

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

SOTERIOLOGY

The Doctrine of Salvation

By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, In Christ Alone, To the Glory of God Alone

UNIT 4: EFFECTUAL CALLING AND REGENERATION

The Spirit's Sovereign Work of New Birth

Lesson 10

The External Call and the Internal Call

The General Invitation and the Sovereign Summons

Many Are Called; Few Are Chosen — and the Difference Is Sovereign Grace

“Whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified”

Key Texts: Romans 8:30; 1 Corinthians 1:23–24; John 6:37, 44, 65; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 2:9; Matthew 22:14

“For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.”

Romans 8:29–30, NASB 1995

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Introduction

With Lesson 10, this Soteriology series enters its fourth unit, Effectual Calling and Regeneration, and turns from the eternal and architectonic dimensions of salvation (the pactum, election, union with Christ) to the moment when those eternal realities break into the experience of the individual sinner. Everything that has been studied in the preceding nine lessons has been, in a sense, preparation for this moment: the eternal election of the Father, the accomplished redemption of the Son, the Spirit's role as the bond of union, all of it has been the backstory of what happens when the Spirit acts in the heart of a specific person, at a specific point in time, to bring that person from death to life, from darkness to light, from the dominion of sin to the freedom of grace. This unit traces that moment and its immediate fruits: the effectual call (Lessons 10), the new birth itself (Lesson 11), and the new heart that regeneration produces (Lesson 12).

This lesson focuses on the distinction between the two dimensions of the call that every presentation of the gospel involves: the external or general call, which is the sincere, universal proclamation of the gospel to all who hear it; and the internal or effectual call, which is the sovereign, Spirit-wrought work by which the external call is made effective in the heart of the elect sinner. The distinction is not primarily a technical theological category developed by scholastic systematians for the sake of logical completeness; it is a distinction demanded by the plain testimony of the New Testament and confirmed by the observable reality of the church's experience across every century of gospel proclamation. The same sermon produces radically different responses in different hearers. The same gospel that is rejected by one is embraced with tears and gratitude by another. The same words that one person hears as foolishness another receives as the power of God and the wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:23–24). What explains the difference?

The Arminian answer to this question, as we have seen in earlier lessons, locates the difference ultimately in the human will, in the person's free decision to receive or reject the offer of grace. The Reformed answer, grounded in the apostolic testimony and developed with careful exegetical precision, locates the difference in the sovereign, discriminating work of the Holy Spirit, who accompanies the external proclamation of the gospel with an internal, effectual work in the hearts of those He has been commissioned to call, making the general invitation a personal summons, opening the blind eyes, softening the hardened heart, and changing the will from a will that cannot receive the gospel to a will that freely and gladly does. The external call is addressed to all; the effectual call reaches only the elect; and the difference between those who believe and those who do not is precisely this sovereign, gracious, discriminating work of the Spirit.

This lesson will proceed through six major sections: the nature and character of the external call; the nature and character of the effectual call; the biblical evidence for effectual calling from the primary texts; the crucial question of the irresistibility of the effectual call and what that means and does not mean; the relationship between the effectual call, election, and the golden chain of Romans 8:30; and the pastoral and homiletical implications of the doctrine for preaching, evangelism, and the care of souls. Throughout, the governing conviction is the one that the Westminster Confession states with characteristic precision: "This effectual call is of God's free and special grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until, being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it" (WCF X.2).

A note on the relationship between this lesson and the broader structure of the *ordo salutis* is important. Effectual calling, in the Reformed ordering, is the temporal application of what election decreed in eternity, the point at which the eternal choosing of the Father breaks into the historical experience of the individual sinner through the Spirit's sovereign action. It precedes regeneration in the logical sense that the Spirit's calling is the immediate context within which the new birth occurs, though in actual experience calling and regeneration are inseparable moments of a single saving event. The effectual call is also distinct from, though organically connected to, the conversion that follows it: the Spirit calls, the Spirit regenerates the called, and the regenerated sinner then exercises the Spirit-given faith and repentance that constitute conversion. The distinction will become clearer as this lesson and the next develop the two elements in their proper order.

I. The External Call

The General Invitation Genuinely Offered to All Who Hear

A. Definition and Character

The external call, also called the general call or the outward call, is the sincere, universal proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to all people who hear it, by which God commands all people everywhere to repent and believe the good news, and genuinely offers the salvation of Christ to all who will receive it by faith. The external call is “external” not in the sense of being superficial or insincere but in the sense of coming to the sinner from outside, through the preached Word, through personal witness, through the written Scripture, through any means by which the content of the gospel is presented to a human being. It is “general” not in the sense of being vague or uncommitted but in the sense of being addressed generally, universally, without qualification or restriction based on the hearer’s spiritual state, electoral status, or moral background.

The character of the external call is established by the New Testament’s own account of apostolic preaching. In Acts 2:38, Peter addresses the crowds at Pentecost with an unqualified command: “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” The command is addressed to “each of you”, to the whole crowd, to all who have heard, without restriction or qualification. In Acts 17:30, Paul declares that God “now declares to men that all people everywhere should repent”, the scope is universal, the command is genuine, and the invitation is without exception. In Matthew 11:28, Jesus issues the most broadly framed gospel invitation in the Synoptic tradition: “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (NASB 1995). The “all” is as universal as the human experience of weariness and burden; the invitation is as genuine as the One who issues it; and the promise is as reliable as the faithfulness of God.

The sincerity of the external call is not undermined by the doctrine of election. The God who has chosen some and passed over others is the same God who commands all to repent and genuinely offers Christ to all who will receive Him. This is not a divine contradiction; it is the expression of the two wills of God, the revealed will (which genuinely desires all to repent, 2 Peter 3:9; Ezekiel 33:11; 1 Timothy 2:4) and the decretive will (which has determined to extend the effectual grace that produces repentance only to the elect). The preacher who stands before a congregation of unknown spiritual states and invites all to repent and believe is not being disingenuous; she is faithfully expressing the genuine compassion of the God whose revealed will extends the invitation without restriction, leaving the exercise of the decretive will entirely in His hands. She does not know who will believe; she is not required to know; she is commanded to offer Christ to all, and she does so with the full confidence that the God who gave the command is the God who uses the proclamation as the means of effectually calling those He has chosen.

The external call also has an effect on those who hear and ultimately reject it. It is not without consequence for the non-elect who hear the gospel and refuse it; their rejection increases their condemnation, precisely because the offer they refused was genuine, the Christ they were invited to receive was genuinely sufficient, and the command to repent was genuinely binding. This is the point of Jesus’ saying in Matthew 11:20–24: the cities that heard the gospel and did not repent will face a more severe judgment than Tyre, Sidon, and Sodom, who never

heard. The greater the light rejected, the greater the condemnation; and the external call, by addressing the gospel to those who will ultimately refuse it, increases the weight of their accountability before God. The external call is never empty of consequence, even for those who reject it.

B. The Necessity and Urgency of Gospel Proclamation

The doctrine of the external call has direct and powerful implications for the church's practice of gospel proclamation. If the external call is the ordinary means by which the Spirit accompanies the gospel with the effectual grace of the internal call, then the church's responsibility to proclaim the gospel is both obligatory (by divine command) and urgent (by divine purpose). The elect are reached through the proclamation; without the proclamation, they will not hear; without hearing, they cannot believe; without believing, they cannot call on the Lord; and without calling on the Lord, they will not be saved (Romans 10:14–17). The external call is the chain of means through which the Spirit's effectual call ordinarily reaches its destined recipients, and the failure of the church to proclaim the gospel faithfully is the failure to be the instruments through which the Spirit's sovereign purpose is ordinarily executed.

