

**Altavista Presbyterian Church
Rev. Eduardo Soto, Jr.**

**“God’s Prerogative”
Matthew 25:41-46
Ezekiel 34:11-16**

**Christ the King Sunday
November 26, 2017**

Matthew 25:41-46

Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.’ Then they also will answer, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?’ Then he will answer them, saying, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’ And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

Ezekiel 34:11-16

For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

“God’s Prerogative”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord remains forever. Friends, this is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Over the last three weeks, the Lectionary led us through some difficult and heavy topics. While I personally am not a hellfire and brimstone preacher, neither am I a universalist. I believe a balance must be struck regarding our fear of the Lord and the judgments he ultimately declares. And while it’s important to keep those in mind, what is more important is to remember that judgments are God’s prerogative. Far too often churches and Christians take that role upon themselves, both individually and corporately. The church is riddled with far too many horror stories of self-righteous, holier-than-thou attitudes of prejudice and condemnation. John Calvin, who preached on the election and reprobation of the world’s citizens, also preached that a person’s status as elect or reprobate rests solely in God. Moreover, while a person may exhibit attributes of being elect or reprobate, the true reality will only be made clear in the final analysis.

This morning we’re going to see how this played out in Israel’s history. If you remember your Sunday School stories, you may recall the story of King Saul. Back in the days before Israel’s

kings, the People of God relied on Judges to govern, protect, and intercede. This was fairly unique for nations in the Middle East at this time. Most other nations were ruled by kings. The Israelites, enamored by the kingships of their neighbors, pleaded with Samuel to beg God for a king. The Last Judge warned them that the king will pillage their own lands, conscript their sons as soldiers, and enslave their daughters as servants. And in that day they will cry out because of the king, whom they chose for themselves, but the Lord will not answer them in that day.¹ For the most part, that's exactly what happened. With few exceptions, Israel's ancient shepherds—its leaders—proved to be utter failures, directing the people into all kinds of idolatry. Over a span of 465 years and 43 kings, only three were truly loyal to God, eight or nine were okay, and the rest were rascals.² Stories of one failed king after another fill First and Second Kings, and even the rulers who were faithful to the Lord never brought about a revival of truth that lasted more than a generation or two.

This is the background behind Ezekiel's prophecy to Israel. God revealed to Ezekiel that a new kingship is planned and the old monarchy will be wiped away. The new kingdom will be marked by a different leadership model. Before, the kings of Israel were despots in the sense that they lead from their own strength. Their leadership style was that of commander. They did exactly what Samuel warned. They warred with other nations, they laid claims on lands not their own, and they were influenced by the religious practices of their neighbors. Again and again, Israel's leadership broke the Double Love Rule. God's promise to Ezekiel is a king whose leadership models that of a shepherd. Shepherding was a very common and very lucrative livelihood. Shepherds who owned many sheep might hire under-shepherds to tend their flocks. These hirelings did not receive their livelihood from the flock, for they were paid directly from the overseer. Without a vested interest, when danger appeared, the hirelings were the first to flee.

Israel's kings were such under-shepherds. The only investment they had in the flock of Israel was for their own benefit. When danger reared its ugly head in the form of foreign invaders, these kings turned and fled, leaving Israel to be plundered. Not only did these kings fail to protect Israel, they often times lead her astray. Hired under-shepherds might lead the fold into dangerous territory and open the flock to perils like predators or deadly terrain. And if a sheep of this fold were to get lost or trapped, the hireling might not be motivated enough to rescue it. The Kings of Israel led the People of God away from God, away from the right worship of God, and toward the false gods of neighboring lands. Enticed by the liberalities of these other religions, the kings distracted Israel from the One true God. Jehovah had enough. God will personally rescue his sheep from turmoil and gather them in from dispersion.

God promises to us that he will be the first actor in searching and calling. This is important to remember. It is God's prerogative to call us. We must first hear his sweet voice in our hearts. Before we can ever respond and seek after God, God must first call us. Without his call, we are left to be guided by the whim of iniquity. For the human will naturally bends toward sin. Without a doubt, we wholeheartedly respond to selfishness, pride, or lust. That is our natural direction. In order to seek after God, we must be attuned to the supernatural voice of the Spirit. But God must

act first. It is his prerogative to call. And on those whom he names, it is their duty and obligation to respond.

