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## The Basis of Spiritual Understanding

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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### **(The Parable of the Sower)**

Reading: Matt. 13:1-23,34-35,51.

Among a number of things which are taught by this parable, in this part of the Lord's discourse it is quite evident that the question which arises is that of spiritual fruitfulness and the basis of spiritual fruitfulness. It is quite evident that the thing of supreme importance in relation to the given Word of God is its result in fruitfulness. Undoubtedly that is what the Lord was getting at here, bringing into view the essential consequence of the Word of the Lord being given. The only justification for God giving His Word is that there shall be, accordingly, fruitfulness in those who hear.

Now, Christ had arrived at a computation as to the result. He was under no illusion. He, at the very outset of His teaching, saw that this real end, this object of the Word of God, would in all probability only be realised in a very small proportion of all who heard it. A fourth part of all the hearers gave back that for which the Word was given. There may be some comfort to be found in that for preachers, but it would be better to take the positive rather than the negative attitude, and note that God will get what His heart is set upon, even if it is in but a small proportion. And the important thing is to see that we are in that small proportion.

### **Spiritual Fruitfulness Dependent on Spiritual Understanding**

Now, the whole issue of spiritual fruitfulness as we have it here, hangs upon one thing, and that one thing is spiritual understanding. That word 'understand' is repeated six times in this brief passage, and you notice in the explanation or the expounding of the parable it begins with, "When anyone

hears the word of the kingdom, and understands it not..." and the end of the exposition is "and understands it" (Matt. 13:19,23). The whole matter is bounded, compassed, by this matter of spiritual understanding.

There is that great section who are dead and blind because of prejudice, to whom the prophecies twice quoted here from Isaiah applied; those who had closed their own eyes, and then God had fixed them; those who had steeled their own hearts and God had made it a fixed thing. Let us recognise this, however, that the slightest tinge of prejudice is going to defeat God's end in spiritual fruitfulness. That is settled. That is a fixed law of God. Unless there is openness, preparedness, willingness at the outset, spiritual fruitfulness is utterly impossible, the situation is hopeless. Well, that is a strong word, but let us understand that anything of the prejudicial character just does make the Word of God void in the cases concerned; the deadness which comes by prejudice.

### **Seed Sown by the Wayside**

But then you have these other four here. The first, "When any one hears the word of the kingdom, and understands it not, then cometh the evil one, and snatches away that which hath been sown in his heart" (Matt. 13:19). These are those described by the Lord as the wayside people. In their case, the faculty for spiritual understanding does not exist, it is just not there. If there is a prospect ruling out that utterly hopeless situation created by prejudice, if there is going to be anything at all, at the very beginning the faculty for spiritual understanding has got to be present, and you will have to say about these people that the initial basic work of the Holy Spirit had not been done. Therefore there was no result at all; there is no understanding, therefore there will be no fruit; they are outside of the pale of the fruitbearers or possible fruitbearers. We need to be very clear, very sure, about this, that, however much we hear - and we may hear a very great deal spread over years, or concentrated into a brief time - it is all unprofitable and in vain until that basic initial work of the Spirit of God has been done in us which will make possible a correspondence between us inwardly and God Himself in the matter of spiritual understanding. That is, that there has been, with other spiritual faculties, a constituting of us anew with power to apprehend and understand things which no one, however eager they might be to do so, no one can understand until something has been done inside.

It is a terrible thing that so many listen, attend meetings, conventions, have the information, but so little real result follows of spiritual fruitfulness. The question has to arise, has to be raised: Now, where is the faculty of spiritual understanding here? It is a definitely Divinely-imparted faculty, the presence of something which no ordinary natural person possesses. And that is where we begin. There is no prospect until that is present.

