

THE CALL OF THE GOSPEL

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In John 10:3, Jesus, our Good Shepherd, tells us that He calls His sheep *by name*. If you are one of His sheep, therefore, you will not just hear Him calling, but will hear Him calling *you*.

Have you so heard Him? If you have, do you know the name by which He called you? Do you even know what it means that He calls His sheep by name?

It is not enough, you understand, just to go to church to hear the preacher. There are many members of the church who have never heard Jesus calling, who do not know the names by which He calls His own.

If you have never heard Him calling you and He never does call you by name, then you are not one of His sheep, one of those to whom He gives eternal life. Then you will never lie down in green pastures and find peace beside still waters.

Sometimes, however, we are so foolish (that is part of being sheep) that we do not recognize the call of Jesus, and do not understand that He is calling us. When that happens it is usually because He calls us not by the names our parents gave us, but by the spiritual names He has given us.

When Jesus calls us, He calls us through the Gospel preaching of the Holy Scriptures. The names our parents gave us are not recorded in the Scriptures. Our spiritual names, however, are. Those are the names Jesus uses when He calls us, His sheep.

What are those names? You will find them in many different passages of Scripture. In Isaiah 55:1, the name He uses is "Thirsty One." In Matthew 11:28 our name is "Laboring and Heavy Laden One." In Revelation 22:17 our spiritual name is "Whosoever Will" and "Him that Heareth." In John 10 our name is "Sheep," foolish, wandering sheep. Often, though, He just calls us "Sinners."

Do you recognize any of those names as your own? If you do not, Jesus is not calling you. Those are names He gives to His sheep and they belong only to His sheep.

They are names that Jesus gives us by the first work of His Spirit in our hearts. No person, by nature, is any of these things. No one thirsts, no one is laboring and heavy laden, no one wills or hears, until the Spirit of God regenerates them.

If you doubt that, then talk to an unbelieving acquaintance sometime. Call him these names and he will soon let you know that you have made a mistake. Call him "Sinner" and he will say, "No, you have the wrong person. I think you're referring to that fellow over there. My name is 'Not-Such-a-Bad-Person' or 'God-can't-possibly-be-angry-with-me-because-I-live-a-decent-life.' I'm not sure exactly whom you were looking for, but it wasn't I."

Perhaps you say, "But are not all men sinners? Is He not pleading with them all to come to Him and promising them all eternal life?"

The answer is "No." We are not talking here about the fact that all men are sinners by nature. The point is that Jesus by the grace of the Holy Spirit gives some the name "Sinner" so that they recognize themselves by that name and know that it is their name.

This is what He means in Luke 5:32 when He says, "I came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance." He is not talking about our natural depravity when He speaks of sinners, but of those who know themselves to be sinners. Thus He speaks also to the righteous, not because there are really any righteous by nature, but because there are so many who call themselves "Righteous."

Thus it is at the table of the Lord. He does not call those who are worthy. He calls those who are unworthy to eat and drink, those who have no proper clothes of their own in which to sit at His table, those who are spiritually hungry and thirsty, whom He has gathered by His Spirit from the highways and byways of life.

Thus it is in the preaching of the Gospel. Not only does He speak through the preaching, so that the sheep hear His voice. He calls them in the preaching as He Himself has made them by His Spirit weary of sin, laboring and burdened with guilt and cares, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, not satisfied anymore with the pleasures of the flesh.

First He makes them cry like the publican in the temple, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." Then He calls such crying sinners to Himself that He may bind up their wounds, heal their broken hearts, remove their burdens and give them rest. For that He came. That is His Word in Isaiah 61:1-3.

That is the Word of God in John 10. He is the Good Shepherd - the Shepherd of the sheep! O yes, we are sheep, foolish, woolly-headed, wandering creatures who say (only by grace), "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way."

But He is the shepherd - the Shepherd who loved His sheep so greatly that for their sakes He went like a lamb to the slaughter. Our very "sheepishness" therefore, is proof that we belong to Him. For such and for none others He came. For such He laid down His life. Such He calls and leads to peaceful pastures.

Has He called *you* . . . by name?