This means that the preacher's responsibility is not merely to announce information but to command and invite with all the urgency that a genuine offer of life demands. Paul can describe his own preaching ministry as an act of "pleading on behalf of Christ: be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20, NASB 1995), the language of an ambassador who brings a genuine message from a sovereign who genuinely desires the reconciliation of those to whom the message is sent. The genuineness of the divine compassion expressed in the external call must be reflected in the genuineness of the human compassion with which the preacher extends it. To preach the gospel with cold indifference, as if the outcome has been settled and the invitation is merely a formality, is to misrepresent the character of the God whose revealed will genuinely desires all to come to repentance and who genuinely offers Christ to all who hear.

II. The Effectual Call

The Sovereign, Internal Work That Makes the External Call Effective

A. Definition and Essential Distinctions

The effectual call, also called the internal call or the special call, is the sovereign, supernatural, Spirit-wrought operation by which the Holy Spirit applies the gospel proclamation to the heart and mind of the elect sinner with divine effectiveness, illuminating the mind so that the gospel is seen as truth, softening and renewing the will so that it is freed from its bondage to sin and enabled to respond freely to the invitation, and so working in the whole person that the external call becomes an irresistibly effective summons to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. The effectual call is "effectual" because it infallibly produces the response it is designed to produce; it is "internal" because it operates in the inner person of the hearer, not merely in the external circumstances of the proclamation; and it is "special" because it is extended only to the elect, not to all who hear the external call.

The distinction between the external and effectual calls can be illustrated from the same sermon producing different responses in different hearers. At Pentecost, Peter's sermon was heard by thousands. Of those thousands, three thousand believed and were baptized on that day (Acts 2:41). The rest heard the same sermon

and were not converted. What accounts for the difference? Not the quality of the preaching, it was the same for all. Not the content of the message, it was the same for all. Not some natural spiritual superiority in the three thousand, they were members of the same spiritually unregenerate crowd. The difference, in the Reformed account, is precisely the distinction between the external call (which all heard) and the effectual call (which the Spirit applied to the three thousand through the same sermon, opening their hearts to respond with faith). The sermon was the external call; the Spirit's accompanying work in the hearts of those who believed was the effectual call.

A close parallel is found in Acts 16:14, in the account of Lydia's conversion at Philippi: "A woman named Lydia... was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul." Paul's proclamation was the external call; the Lord's opening of Lydia's heart was the effectual call. The sequence is unmistakable: first Paul speaks (external call), then the Lord opens the heart (effectual call), then Lydia responds (conversion). The response was genuinely Lydia's, she genuinely opened her heart, she genuinely believed, she was genuinely converted. But the opening that made her response possible was the Lord's prior act, not a response to her prior willingness. The effectual call precedes and produces the conversion, just as the sovereign divine act precedes and produces the human response throughout the entire *ordo salutis*.

The Westminster Confession's formulation of the effectual call in chapter X captures the definition with characteristic precision: "All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature, to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them an heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ: yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace" (WCF X.1). Every phrase of this definition carries weight, and the final clause is especially important: they come "most freely, being made willing by His grace." The effectual call does not produce a coerced response; it produces a free response, by the prior sovereign act of making the sinner willing.

B. The Effectual Call Distinguished from the External Call

Four specific distinctions between the external and effectual calls are worth making explicit, because each carries theological and pastoral significance. First, in scope: the external call goes to all who hear the gospel; the effectual call comes only to the elect. This is the force of Matthew 22:14: "Many are called, but few are chosen." The "many" who are called in verse 14 are those who receive the external call, the universal proclamation of the gospel invitation; the "few" who are chosen are those upon whom the effectual call has fallen, those whom the Spirit has opened to receive what the external call offers. The many/few contrast is not a statement about the church's numerical size relative to the world's population; it is a contrast between the unlimited scope of the external call and the specific, selective scope of the effectual call.

Second, in nature: the external call is presented through human proclamation and received through ordinary hearing; the effectual call operates through a supernatural, Spirit-wrought work in the inner person that transforms the hearer's capacity to receive the gospel. The external call addresses the person as she is; the effectual call changes the person so that she becomes capable of receiving the gospel. This is the crucial distinction that the whole of the debate between Reformed and Arminian soteriology turns upon: does grace change the sinner so that she can believe, or does grace assist the sinner so that she believes more easily? The Reformed

account says the former; the Arminian account (in most of its forms) says the latter; and the exegetical evidence, as we have seen in earlier lessons and will see again in this one, strongly supports the former.

Third, in certainty: the external call may be received or refused; the effectual call infallibly produces the response it is designed to produce. The Arminian tradition's account of prevenient grace acknowledges that not all who receive prevenient grace believe; the grace is resistible and the outcome is uncertain, depending ultimately on the human will's free choice. The effectual call in the Reformed account produces its intended effect with certainty, not because it overrides human freedom, but because it sovereignly transforms the will from a will that is enslaved and cannot receive the gospel to a will that is freed and freely does. Every effectually called person will believe; none are effectually called and yet fail to come to faith.

Fourth, in grounds: the external call is grounded in the universal compassion of God expressed in the revealed will; the effectual call is grounded in the sovereign election of the Father expressed in the decretive will. The preacher extends the external call to all on the grounds that God genuinely desires all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4); the Spirit exercises the effectual call among the elect on the grounds that God has from eternity purposed their salvation in the unilateral act of sovereign grace. Both calls are genuine, both are divine, and both are necessary for the full account of how salvation reaches the individual sinner.

III. The Biblical Evidence for Effectual Calling

Romans 8:30, 1 Corinthians 1:23–24, John 6:37, 44, 65, and 2 Timothy 1:9

A. *Romans 8:30, The Calling That Never Loses a Link*

Romans 8:30 is the most structurally important text for the doctrine of effectual calling in the entire New Testament, because it places calling within the golden chain of redemptive purpose in a way that establishes both its character and its certainty. “Whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and these He justified, He also glorified” (NASB 1995). The calling in this chain is not the external call extended to all who hear the gospel; it cannot be, because the chain has no attrition, every person who is called is also justified, and every person who is justified is also glorified. If the calling here were the external call, then every person who ever heard the gospel would be justified, which is manifestly not the case.

The calling of Romans 8:30 is the effectual call, the sovereign, Spirit-wrought summons that infallibly produces its intended response in the hearts of the elect. The chain runs without loss: those who are predestined are called; those who are called are justified; those who are justified are glorified. The one-to-one correspondence between the subjects of consecutive verbs, “these... these... these... these”, establishes that no one enters the chain at one link and fails to emerge at the next. The calling is effectual; the justification is certain; the glorification is guaranteed. This is the pastoral anchor of the believer's assurance: the effectual call that brought her to faith is the same sovereign act of God that has linked her to the whole chain from predestination to glorification, and not a single link in that chain has ever been broken for those who are genuinely in it.