Furthermore, it is God's prerogative to rescue and redeem. Without God first prodding us, we would never even know we needed redemption. Our natural stance is content to be left wallowing in sin, as if iniquity were the most titillating experience; and indeed we are often enticed into such belief. Our Reformation ancestors saw this, too, for they never released their congregations from adhering to the Law. Unquestionable, the first act of the Law of Moses is to reveal to us our inability to fulfill the law. If we are unable to perfectly follow ten simple commands, we most surely are unable to redeem our own flesh before God's judgment. Therefore, God must act first in rescuing us. Indeed, the sheep who is trapped in a pit or surrounded by wolves has very little chance of saving itself. God the Shepherd is the only safeguard and protector that can rescue lost sheep. And without God's first acting in redemption, we might as well carry on the path of eternal ruin.

Here's the Good News: God has acted. God's prerogative to call and redeem was fulfilled in Christ. Jesus, who styles himself *the* Good Shepherd, is undoubtedly the execution of Ezekiel's prophecy. Jesus is very much the Good Shepherd. Not only is he constantly present with us, leading us and comforting us, he also gives his life for the sake of his sheep. This is most unlike the hireling. The Good Shepherd will defend his own, even unto death. Additionally, many Israelites during Jesus' ministry had a narrow view of the sheepfold—it could be home only to the ethnic sons of Abraham. But when the Messiah had come, it meant that the messianic age had dawned, along with the enlargement of the sheepfold—Gentiles, you and me, welcome in the kingdom of God. That was God's prerogative! And if it is God's prerogative to call, then that call is effective. When he calls his people to himself, they come. No sheep of the Good Shepherd can ultimately resist his call. And the sheep who does reject this call was never his sheep to begin with. If Jesus has called us, we cannot lose our salvation. We will not finally turn away from him, for our wills are guided by the Holy Spirit to align with his.

Another prerogative of God is to have but one, great flock. And all of the sheep in his fold he purchased with the blood of Christ. They, in turn, will leave the flocks into which they were born and become his sheep at his calling. All the other flocks are destined for destruction and are ruled by cruel and false shepherds. But the flock of the Lord is destined for life eternal under the watchful eye of the Good Shepherd, himself! We never need be afraid that this Shepherd will abandon his flock! Jesus promises that all who hear his voice as the Good Shepherd and come to him will be saved and protected in his fold. His sheep hear his voice and follow moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day. I entreat you, therefore, ask the Lord to let you hear his voice clearly, and if you are not in his fold, enter by placing your trust in Christ alone.

Although it is God's prerogative to call and redeem, and therefore does not really need us for his plan to succeed, he nevertheless deemed it wise to use us—to use his church—to accomplish his purposes in the world. Sometimes we humans let our usefulness get to our heads. While God does use our time, talents, and treasures to his glory, we must not think of ourselves more highly

than we ought. In fact, Paul tells this same advice to the church in Rome. He writes, “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”³ Note that Paul does not tell us that we should *not* think of ourselves highly in any sense, but that we must have a *right estimation* of ourselves.

While it is true that we are fallen and must struggle with sin throughout our lives, we must not allow this truth to overshadow the fact that we are made in the image of God and are being renewed day by day. We are not to be caught off guard by the remnants of sinful flesh that cling to our renewed selves, but we are also not to think of ourselves as useless. Sin may be something that we do, and we will fall from time to time as we grow in the Lord; however, sin does not define who we are as Christians. We are saints whom our Creator is refashioning into what we were always meant to be, and he makes us useful for his kingdom. God has gifted us for ministry, bestowing upon us the honor of being the agents through whom he makes his invisible kingdom visible in this world. The Lord has ordered things so that all of his people must exercise their gifts in order for his church to work properly in this world. No Christian can get away with sitting on the sidelines. We all have something to contribute, and if we are not serving the body of Christ, the body will not be healthy. It is God’s prerogative to invite us to be partakers of his kingdom. He calls us to his service and we must respond in faith and gratitude.

Let us pray. Grant, Almighty God, since you have once redeemed us by the death of your only-begotten Son, that we may not interrupt the course of thy favor by our ingratitude; but may we so proceed in obedience to thy Gospel, that we may be brought at length to the perfection of that grace which is commenced within us, and may proceed more and more every day in true piety, till at length we are gathered into thy heavenly kingdom, and enjoy the inheritance promised and obtained for us by the same Christ our Lord. Amen.⁴

¹ 1 Samuel 8:10-18

² Douglas Stuart, *The Communicator’s Commentary: Ezekiel*, Dallas: Word Books, 1986. Page 321.

³ Romans 12:3

⁴ John Calvin, “Prayer Lecture 64” from *Commentary on Ezekiel*, vol. 2. Page 380