

Listening to the Shepherd's Voice

John 10:1-10

May 3, 2020

Do you use the voice recognition program on your smart phone or computer? Voice Recognition or Automatic Speech Recognition is a computer software program that is commonly used to operate a device, perform commands, or write without using a keyboard. All smart phones and late model computers have this function. To use that program, you need to train your device (phone or computer) to recognize your voice. Some programs respond to more than one voice. But some recognize only one, mainly for security purpose.

The one that is trained to recognize only one voice can only be used by its owner or by the one who trained it. That reminds me of sheep. Did you know that sheep respond to only one voice?

A Lutheran pastor Frank G. Honeycutt once shared about a traveler who pretended to be a shepherd while he was traveling in the Middle East. The traveler came upon three shepherds whose flocks had intermingled while drinking water from a stream. After a few moments of resting, one of the shepherds turned toward the sheep and called out, "Manah, Manah, Manah." Manah means "follow me" in Arabic. Immediately, his sheep separated themselves from the rest and followed him.

Then one of the two remaining shepherds called out, "Manah, Manah." And his sheep followed him. The traveler wanted to try that. So, he asked the third shepherd if he could pretend to be him and try to call his sheep? He said to the shepherd, "Let me put on your cloak and turban and see if I can get your sheep to follow me."

The shepherd smiled and let him borrow his cloak and turban. After putting on the shepherd's outfit, the traveler called out, "Manah, Manah." The sheep did not even look at him let alone responding to the traveler's voice. Not even one.

That was amazing. So, the traveler asked, "Will the sheep ever follow someone other than you?" "Oh yes," the shepherd replied, "sometimes when a sheep gets sick, it will follow just about anyone."¹

¹ Frank G. Honeycutt, "Just Like That," a sermon based on John 13:31-35, excerpted from *Sermons On The Gospel Readings: Series I, Cycle C* (CSS Publications, 2003).

Jesus said, "The sheep hear (the shepherd's) voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger...because they do not know his voice."²

There are a few things we can learn from this passage.

First, sheep recognize the shepherd's voice.

When the traveler pretended to be the shepherd, the sheep recognized he was not their shepherd right away. They did not recognize his voice. Healthy sheep recognize their shepherd. The sick ones don't. There are many voices in the world vying for our attention and loyalty. There are a lot of voices that want us to think that they are the voice that will lead us to a blessed life. But in reality, they can only provide a temporary satisfaction or even destroy our lives.

Bob's Famous Ice Cream Parlor in Bethesda, Maryland, was robbed, but manager Nathan Peabody was warned in time. Moments before the robbery, he received a phone call. The voice said, "Are you the manager? Listen carefully; don't panic. This is the police. You are going to be robbed. Do NOT resist. He is dangerous and he will harm you. Let him have your money. We will be waiting right outside your store and we need to catch him with the money on him. Thank you for your cooperation."

Sure enough, a man with a knife came in demanding money. Mr. Peabody, the manager did not resist. He let the robber take all the money. He watched as the robber left the store, waiting for the cops to close in. Instead, the robber just got in his car and drove away. He saw the robber disappear. No police showed up. Then he realized that the call had not come from police. It was from the thief.³ He listened to the wrong voice.

We need to learn to listen to the right voice. Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."⁴

Second, sheep know who their shepherd is. They know to whom they belong. We all want to have a sense of belonging.

² John 10:3-5.

³ Stories For Preachers and Teachers, HeavenWord, Inc, 1999.

⁴ John 10:10.

The late Bishop Gerald Kennedy (1907-1980) once told a story about a young girl who lived in an apartment in a big city. During the summer, children on block gathered in the street to play. After a while, one girl said she had to go home because her mother told her to be home before eight o'clock. Then a father would call his son and the boy would leave. Then a mother would call and others would leave. The girl said, "One by one, they would all go. It would get dark and I would be there all alone, waiting for my father or my mother to call me in. But they never did."⁵

Isn't that sad? It is important for all of us to have a sense of belonging. It is sad that there are children who do not know the voice of a caring parent, who never get called in or called home. They are neglected to do whatever they want. That neglect is not freedom. It is inattention and lack of care.

What children really want and need is someone to care for them. Someone to call their name with love and care. Someone to let them know that they matter. Someone to even rebuke them and correct them for the wrong they do.

God want us to recognize that we are loved and we matter to him. That is why he gave his life for us on the cross. That is why he rose from the dead to let us know that he is always with us and that he will never abandon us.

Third, sheep trust the shepherd to lead them and guide them in the right path. Each time we pray to the Lord and rely on the Lord, he guides us and leads through convictions in our hearts. When we do not know what to do, sometimes the Lord gives us a conviction in our hearts. We get a sense that "This is what I gotta do." Or "That is what I should try." When we follow that conviction, it often becomes a great blessing.

At the age of forty-seven, Nick Thomas found himself unemployed and under tremendous financial pressure. He had had a successful career in the Air Force and in the insurance business. But when he started his own consulting business, it did not do too well. In the process of doing his own business he accumulated a lot of debt, and he realized he could not pay it back. He could barely survive. He had no place to turn. He didn't know what to do. He was deeply frustrated.

Knowing his frustration, Nick's wife Liz turned to the Lord in prayer. Her church had morning prayer each day. So, every morning she would be in the

⁵ Stories for Preachers and Teachers, HeavenWord, Inc, 1999.

sanctuary praying that something good would happen to change their fortune. Then one day while she was praying, she thought she could almost hear someone saying to her, "Make the mustard." Her family had a mustard recipe from Russia, and every Christmas she made this mustard and gave it to her family and friends as a special gift. At first, she ignored what she thought she heard. But each time she prayed those words kept coming back, "Make the mustard."

Reluctantly, she told her husband Nick about what she thought she heard. He thought she was losing her mind. Liz was sure she was hearing this voice. She had no idea from where, or from whom, the voice came. After considerable discussion and prayer, Nick and Liz decided to listen to the voice. She prepared a substantial amount of the mustard. They packaged it and then called on a local cheese shop. The manager tasted it and loved it. He immediately bought out their entire inventory. Within three months they had become a highly competitive mustard supplier in New York. Their mustard became very popular in New York's deli markets.⁶

Liz and Nick committed their troubles to the Lord and listened to the voice of the Lord. And the Lord gave them the direction they needed. As they followed the conviction of their hearts their fortune turned. They started to build a very profitable business.

We, as followers of Christ, need to learn to listen to his voice, to recognize his voice, and to follow his voice. May we all learn to do that!

⁶ When Smart People Fail: Rebuilding Yourself for Success, Carole Hyatt, Linda Gottlieb, Penguin Books; Rev/Upd edition (May 1, 1993)