The context of Romans 8:30 is the broader argument of Romans 8:28–39, which presents the effectual call as one dimension of the comprehensive divine commitment to the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose. The calling “according to His purpose” in verse 28 introduces the entire chain of verses 29–30: the purpose of God is the ground of the calling, and the calling is the temporal execution of that eternal purpose. This

connects the effectual call directly to the election studied in Lesson 5: the effectual call is election breaking into time, the eternal purposing of the Father taking concrete historical form in the Spirit's sovereign work in the heart of the called sinner. Those who have been effectually called can look back at the chain and see in their own calling the temporal expression of an eternal love that preceded their existence, and they can look forward along the chain and see in their own future glorification the certain consummation of the same sovereign purpose that called them.

The aorist tense of all five verbs in the chain (foreknew, predestined, called, justified, glorified) indicates completed, definite divine acts. Even "glorified" is expressed in the aorist past, a temporal event that has not yet occurred in the experience of Paul's readers but that is so certain in the divine purpose that it can be spoken of as already accomplished. The calling is equally certain, equally definite, and equally a completed divine act in the divine purpose, whether or not the individual has yet consciously experienced it. The temporal unfolding of the chain does not alter the certainty of each link; it is simply the progressive historical expression of a purpose that was settled in eternity.

B. 1 Corinthians 1:23–24, The Same Proclamation, Two Responses

First Corinthians 1:23–24 provides one of the most illuminating illustrations of the distinction between the external and effectual calls in the entire New Testament, in the specific context of Paul's defense of the gospel's apparent foolishness to those who reject it. "We preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (NASB 1995). The structure of the verse is instructive: the same proclamation ("we preach") produces radically different responses. To Jews it is a stumbling block; to Gentiles it is foolishness; but to "those who are the called," both Jews and Gentiles, it is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The phrase "those who are the called" (Greek: *tois klētois*) is a participial phrase, "the called ones", describing a specific group within the larger group of those who have heard the proclamation. Not all who hear the proclamation are among "the called" in this specific sense; only those to whom the Spirit has applied the gospel with effectual power. For the called, the same message that is foolishness to the Gentile world and a stumbling block to the Jewish community is the power of God and the wisdom of God, not a different message, not a different proclamation, but the same words received with entirely different effect because the Spirit has done His effectual work in the hearts of the called.

This passage also illuminates the relationship between the effectual call and the apologetic task of the church. Paul does not explain the difference between those who receive the gospel and those who reject it by appealing to differences in the quality of the preaching, the persuasiveness of the arguments, or the cultural preparedness of the hearers. He explains it by the sovereign distinction between those who are called and those who are not. This is not an excuse for poor preaching or inadequate apologetics, Paul was a superb preacher and a rigorous thinker. It is an honest theological account of why even the best preaching and the most rigorous apologetics do not, by themselves, produce saving faith. The power that makes the gospel the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16) to those who believe is not the power of rhetoric or argument; it is the power of the Spirit who effectually calls the elect through the proclamation of the Word.

C. John 6:37, 44, 65, The Father's Drawing and the Son's Receiving

John 6:37, 44, and 65 provide Jesus' own account of the effectual call in the Gospel of John, in the context of the Bread of Life discourse that is the Gospel's most extended treatment of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human believing. Verse 37: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out." Verse 44: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day." Verse 65: "No one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father."

The three verses together present the effectual call in its most complete New Testament expression. Verse 37 establishes the giving relationship: the Father gives specific people to the Son, and those given will certainly come. The certainty of the coming is grounded in the certainty of the giving, the Father's sovereign act of giving is the ground of the Son's receiving. Verse 44 introduces the mechanism: the Father "draws" those He gives. The Greek verb *helkyō* (to draw, drag, or pull with irresistible force, used of nets being hauled in, John 21:6, 11; of men being dragged before authorities, Acts 16:19) is not the language of gentle persuasion or attractive invitation; it is the language of effective, sovereign, irreversible movement of the drawn person toward the One doing the drawing. No one can come to Christ without this drawing; but everyone whom the Father draws will come.

Verse 65 provides the most compressed statement of the three: coming to Christ is possible only if it "has been granted" by the Father. The passive verb (*hē dedomenon*, perfect passive participle of *didōmi*, to give) describes a prior divine act of granting, a completed sovereign determination that makes the coming possible. The person who comes to Christ does so not because she found it within her natural capacity to come but because the Father "has granted" her the coming, has given her to the Son, drawn her with the irresistible drawing of sovereign grace, and produced in her through this effectual call the willingness to come that she could not produce from within the resources of her own enslaved will. The context of verse 65 is significant: Jesus speaks these words immediately after describing the defection of many disciples (v. 66), explaining their defection by reference to the Father's granting. The ones who remain did not remain by the superior quality of their own will; they remained because the Father had granted them to come and the Son would certainly not cast out any whom the Father gave Him (v. 37).

Second Timothy 1:9 provides the Pauline complement to the Johannine teaching: God "had saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity" (NASB 1995). The calling is a "holy calling", not the general call to moral improvement but the specific, saving, effectual call that produces holiness in those who receive it. It is "not according to our works", the effectual call, like election itself, is not conditioned on anything in the recipient. It is "according to His own purpose and grace", the ground is entirely in the divine will and the divine generosity. And it was "granted... in Christ Jesus from all eternity", the grace of the effectual call was determined before time in the eternal pactum, and its temporal execution is the fulfillment of what was covenanted in eternity.

IV. The Irresistibility of the Effectual Call

What 'Irresistible Grace' Means and Does Not Mean

A. The Meaning of Irresistibility

The term “irresistible grace” has been one of the most consistently misunderstood formulations in the entire vocabulary of Reformed theology, and the misunderstanding has produced more unnecessary controversy than the doctrine itself would generate if it were properly understood. The misunderstanding assumes that “irresistible” means “coercive”, that the effectual call is a divine override of human will, a compulsion of the sinner against her own genuine desires, a violence done to the person’s authentic selfhood in the interest of salvation. This misunderstanding makes irresistible grace sound both morally problematic (it appears to violate the person’s freedom) and experientially implausible (it does not describe what conversion actually feels like from the inside). But this is not what the Reformed tradition means by the irresistibility of the effectual call, and the misunderstanding can and must be addressed directly.

What the Reformed tradition means by the irresistibility of the effectual call is this: the Spirit’s effectual calling does not merely make it possible for the sinner to come to Christ; it makes the sinner actually come to Christ, infallibly, certainly, and without fail, by the sovereign transformation of the sinner’s will from a will that cannot and does not desire to come to a will that freely, genuinely, and gladly does come. The grace is irresistible not because it forces an unwilling sinner against her desires but because it changes her desires, so that the sinner who was formerly unwilling becomes willing, the one who formerly found the gospel foolishness finds it the wisdom of God, the one who formerly had no spiritual appetite now hungers and thirsts for righteousness. The irresistibility operates at the level of the transformation of the person, not at the level of compulsion imposed upon an unchanged person.

The Westminster Confession’s formulation, cited in the previous section, captures this precisely: they “come most freely, being made willing by His grace.” The freedom and the willingness are both genuine; the sovereignty of grace is also genuine; and they coexist because the sovereignty operates at the level of producing the freedom and willingness rather than bypassing them. This is the compatibilist account of freedom and sovereignty that the Reformed tradition has consistently maintained: genuine human freedom (acting according to one’s own genuine desires and without external compulsion) is compatible with divine sovereignty (God sovereignly working within the person to produce the very desires according to which the person freely acts). The grace that calls is irresistible in the sense that it invariably produces its intended effect; the response it produces is free in the sense that it flows from the person’s own genuine, transformed desires.

