

The Shepherd's Call

Isaiah 43:1-3a; Hosea 12:1-2; JOHN 10:3-5, 16-17, 27 (TEXT)

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • January 31, 2016 (Big Springs URC & ZCRC Pasig)

Dear Congregation of Christ: When the pastor preaches the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ to a congregation, there are people who respond positively, and with interest, and later come to faith. But there are also many who have no response and show no interest. Have you ever wondered why this division happens? Are those who say yes to the gospel have better understanding and more wise than those who don't? Are they better than the others?

Let us briefly take a look at the life of Augustine. He was born in A.D. 354 in Numidia in present-day Algeria to a pagan father and a devoted Christian mother named Monica. He was a brilliant, well-educated student of classical literature and rhetoric. In his early youth, Augustine's life was one of immorality, excesses of youth, and discontent. At the age of 18, he started a 13-year relationship with a woman whom he never married, but who bore him a son. During this time, he was involved in a pagan cult called Manicheism, which was a combination of the teachings of Buddha, Zoroaster and Mani, two Persian wise men, and Christ. But the philosophical teachings of this cult was staunchly anti-Christian.

From a teaching appointment at Carthage, in present-day Tunisia, Augustine went on to teach in Rome, where he drifted into neo-Platonism, a Greek philosophical system. Later, he was appointed as chief professor of rhetoric in the most prestigious school in Milan, the capital city of the Western Roman Empire. In spite of all these things, his mother Monica prayed without ceasing for his son to come back to Christianity.

But how can this man, pagan, adulterer and rebel for most of his 32 years of life, come to faith? Our texts today in John 10 give us the answer to this mystery. Jesus says that his sheep know him, and when he calls them, they know his voice, and they follow him. Other sheep do not follow him because they are not among his own flock. But we know from our studies that all humankind are slaves of sin and are actually dead in sin. How would sinners hear the voice of Christ calling them when they are spiritually dead and enslaved by the devil?

Today we will study how a dead sinner respond to the gospel and hear God's call? Our meditation will be, **"The Shepherd's Call,"** under three headings: first, **"The Shepherd Calls His Own Sheep by Name"**; second, **"The Sheep Hear His Voice"**; and third, **"The Sheep Follow Him."**

"The Shepherd Calls His Own Sheep by Name"

The Bible tells us that before the creation of the world, God chose to save his own people from sin through his own Son. In the fullness of time, Jesus the Son of God came down from heaven, assumed human flesh, and willingly went to his death on the cross. God's plan is that all those he had chosen would believe in his own Son as Savior and Lord and be saved from

sin and eternal death. But how would these chosen ones believe in the Son, when they are slaves of sin and spiritually dead? Can a dead person see, hear, and understand?

The answer is illustrated in the death of Jesus' friend Lazarus. Four days after Lazarus died, *"he called Lazarus out of the tomb and raised him from the dead"* (John 12:17). Jesus says that he as the good Shepherd *"calls his own sheep by name."* Those who are his own hear his voice, but those who are not his do not hear. In verse 26, Jesus tells the Pharisees, *"you do not believe because you are not among my sheep."*

This is the reason why many who hear the call of our Lord to repent and believe do not respond. They are not among his sheep. They are not among those whom his Father had chosen before the creation of the world. In John 8:43, Jesus tells the Jews that they do not understand what he was saying is *"because you are not able to hear my word."* Later in verse 47, he tells them, *"The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God."* (verse 47).

This is the state of those whom God had not chosen. Why can't they hear God's call to repent and believe? In our reading of Article 9 of the Canons of Dort III/IV, the reason that they do not hear *"is not the fault of the gospel, nor of the Christ offered by the gospel, nor of God... The fault lies in themselves."* No one can fault God and Christ and his gospel for man's heart of stone and rebellious minds.

The Parable of the Sower illustrates what happens when the gospel is preached. There are those who right away reject the gospel. Others seem to receive it, but it is not a real reception, and later turn away. Still others receive it, but it is also not real, because their faith is choked by the cares and pleasures of their earthly life, not having their minds on heavenly things.

So doesn't this prove that many people can resist the gospel call by the Spirit? Didn't Stephen say this when he rebuked the unbelieving Jews, *"You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you"* (Ac 7:51)? Scripture sometimes uses "resist," "oppose," and "contradict," to express the attitude of unbelief (Acts 13:45; Rom. 10:21; II Tim. 3:8; Tit. 1:9). It is obvious that sin consists in resistance to the will of God. If the commands of God were not resistible, there would be no sin.

So God's grace is also resistible in that people can be in a state of unbelief. Stephen was bold enough to indict his unbelieving audience with resistance to the Holy Spirit. When we speak of irresistible grace, therefore, it is not that all grace is irresistible. Because without the regenerating work of the Spirit, a sinner will always ignore, even resist, the gospel call. He will always be against God, an enemy of God (Rom 5:10). The prophet Hosea says that Israel was in this state of rebellion and unbelief, even as the Lord continued to call them back, *"The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols"* (Hos 11:2). So we see that all kinds of unbelievers – followers of other religions, cultists, atheists, humanists and politicians – resist or ignore the gospel call by Christ.

But not so with God's chosen ones. They hear the gospel, believe and converted, and then bear many fruits. How then did they hear? Are they better people? Are they wiser than others?

