a Japanese boyfriend. But many people ask me that question. I always hesitate to answer.

In English, people often say “I love you.” Couples say it to each other, parents say it to their children, children say it to their parents, and even friends express love. Though God’s love and human love differs, it still sounds natural to hear “God loves you” or “Jesus loves you” in English.

But Japanese people almost never say “I love you,” especially in public. Though the word *love* translates as *ai* in Japanese, Japanese people do not use it as a verb but usually only as a noun. Love (*ai*) is an emotion that you do not verbalize but rather something that should be felt through relationships, such as love of parents and love of family.

The Japanese language is also different in that words can be combined to become a new word. For example, *ai* is “love” but *aijou* is “affection,” *aiso* is “friendliness,” *keiai* is “respect,” and *aikoku* is “patronage.” *Ren’ai* is “romance,” and this is one of the only situations where the word love is used as a verb, ‘*aishiteru*,’ to describe the closeness of the romantic or sexual relationship. In this situation, young people in Japan prefer to use English expressions, and many love songs and greeting cards use *I love you* without translating it into Japanese.

The Japanese Bible uses the word *ai* and it is relatively easy to understand God’s love as a noun. But the phrase “God loves you” doesn’t communicate well to Japanese people, and it’s important to understand why.

The Gospel is universal, and the power of the salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ is the same for all the peoples on earth, in spite of differences in nationalities, languages, races, and other cultural matters (Romans 1:16, 1 Timothy 2:4). Therefore, it is our mission to preach the Gospel to all the nations (Matthew 28:19).

Then, why does Christianity spread rapidly in some nations but struggle in other nations? It is not the Gospel that separates us, but we—sinful, limited humans—are the ones who create all the differences among us. We cannot grasp the huge nature of God and His mystery as a whole. We can see only a part of it, depending on our experiences and knowledge on earth, namely, our culture.

Knowing that the Gospel is universal and ministry is the work of the Holy Spirit, it seems a waste of time to study a certain culture and think about effective ministry in that particular culture. In reality, though, it is helpful to study a certain culture to find effective approaches to reach the people in that culture. We do not change or arrange the Gospel so that it fits better into the certain culture. Rather, we are trying to find a cultural hook that will help people understand and respond to Christ.

I once heard this statement: “American Christians are serving Christians, Korean Christians are praying Christians, and Japanese Christians are studying Christians.” Cultures are unique and powerful. They can limit our understanding of God, but they also bring out different styles of praising and glorifying the Lord. How beautiful it is when we build up the body of Christ by appreciating different cultures and learning from one another, instead of judging one another.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 reads: “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.” It is my prayer that we will renew our strength by the power of the Holy Spirit, and take this new step of faith to witness to people in different culture groups with a special concern for their cultures. ■

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