Psalm 110:3, cited in the outline of this lesson, provides the Old Testament’s most vivid expression of this dynamic: “Your people will volunteer freely in the day of Your power” (NASB 1995). The volunteers are truly voluntary, their coming is genuine willingness, not coerced compliance. But the volunteering occurs “in the day of Your power”, it is the exercise of a freely given will that has been created and moved by divine power. The freedom and the sovereignty coexist in the same act: the sinner comes freely, because she genuinely wills to come; she genuinely wills to come, because the Spirit has sovereignly given her the will.

B. What the Effectual Call Does to the Sinner

The Westminster Confession’s further description of the effectual call in chapter X.1 specifies what the Spirit’s work actually consists of in the heart of the one effectually called: “enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh; renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good.” Each of these is worth unpacking.

“Enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God”, this is the work of the Spirit as the Teacher who opens the understanding to receive the gospel as genuine truth rather than as foolishness. Second Corinthians 4:6 describes this as the same creative act as the original creation of light: “God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.” The effectual call is nothing less than the Spirit’s re-creative act in the mind of the sinner, the opening of eyes that were blind to a glory that was always there but never seen.

“Taking away their heart of stone, and giving unto them a heart of flesh”, this is the fulfillment of the New Covenant promise of Ezekiel 36:26, to be developed at length in Lesson 11. The heart of stone is the hardened, self-enclosed, God-resistant heart of the unregenerate; the heart of flesh is the responsive, pliable, God-oriented heart of the regenerate. The change is not a gradual softening produced by moral effort or religious influence; it is a sovereign act of divine surgery in which the old heart is replaced by a new one. “Renewing their wills, and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good”, the renewed will is the will that has been liberated from its bondage to sin and enabled to choose the good it was previously constitutionally incapable of choosing. This is not the elimination of the will but its liberation and reorientation, from a will bent toward self and away from God to a will genuinely oriented toward God and the good He defines.

First Peter 2:9 adds the positive description of what the effectually called have become: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (NASB 1995). The effectual call is described as a calling “out of darkness into His marvelous light”, a movement from one realm to another, from the dominion of spiritual darkness to the kingdom of the Son of His love (Colossians 1:13). The one who has been effectually called is not the same person she was before the call; she belongs to an entirely different order of existence, defined by the One who called her and by the marvelous light into which she has been called.

V. The Effectual Call, Election, and the Golden Chain

How Calling Connects the Eternal Decree to the Individual Experience

A. Calling as the Temporal Expression of Eternal Election

The relationship between election (studied in Lesson 5) and effectual calling is one of the most important structural relationships in the entire *ordo salutis*. Election is the eternal, pre-temporal, divine choosing of specific individuals for salvation, an act entirely within the divine counsel, before any of its objects exist or do anything. Effectual calling is the temporal, Spirit-executed bringing of those specific individuals into the conscious experience of salvation through the proclamation of the gospel and the accompanying work of the Spirit. The relation between the two is the relation between the eternal decree and its temporal execution: election is the divine determination of who will be saved; effectual calling is the historical unfolding of that determination in the life of each specific individual.

This relationship establishes several important truths. First, it establishes that everyone who is elected will certainly be effectually called: election guarantees calling, because the God who decreed the end has also decreed the means, and the effectual call is the means by which the decree of election is applied in time. Romans 8:30’s golden chain makes this explicit: the same people who are predestined are also called, and the same people who

are called are also justified. There is no gap between the predestined and the called; no elect person fails to receive the effectual call, and no effectually called person is not among the elect. Second, it establishes that the effectual call carries the authority and certainty of the divine election that stands behind it: when the Spirit calls, the call is not a conditional invitation awaiting human ratification but the personal, sovereign, effectual summons of the God who decreed the calling before the foundation of the world.

Third, this relationship illuminates why 2 Timothy 1:9 can describe the grace of the calling as having been “granted... in Christ Jesus from all eternity.” The calling is not a new divine decision made in response to the sinner’s situation; it is the temporal execution of an eternal purpose. The grace experienced in the moment of the effectual call is the same grace that was determined in the *pactum salutis* and expressed in the election of the Father, it has been on its way, sovereignly and certainly, since before the ages began. This means that the moment when the Spirit effectually calls a sinner is not the beginning of God’s saving concern for that person; it is the temporal arrival of a love and a purpose that has been moving toward that person since eternity.

The pastoral implication is profound. The believer who has been effectually called can look back at the call and see in it the fingerprints of the eternal God whose love preceded her existence by an eternity. She did not find God; God found her, and He found her because He had been seeking her since before time began, in the unbroken purposefulness of an electing love that was moving toward her through history and through the providential arrangement of every circumstance that brought the gospel to her ears and the Spirit to her heart. Her conversion was not a divine afterthought; it was the precisely timed, sovereignly ordained execution of an eternal purpose. This is the specific, personal, utterly non-generic character of the effectual call: it comes to each person in the right time, in the right way, through the right instrument, with the right effect, because the God who ordained it ordained every detail.

B. The Effectual Call and Assurance

The doctrine of the effectual call is among the most powerful available tools for the pastoral care of souls struggling with assurance, and its pastoral use in this direction has been one of the Reformed tradition’s most consistent and most beneficial contributions to the care of anxious believers. The person who understands that her faith is the fruit of the effectual call, that she believes because the Spirit sovereignly acted to make her willing and able to believe, has a ground of assurance that does not ultimately rest in the quality of her own faith. The quality of her faith may vary; the Spirit who gave her the faith and who effectually called her does not vary. The certainty of her believing rests not on the strength of the believing but on the sovereignty of the One who gave it.

This pastoral use of the doctrine must be carefully distinguished from a mechanical or presumptuous application. The doctrine of effectual calling does not provide assurance by allowing the anxious believer to reason: “I must be among the elect because the Bible says all the elect are effectually called and I believe I have been called.” This reasoning is circular and potentially dangerous, it could provide false comfort to someone who has had a religious experience but has never been genuinely regenerate. The proper pastoral use is different: it grounds the assurance of someone who has genuine evidence of regeneration (genuine faith, genuine repentance, genuine love for God and His people, genuine growth in holiness) in the sovereign divine act that produced those evidences. When you examine your faith and find it genuine, you are examining the evidence of the effectual call; and the God who effectually called you is the God who placed those evidences there as the certain fruit of His sovereign work.

John 6:37 provides the pastoral anchor in the specific form of Christ's own promise to those who come to Him: "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out." The promise is unconditional: the one who comes will not be cast out. Full stop. The effectual call that brought the sinner to Christ is the guarantee that Christ will not refuse what the Father has given. The assurance of the one who comes is grounded not in the dignity of the coming but in the faithfulness of the One to whom she comes, and the One to whom she comes has committed Himself, with the full authority of the divine Word, to receive and hold every person whom the Father gives and who comes in response to that gift. The effectual call is the call that cannot fail; the receiving it produces is the receiving that will not be rejected; and the assurance of the effectually called sinner is the assurance of a person who stands in the promise of the sovereign, faithful, immutable God who called her.

VI. Pastoral and Homiletical Implications

How the Doctrine of Effectual Calling Shapes the Preacher and the Pastor

A. *The Preacher Who Knows He Depends on the Spirit*

The doctrine of effectual calling has a specifically pastoral and homiletical significance that goes beyond its systematic theological importance. For the preacher, the distinction between the external and effectual calls establishes the precise nature of the preacher's responsibility and the precise nature of his dependence. His responsibility is the external call: to proclaim the gospel with faithfulness, clarity, urgency, and genuine compassion to every person who will hear him, without restriction, without qualification, and without reserving the invitation for those he judges most likely to respond. His dependence is on the Spirit who alone can exercise the effectual call: to produce in the hearers the spiritual perception, the renewed will, and the transformed desire that make the reception of the gospel possible.