“The Sheep Hear His Voice”

No, they are not better or wiser than others. When the good Shepherd calls his own sheep by name, they hear. But this is not because of anything good in them, but only because of the Holy Spirit's regenerating work on their hearts; because they were chosen as God's own sheep. In the Old Testament, God called the Jews his *“own treasured possession”* (Exo 19:6). He created and formed them, and said, *“I have called you by name, you are mine”* (Isa 43:1). Our reading of CD III/IV Article 11 summarizes what the Spirit does to bring about the conversion of the sheep.

First, he “powerfully enlightens their minds” so they may understand the things of God. Paul prays for the Ephesian believers, *“that [God] may give you the Spirit... having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you”* (Eph 1:17-18). Second, the Spirit “penetrates into the innermost recesses of man,” just as Hebrews 4:12 says about how the Word of God, working through the Spirit, *“[pierces] to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and [discerns] the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”* Third, he “opens the closed and softens the hard heart, circumcises that which was uncircumcised.” God promises the sinner, *“And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh”* (Ezk 36:26). He also promises to *“circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul”* (Deu 30:6).

Fourth, the Spirit “instills new qualities into the will. He makes the will, which was dead, alive; which was bad, good; which was unwilling, willing; and which was stubborn, obedient.” The heart that was “dead to sin” is now “alive to God” (Rom 6:11). It is made willing and able to answer the gospel call. And it is made obedient to the Shepherd's call to come.

Fifth and last, the Spirit “moves and strengthens it so that, like a good tree, it may be able to produce the fruit of good works.”

“The Sheep Follow Him”

Jesus says that when he calls his sheep, they know his voice. Because they know his voice, they listen, and then they follow him. Following the good Shepherd means obedience to his commands, and obedience means doing good works.

Hearing, listening and following are words indicating obedience. Back in John 8:47, Jesus says, *“Whoever is of God hears the words of God.”* Everyone who hears the Word of God, the Truth, listens to his voice (John 18:37). And in 1 John 4:6, the apostle again says, *“Whoever knows God listens to us,”* that is, to the Apostles. The writings of the Apostles are the truth and the Word of God.

Today, so many in the church have been deceived by their pastors and teachers. They teach that a person can be a true Christian, and still live in godlessness and unrighteousness. They teach a deceptive and dangerous saying, “Once saved, always saved.” They believe that since they have been saved by faith in Christ, they will never lose their salvation. They can be “carnal Christians,” doing whatever pleases their passions and desires, and yet never be in

danger of eternal judgment. Have they ever read Galatians 5:19-21?

“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.”

This teaching has done great harm to the church, with so many people calling themselves “born again,” but all the while continuing their sinful lives. But Jesus says that his sheep hear the gospel call, listen to his voice, and follow his commandments in his Word. Paul says that God has called a Christian *“to lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him”* (1 Cor 7:17). He urges us *“to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called”* (Eph 4:1), since *“God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness”* (1 Thess 4:7), and *“to a holy calling”* (2 Tim 1:9). And Peter says, *“but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct”* (1 Pet 1:15).

How then can anyone say that he is a true believer, called to be a saint, when he continues to live a life of an unrepentant sinner? Jesus has a warning to him. On Judgment Day, he will say, “Lord, Lord, I did this thing and that thing in your name.” But Jesus will rebuke him, *“I never knew you; depart from me, you worker of lawlessness!”* (Matt 7:23).

But let this also be a warning to all of us. The response of obedience to our good Shepherd's call is not for just one moment, one day, one year, but for the rest of our lives. Following our good Shepherd means, as Paul says, to *“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure”* (Phil 2:12-13).

Dear Friends in Christ: After all those years of Augustine's life of excesses, his mother Monica's prayers were answered. While in Milan, he met Ambrose, the pastor of the Christian church there. He listened to the faithful preaching of Ambrose, whom he admired for his skill as a rhetorician. One day in 386, in a garden, while he was contemplating over his immoral lifestyle, it is said that he heard a girl's voice, or children chanting, “Take up and read, take up and read.” Getting the Scriptures beside him, Augustine began reading Romans 13:13-14, *“Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”*

What amazing grace! What a demonstration of God's providential love for him! On that day, he repented of his sins and placed his trust in Christ. In 395, he was ordained by Ambrose as pastor of the church in Hippo, and became the greatest theologian in the early church.

But how did this amazing conversion happen? Is it because Augustine was brilliant, wise, and good? No, not at all. Like Saul the persecutor of Christians, he was a fool before God. Augustine lived a life of immorality and excesses. But we know of many others more wicked than Augustine before they listened to the voice of their good Shepherd. Two of these are David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam serial killer, and Jeffrey Dahmer, a monster by all accounts. But they both repented of their heinous sins and placed their faith in Christ.

Friends, if the Holy Spirit can completely change the hearts of stone of these most wicked men into hearts of flesh molded into faith, holiness and righteousness, how can he not transform your hearts, and the hearts of those close to your hearts? When the Spirit changes your heart, you are not able to resist. He is infinitely more powerful than you. He will surely draw you to faith in Christ. And he promises that you will hear his call, listen to his voice, and follow his commands. He will do these from your day of salvation until your last day, even for eternity.