This distinction liberates the preacher from two opposite errors. The first is the error of taking too much responsibility, treating the conversion of the hearer as primarily dependent on the quality of the preaching, the persuasiveness of the argument, or the emotional force of the appeal. The preacher who carries this burden will preach with the anxious urgency of someone who knows the outcome depends on him, and he will experience the inevitable failures of gospel proclamation (the sermon that produces no visible response, the congregation that remains apparently unmoved) as personal failures rather than as occasions to trust more deeply in the sovereign Spirit who alone can open the heart. The second error is the inverse: taking too little responsibility, preaching with a casualness or a cold formality that is justified by the doctrine of sovereign grace but actually reflects a failure to feel the genuine compassion of the God whose revealed will desires all to be saved.

The preacher who has understood the doctrine of effectual calling will preach with the combination that this series has consistently identified as the hallmark of apostolic ministry: divine confidence and human urgency. He will preach with divine confidence because he knows that the Spirit who is at work through his proclamation is the Spirit who has been commissioned to effectually call the elect, and that his faithfulness in the proclamation is the ordained instrument through which the Spirit's work is ordinarily accomplished. He will preach with human urgency because he knows that the people before him are dead, blind, and enslaved without the Spirit's work, that the stakes of their response to the gospel are eternally decisive, and that the genuinely compassionate God

whose revealed will desires their salvation has placed in the preacher's mouth the words through which the Spirit works. Both postures together constitute faithful preaching.

The preacher's dependence on the Spirit also has implications for his prayer life. If the effectual call is the Spirit's sovereign work that makes his preaching effective, then prayer for the Spirit's work is not an optional enhancement to sermon preparation but an indispensable element of the preacher's ministry. Paul's request in Ephesians 6:19–20, that the Ephesian church would pray for him to have the utterances and the boldness to make known the mystery of the gospel, reflects not a general desire for spiritual support but the specific theological conviction that the Spirit's attending the Word with power is what makes preaching effective. The preacher who prays for the Spirit to attend his proclamation with effectual calling is the preacher who has understood the doctrine; the preacher who trusts in his own preparation, skill, and rhetorical competence without sustained prayer for the Spirit's sovereign work has misunderstood it.

B. The Pastor Who Can Diagnose and Comfort

The distinction between the external and effectual calls also provides the pastor with a diagnostic framework for the most common pastoral situations he encounters. The person who has grown up in the church, knows the content of the gospel thoroughly, can articulate the doctrines with precision, participates in the religious life of the congregation, but shows none of the evidences of genuine regeneration, no love for the brethren, no grief over sin, no genuine delight in the Word, no Spirit-borne awareness of being a child of God, is a person who has received the external call but not the effectual call. She has heard the gospel, been exposed to the truth, and formed a religious identity around the content of the Christian message without ever being transformed by the Spirit's sovereign work at the center of her being. She needs to hear the gospel not merely as information but as the occasion for the prayer and expectation that the Spirit will accompany the hearing with effectual grace.

The person who is anxious about his conversion, who is uncertain whether his faith is genuine, whether his repentance was sufficiently sincere, whether the experience of conversion he had at some point in the past was real, needs the diagnostic provided by the evidences of effectual calling rather than a repetition of the doctrinal content he already knows. The question is not whether he has heard the gospel (he obviously has) but whether the Spirit has accompanied the hearing with effectual grace. And the evidence for the Spirit's effectual work is precisely the fruit that the effectual call invariably produces: genuine faith in Christ, genuine love for the brethren, genuine grief over sin, genuine desire for holiness, the Spirit's own testimony with the believer's spirit that he is a child of God (Romans 8:16). If those evidences are present, the anxiety is about a real but misunderstood assurance; if they are absent, the anxiety has a different and more serious pastoral address.

The doctrine of effectual calling also gives the pastor a resource for those who are coming to faith, whose hearts are being opened in the process that the Spirit is conducting through the preaching of the Word, and who need to understand what is happening to them. The person who is beginning to see the gospel not as foolishness but as wisdom, who is beginning to feel the weight of sin not merely as a social failing but as a genuine offense against a holy God, who is beginning to find the invitation of Christ not merely intellectually interesting but personally urgent, that person is experiencing the early stages of the Spirit's effectual calling. The pastor who can identify this process and name it, who can say, "What you are experiencing is the Spirit of God drawing you to the Son, and the One who has begun to draw you has promised that He will not cast out any who come", is providing an enormously valuable service to a soul at the most important crossroads of its existence.

“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day.”

John 6:37–39, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

External Call	The sincere, universal proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to all who hear it, by which God genuinely commands all people everywhere to repent and believe, and genuinely offers the salvation accomplished by Christ to all who will receive it by faith. The external call is addressed without restriction to all hearers regardless of spiritual state, electoral status, or moral background. It is grounded in the genuine divine compassion of the revealed will (2 Peter 3:9; 1 Timothy 2:4). Distinguished from the effectual call by its universal scope (all who hear) and its variable outcome (received by some, rejected by others). Also called the general call or outward call.
Effectual Call	The sovereign, supernatural, Spirit-wrought operation by which the Holy Spirit applies the gospel proclamation to the heart and mind of the elect sinner with divine effectiveness, enlightening the mind, renewing the will, and transforming the whole person so that the external call becomes an irresistibly effective summons to repentance and faith. The effectual call is restricted to the elect (Romans 8:30), grounded in the divine election (2 Timothy 1:9), and certain of its effect (the effectually called will believe). Distinguished from the external call by its restricted scope (elect only), its sovereign character (Spirit-wrought), and its certain outcome (faith invariably follows). Also called the internal call or special call.
Irresistible Grace	The fourth point in the Canons of Dort (TULIP), affirming that the Holy Spirit's work of effectual calling infallibly produces its intended effect in the hearts of the elect, not by coercing an unwilling sinner against her desires but by sovereignly transforming those desires so that the sinner comes freely, willingly, and gladly to Christ. The grace is "irresistible" in the sense of being invariably effective, not in the sense of being imposed against the person's genuine will. The Westminster Confession's formulation: they "come most freely, being made willing by His grace" (WCF X.1). Contrasted with the Arminian doctrine of prevenient grace, which is resistible and whose reception or rejection determines who ultimately believes.
Klētos	Greek: "called." Used in the New Testament in two distinct senses that reflect the external/effectual call distinction. (1) In the broader sense of all who hear the gospel call (Matthew 22:14, "many are called"). (2) In the narrower, technical sense of those who have been effectually called by the Spirit and have believed (Romans 1:6–7, "called of Jesus Christ... called as saints"; 1 Corinthians 1:24, "to those who are the called"). The distinction between klētos in its general and specific senses maps directly onto the external/effectual call distinction, and careful attention to the specific usage context is required to determine which sense Paul intends in any given passage.
Helkyō	Greek: to draw, drag, or pull with effective, irresistible force. Used in John 6:44 ("no one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him") to describe the Father's effectual drawing of the elect to the Son. The same verb is used of hauling in fishing nets (John 21:6, 11) and of Paul and Silas being dragged before the authorities (Acts 16:19), establishing that the force intended is effective and not merely attractive or persuasive. The drawing of John 6:44 is not the gentle attractiveness of the gospel offer (which would not require the denial of human capacity in the surrounding verses) but the sovereign, effectual movement of the Father's will in the heart of those He gives to the Son.
Compatibilism	The philosophical position that divine sovereignty (God's ordination of all events, including human choices) is compatible with genuine human freedom (acting according to one's own genuine desires without external compulsion). Compatibilism holds that "freedom" does not require the absence of prior determination but only the absence of external coercion and the presence of one's own genuine desires as the source of action. The Reformed account of effectual calling operates within a compatibilist framework: the Spirit sovereignly transforms

	the sinner's desires; the sinner then acts freely according to those transformed desires; and both the sovereign transformation and the free response are genuinely real.
Prevenient Grace	The Arminian doctrine of a universal, resistible grace extended by the Holy Spirit to all who hear the gospel, which partially restores the moral capacity of the fallen will and enables every person to respond in genuine faith or to resist. Prevenient grace is designed to preserve genuine human freedom (the response may be refused) while acknowledging the need for divine assistance given the fall. The Reformed critique: (1) if faith is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8–9; Philippians 1:29), it cannot be the product of prevenient grace independently exercised by the human will; (2) prevenient grace, being universal and equally available to all, cannot account for the differential response to the gospel (why some believe and others do not); and (3) the decisive factor in salvation is therefore still the human will, not the divine will.
Golden Chain	The name commonly given to the sequence of divine saving acts in Romans 8:29–30: foreknew → predestined → called → justified → glorified. The chain is “golden” because every link holds without loss: the same people who are foreknown are predestined; the same people who are predestined are called; the same people who are called are justified; the same people who are justified are glorified. The calling in the golden chain is effectual calling (not the external call), established by the one-to-one correspondence between consecutive verbs, if the calling were the external call, every person who ever heard the gospel would be justified, which is not the case.
Special Grace	The sovereign, effectual, transforming grace extended by the Holy Spirit to the elect, also called saving grace or efficacious grace, that produces regeneration, faith, and salvation. Distinguished from common grace (the undeserved goodness of God toward all people, including the restraint of sin, natural gifts, and the sincere gospel offer) and from prevenient grace (the Arminian universal grace that enables but does not determine saving response). Special grace is called “special” because it is extended specifically to the elect, distinguished from the grace offered to all in the external call by its efficacious, transforming character.
Invincible Grace	An alternative formulation of irresistible grace, emphasizing that the Spirit's effectual calling cannot be ultimately overcome by the sinner's resistance. All sinners resist the Spirit to some degree in the process of effectual calling; the difference between the elect and the non-elect is not that the elect did not resist but that the Spirit's sovereign grace overcame their resistance, ultimately prevailing over every obstacle and bringing the elect sinner to faith. This formulation is more pastorally accurate than the simple term “irresistible,” which can suggest that the called person never experiences any resistance or struggle in coming to faith, which is not consistent with the experience of most believers.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the distinction between the external and effectual calls is not a theological subtlety invented to protect the doctrine of election from the obvious counterevidence of people who hear the gospel and do not believe. It is the honest exegetical account of an observable reality: the same gospel produces radically different responses in different hearers, and the explanation for the difference is not the quality of the preaching, the spiritual preparedness of the audience, or the autonomous free choice of each individual hearer, but the sovereign, discriminating work of the Spirit who accompanies the external call with the effectual grace of the internal call in the hearts of those He has been commissioned to call. We must believe this not because it is a comfortable doctrine, it is not, at least not initially, but because the apostolic testimony demands it, and the alternatives consistently fail to account for the full range of the biblical evidence.

We must believe, with equal conviction, that the external call is genuine, sincere, and urgently necessary. The doctrine of effectual calling does not make the external call a divine formality extended to those who will inevitably reject it with a kind of theological shrug. The external call is the expression of the genuine divine compassion of the revealed will; it is the means through which the effectual call is ordinarily exercised; and its proclamation by the church is both obligatory (by divine command) and consequential (for both the hearers who receive it and those who reject it). We must believe in both calls together, holding the sovereignty of the internal call and the sincerity of the external call without collapsing either into the other or allowing either to make the other unnecessary.

We must also believe that our faith, if it is genuine faith, is the fruit of the effectual call, not its cause. This is the humbling truth that the doctrine of effectual calling presses upon every believer: you did not bring yourself to faith; you were brought. You did not open your own heart; the Lord opened it. You did not choose God from a neutral position of undetermined will; God chose you and effectively called you in the moment when His sovereign purpose reached the crossroads of your personal history with the exact grace that would produce the exact response He ordained. This is not a doctrine that should produce pride in the called; it is a doctrine that should produce, in equal measure, deepest humility (you have nothing that you did not receive) and deepest gratitude (what you received was pure, sovereign, undeserved grace).

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

The emotional register that the doctrine of effectual calling should produce is the specific, personal, historically anchored gratitude of someone who has understood that her arrival at faith was not merely a fortunate spiritual development but the precisely timed, sovereignly orchestrated execution of an eternal purpose that had been moving toward her since before time began. The preacher who preached the sermon that changed her life was carrying a message that the Spirit had been waiting to apply to her heart at exactly that moment in exactly that way. The friend who shared the gospel with her was being used as the instrument of a divine summons that had been decreed before the foundation of the world. The Spirit who opened her heart was the same Spirit who accepted in the pactum salutis the commission to apply to her specifically what the Father planned and the Son purchased. The depth of this historical particularity, the sense that all of redemptive history was moving toward

the specific moment when she heard and believed, is the appropriate emotional register of the doctrine of effectual calling received in its full personal weight.

Desire, above all, the freedom from evangelical anxiety that the doctrine of effectual calling provides when it is received with the pastoral precision this lesson has developed. The believer who understands that her faith is the fruit of the Spirit's effectual calling does not need to maintain her salvation by the quality of her own believing, because the salvation does not depend on the quality of her believing but on the sovereignty of the One who gave her the faith to believe. This does not produce carelessness; it produces the specific kind of settled, stable, endurance-enabling confidence that Paul describes in 2 Timothy 1:12: "I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day" (NASB 1995). The certainty is not in herself; it is in the One who called her and who holds what she has entrusted to Him.

Desire also the specific pastoral compassion for the unconverted that the doctrine of effectual calling should produce. The person who understands that the unconverted person she is praying for is not merely someone who has not yet made the right decision but someone who is dead, blind, and enslaved, who literally cannot come to Christ without the Spirit's effectual calling, will pray for that person with a different quality of urgency and a different quality of dependence than the person who thinks the only obstacle is insufficient persuasion. She will pray for the Spirit to do what only the Spirit can do: to draw with the divine, effectual, will-transforming drawing of John 6:44, to open the heart as He opened Lydia's, to shine in the darkness of a dead soul with the creative light of 2 Corinthians 4:6. And she will take her evangelistic responsibility more seriously, not less, because she knows that the Spirit uses the proclamation as His ordinary instrument.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read Acts 16:9–15, the account of Paul's calling to Macedonia and Lydia's conversion, as a narrative illustration of the external and effectual calls operating in sequence. Note: (1) the vision that directs Paul to Macedonia (providential preparation); (2) Paul and his companions going and speaking to the women gathered at the riverside (external call through proclamation); (3) the Lord opening Lydia's heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul (effectual call through the Spirit's sovereign work); (4) Lydia's response in baptism and hospitality (conversion as the genuine fruit of the effectual call). Ask: what does the sequence reveal about the respective roles of the preacher (responsible for faithful proclamation) and the Spirit (responsible for the effectual application)? And how does the account guard against both the hyper-Calvinist error (no need to proclaim) and the Arminian error (the decisive factor is the hearer's free choice)?
- Read 1 Corinthians 1:17–2:5 as Paul's theology of preaching, noting his explicit renunciation of the power of human eloquence and wisdom as the instruments of salvation (1:17; 2:1–5) and his explicit affirmation that the demonstration of the Spirit and of power is the instrument of true faith (2:4–5). Ask: does this passage support or undermine the practice of highly skilled, intellectually sophisticated preaching? How does Paul hold together the renunciation of persuasive wisdom (vv. 1–4) with his own obvious rhetorical skill and intellectual rigor elsewhere in the same letter? And what does the phrase "a demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (v. 4) describe, is it the Spirit's attestation of the proclamation through miraculous signs, or the Spirit's effectual work in the hearts of the hearers, or both?
- Evaluate a recent sermon you have heard (or preached) against the two responsibilities the doctrine of effectual calling assigns to the preacher: (1) faithfulness in the external call (Was the gospel clearly, accurately, urgently, and compassionately proclaimed? Was the invitation genuine and universal?), and (2) dependence on the Spirit for the effectual call (Was there genuine prayer for the Spirit's accompanying

work? Was the preacher's confidence in the outcome grounded in the Spirit's sovereignty rather than in rhetorical technique or emotional impact?). Which of the two responsibilities is better fulfilled in the preaching you most frequently encounter? And what specific changes in the preparation, delivery, or follow-up of gospel proclamation would bring it into better alignment with the theology of the external and effectual calls?

- Memorize Romans 8:29–30 in the NASB 1995 and spend one week meditating specifically on the calling link in the golden chain: “whom He called, these He also justified.” Ask: when did God call you? Not merely in the sense of when you first heard the gospel (external call) but in the sense of when the Spirit sovereignly opened your heart to receive it (effectual call). Can you identify the specific circumstances, the specific proclamation, the specific moment when the gospel moved from being information to being personal, urgent, life-transforming truth? If you can identify it, give thanks specifically for the Spirit's effectual work in that moment. If you cannot identify a specific moment, examine instead the evidences of the effectual call in your present life (genuine faith, love for the brethren, grief over sin, desire for holiness) and receive those evidences as the fruit of a calling that is just as real and just as sovereign even when it cannot be dated.
- Pray specifically for five people in your life who appear to have received the external call (they have heard the gospel) but not the effectual call (there is no evidence of genuine regeneration and faith). Pray for them with the specific theological content of John 6:44: that the Father who sent the Son would draw them with the divine, irresistible, will-transforming drawing that is the essence of the effectual call. Then ask yourself: am I actively using the means through which the Spirit exercises the effectual call, specifically, am I faithfully proclaiming the gospel to these people? If not, plan a specific step of faithful witness to at least one of the five within the next month.

Key Texts: *Romans 8:29–30; 1 Corinthians 1:23–24; John 6:37, 44, 65; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 2:9; Matthew 22:14; Acts 16:14; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Psalm 110:3*

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before studying this lesson, how did you account for the observable fact that the same gospel produces radically different responses in different hearers? Did you explain the difference primarily in terms of the quality of the preaching, the spiritual preparedness of the audience, the individual's free choice, or the sovereign work of the Spirit? How does your prior explanation compare with the distinction between the external and effectual calls that this lesson develops? And what is your emotional response to the claim that the decisive difference between a person who believes and one who does not is the Spirit's sovereign effectual calling?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Romans 8:28–30. In verse 28, what is the group Paul identifies as those for whom “all things work together for good”? What two characteristics define this group (“those who... those who...”) ? In verses 29–30, trace the five links of the golden chain. What is the grammatical structure that establishes the one-to-one correspondence between consecutive links (note the repeated “these”) ? Why does the fact that every called person is also justified establish that the calling in this passage is effectual calling rather than external calling? And what does the past tense of “glorified” establish about the certainty of the chain's final link?
- Read 1 Corinthians 1:17–2:5. Identify every phrase in which Paul describes the nature of his own preaching (what he renounced and what he relied on). In 1:23–24, what three groups does Paul identify as the different audiences for the same proclamation (“we preach”) ? What response does each group have to the same proclamation? What specific term does Paul use for the third group (“those who are the...”) that distinguishes them from the Jews and Gentiles in general? And what does that distinction establish about the ground of their different response to the same proclamation?
- Read John 6:35–65. In verse 37, what is the relationship between the Father's giving and the coming to Christ (are all who come given by the Father? Are all whom the Father gives coming to Christ?) ? In verse 44, what does Jesus say is the necessary condition for coming to Him, and what does the word “can” (Greek: dynatai) establish about the natural capacity of the unregenerate for this coming? What is the verb translated “draws” (Greek: helkyō), and how do its other New Testament uses (John 21:6, 11; Acts 16:19) illuminate the force of the drawing in verse 44? In verse 65, what prior divine act does Jesus identify as making coming to Him possible?
- Read Acts 16:9–15. What is the narrative sequence of events leading to Lydia's conversion? Who initiates the gospel proclamation (v. 14a, “was listening”, she has heard)? What divine act intervenes between the proclamation and Lydia's response (v. 14b)? What is the precise grammatical construction (“The Lord opened her heart to respond...”, who is the subject, what is the verb, what is the object, and what is the purpose)? How does the sequence, hearing, heart-opening, responding, illustrate the relationship between the external and effectual calls?
- Read 2 Timothy 1:9. What does Paul say about God's saving and calling in this verse? What did God's saving and calling occur “not according to”? What did it occur “according to”? When was the grace expressed in the calling granted? What does the temporal phrase “from all eternity” (Greek: pro chronon aionion, “before the ages”) establish about the relationship between the effectual call experienced in time and the eternal divine purpose?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the calling in Romans 8:30 must be effectual calling rather than external calling, on the grounds that every called person in the chain is also justified, which would make every gospel hearer justified if the calling were external. Evaluate this argument. Is it exegetically sound? Is there any alternative interpretation of Romans 8:30 that could sustain a reading of the calling as external while explaining why not every gospel hearer is justified? And how does 1 Corinthians 1:24's use of the called (*klētos*) as a specific subset of those who hear the same proclamation provide additional support for the effectual interpretation of the calling in Romans 8:30?
- The lesson argues that the irresistibility of the effectual call does not mean God forces an unwilling sinner against her desires but that He transforms her desires so that she comes freely and willingly. Evaluate this compatibilist account of irresistible grace. Is it philosophically coherent? Does it genuinely preserve human freedom (acting according to one's own genuine desires without external compulsion), or does it simply push the coercion back one level (forcing the transformation of desires rather than forcing the action)? How does Psalm 110:3 ("volunteer freely in the day of Your power") support the compatibilist account?
- The lesson identifies four specific distinctions between the external and effectual calls: scope (universal vs. elect only), nature (human proclamation received vs. Spirit-wrought transformation), certainty (variable outcome vs. certain outcome), and grounds (revealed will vs. decretive will). Which of these four distinctions do you find most theologically important? Which is most practically significant for the church's ministry of proclamation? And how do the four distinctions together establish that the external and effectual calls are genuinely different divine acts rather than merely two aspects of the same act?
- The lesson presents Matthew 22:14 ("Many are called, but few are chosen") as a statement about the relationship between the external call (many) and the effectual call / election (few). Evaluate this interpretation in context. What is the parable of the wedding banquet (Matthew 22:1–14) about, and what is the specific significance of the man without a wedding garment (vv. 11–13)? Does the "called" of verse 14 refer primarily to (a) all who hear the external call of the gospel, (b) those who accept the external call's invitation and come to the banquet (including the garment-less man), or (c) something else entirely? And how does the interpretation of "called" in this verse determine whether it supports the external/effectual call distinction or a different theological point?
- The lesson argues that the doctrine of effectual calling provides the preacher with a combination of "divine confidence" (grounded in the Spirit's sovereignty) and "human urgency" (grounded in the genuine compassion of the revealed will). How do these two postures relate to Paul's own description of his preaching ministry in 2 Corinthians 5:11–21? Specifically: in verse 11 Paul speaks of "persuading men" and in verse 20 of "pleading on behalf of Christ," both suggesting genuine urgency; but in 1 Corinthians 2:1–5 he renounces reliance on persuasive wisdom and grounds the outcome in the Spirit's demonstration and power. How do these apparently different emphases cohere in Paul's own preaching practice, and what does their coherence suggest about how the external and effectual call distinction should shape actual ministerial practice?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- The lesson identifies the person who "knows the content of the gospel thoroughly, can articulate the doctrines with precision, participates in the religious life of the congregation, but shows none of the evidences of genuine regeneration" as someone who may have received the external but not the effectual call. Reflect honestly on your own spiritual history: is it possible that for any period of your life you were in

this category, religiously informed and active but not genuinely regenerate? If so, what was the difference between that period and your present experience? And how does that reflection shape the way you evaluate the spiritual state of others who appear to be active religious participants?

- The lesson argues that the doctrine of effectual calling should produce freedom from evangelical anxiety, the settled confidence of someone who knows that her faith is the fruit of the Spirit's sovereign work, not its cause. Is this the actual effect the doctrine has had in your own spiritual life, or has the doctrine produced a different emotional response (anxiety about whether you are among the elect, complacency because salvation is certain, or something else)? What specific misunderstanding of the doctrine might account for a harmful emotional response? And how does the lesson's pastoral application of the doctrine address that specific misunderstanding?
- The lesson argues that the preacher who understands the doctrine of effectual calling should pray more earnestly for the Spirit's attending work, not less, because the outcome depends on the Spirit's sovereign action rather than on the quality of the proclamation alone. Evaluate your own prayer life in relation to your proclamation of the gospel. Do you pray as earnestly for the Spirit's effectual work as you prepare for the content and delivery of the proclamation? Or does your confidence tend to rest more in the quality of your communication than in the sovereign work of the Spirit? What specific changes in your pre-proclamation preparation would reflect the theological conviction that the effectual call is the Spirit's work, not yours?
- The lesson's treatment of Acts 16:14 (Lydia's conversion) presents the sequence of external call → effectual call → conversion as the paradigmatic account of how the Spirit ordinarily works through the proclamation of the Word. Think of one or two specific conversions you have witnessed or been told about. Does the sequence described in Acts 16:9–15 match the narrative of those conversions? What was the external call (who proclaimed, in what context)? Can you identify the moment or process of the effectual call (the opening of the heart)? And how does the conversion narrative illuminate the respective roles of human faithfulness (the proclamation) and divine sovereignty (the opening of the heart)?

Prayer Focus

Open this lesson's prayer time with a slow, meditative reading of John 6:35–44, the passage in which Jesus most directly and most comprehensively articulates the relationship between the Father's giving, the Spirit's drawing, and the sinner's coming. Read it as Jesus' own account of how you came to believe: not as abstract theology but as the personal narrative of your own conversion told from the divine perspective. You came to Christ because the Father gave you to the Son before the foundation of the world. You believed because the Father drew you with the sovereign drawing of John 6:44, the drawing that no one can come without, and that everyone who receives will come. And the One to whom you came has promised: "I will certainly not cast out" (v. 37) and "I shall lose nothing of all that He has given Me" (v. 39). Let these specific, personal, unqualified promises settle into your heart before you move to intercession.

Pray with thanksgiving for your own effectual calling. Not in general terms but with the specific, historical, personal particularity that the doctrine demands. If you can identify the specific sermon, conversation, or moment when the Spirit opened your heart to the gospel, when the external call became the effectual call, bring that specific moment before God and give thanks for it with the precision it deserves. Thank the Spirit for doing in you what only the Spirit can do: for enlightening a darkened mind, softening a hardened heart, renewing an enslaved will, and drawing you to the Christ who was offered to you in the proclamation. Thank the Son who promised not to cast out anyone the Father gives Him. Thank the Father who gave you to the Son in the eternal counsel of His grace and who ordained the exact moment, the exact circumstances, and the exact instrument through which the Spirit's effectual calling would reach you.

Pray for the preacher and for the proclamation of the gospel in your specific community and beyond. Ask the Spirit to attend every faithful proclamation of the Word with the effectual grace of the internal call, to use the external call of faithful preachers as the instrument through which He effectually calls those who have been appointed to eternal life. Pray for specific preachers and teachers you know, that the Spirit would work powerfully through their proclamation. Pray for the faithfulness of the proclamation itself: that it would be clear, accurate, urgent, and genuinely compassionate, reflecting the sincerity of the divine compassion that extends the external call to all who hear. And pray for the specific people in your congregation and community who appear to have heard without believing, that the Spirit would use continued faithful proclamation as the means of the effectual calling that is the only remedy for their spiritual death.

Pray for yourself as a gospel witness. Ask the Spirit to give you the courage and the faithfulness to extend the external call, to proclaim the gospel clearly and urgently to those in your life who need to hear it. Then commit yourself to the Spirit's sovereign work in those people's hearts, asking Him to do what you cannot do: to open the eyes that are blind, to soften the hearts that are hardened, to draw with the irresistible drawing of John 6:44 the people to whom you are called to witness. Ask for the combination of Paul's posture in 2 Corinthians 5:20 (pleading on behalf of Christ with genuine urgency and compassion) and Paul's conviction in 2 Timothy 2:10 (enduring all things for the sake of those who are chosen, because the sovereign God will use faithful witness to bring them in). This is the preacher's double posture, and it belongs not only to the ordained minister but to every member of the body who carries the gospel to the world.

Close with the doxological reading of 1 Peter 2:9 as a declaration of who the effectually called are and what they are called to: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so

that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (NASB 1995). The effectual call has not called you to a private religion of personal spiritual comfort; it has called you out of darkness into marvelous light so that you may “proclaim the excellencies” of the One who called you. The proclamation is not incidental to the calling; it is the purpose of the calling, you have been called so that you may call others, so that the external call may go to more people, so that the Spirit may exercise the effectual call in more hearts, until the number of the elect is complete and the great commission has gathered from every tribe and tongue and people and nation the redeemed who will stand before the throne and sing the song of the Lamb.

“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.”

1 Peter 2:9, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Romans 8:29–30; 1 Corinthians 1:23–24; 2:1–5; John 6:35–65; Acts 16:9–15; 2 Timothy 1:9; 1 Peter 2:9; Matthew 22:14; Psalm 110:3; 2 Corinthians 4:6

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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