### **The Faculty of Spiritual Understanding the Birthright of every Child of God**

But, of course, it is the birthright and the birth possession of every truly born-again and Holy Spirit indwelt child of God. We have often tried to press this home, especially upon our younger people, that it is your right, your inheritance, to have something in you by the imparting of the Spirit of God which constitutes you different from all other men and women in this particular sense. You have a power, a faculty, an ability to grasp and see, to understand - not fully and altogether, at once, but in beginnings to understand what the natural man can never understand, and you ought to be very jealous about that gift, that qualification. The Lord's people everywhere need reminding of that, if not instructing about it, because here, in the beginning of parables, the Lord Himself lays it down.

The Word went forth, it was heard, nothing resulted because they had no understanding. Do not let us dismiss this matter and so pass off the matter of responsibility on to the speaker. Put the Lord

Jesus in the place of the speaker. No one could have been simpler than He was, no one could have been more definite and direct than He was, and certainly no one could have been conveying the heart of God more than He was, and yet in His case there were those who would have said, "Well, I do not understand what He is talking about!" - passing the responsibility back on to Him. Now if you do not understand, do not go away like that, saying, "I do not know what it is all about". If that is true, that may be your condemnation, not your justification; that might mean there is something wrong with you, not necessarily with the one who gives the Word. It is important to have the beginning of possible fruitfulness established in this matter of a faculty for spiritual understanding.

### **The Seed Sown on Rocky Ground**

The second group were those whom He called the rocky ground people, who made a quick response very joyfully, and then tribulation arose because of the Word, and they disappeared; people who made swift mental and emotional reactions. You notice how the Lord put it - "Hear with their ears, and understand with their heart" (Matt. 13:15). That is the focal point of spiritual understanding - "and understand with their heart". Paul's prayer was that the eyes of their heart might be enlightened, that they might know (Eph. 1:18).

A mental and emotional reaction or response will not get us very far. Let us watch that very carefully. Very gladly we might feel - "That is great, that is wonderful, that is splendid, I should like to have that! And, oh, I have seen, I see that!" Are you quite sure that you have seen? You may be dubious about many of these emotional reactions and these mental reactions. It has to go deeper than that because it has got to stand up to something.

### **The Seed Sown in Thorny Ground**

And then the third group, those thorny ground people, "The care of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches" (v.22). What a phrase, what a lot there is in that! There were certain people, one outstandingly, who came to the Lord Jesus. He was very rich and thought that because he could buy anything in this world that he wanted, he could have spiritual things on the same terms, and that is the deceitfulness of riches. Because you can buy everything else you want, do not be deceived into thinking that you can buy spiritual things. Oh no, not at all. Here are people who may receive, the Word may get in, there may be something done, something promising, some potential, something which has in it tremendous possibilities, but they are preoccupied and have no time for sufficient occupation with these Divine matters. How the enemy likes to fill the hands overfull, the hands even of the servants of the Lord, Christian workers. And as to the business of this world, the affairs of this world, oh, one of his greatly successful lines is to see that we do not have time for occupation with the things which matter most. It is like a drive. And then, oh, where has it all gone, all those promises, all those possibilities, those potentialities? "As thy servant was busy here and there, he was gone" (1 Kings 20:40), said a man in the Old Testament. How that might be applied to this - while I was busy here and there, even in Christian work, the spiritual values were gone.

We need not speak about the last group, "This is he that hears the word, and understands it" (v.23).

### **The Wayside - The Need to Seek Spiritual Understanding**

Now, what would spiritual understanding have meant in the case of these different people if they had had it, in the case of the three who did not have it, or did not have it sufficiently, or did not look after it? It is quite clear that, in the first place, as we pointed out, the realisation that there was no understanding, that attitude, "Well, I don't understand, I do not know what it is all about..." - surely

any glimmer of understanding would mean, "Well, what is the matter with me? There are people who are getting the good of that, there are people who seem to understand and get blessing". The very faintest glimmer of understanding would have meant - "There is something wrong with me. I must see to that, I must find out what is lacking in my case, where I am deficient". This is a kind of imaginative argument, not absolutely sound, because people who do not understand, do not usually argue like this. They usually put it off and blame someone else. But if you should at any time feel the thing is not getting through to you and you are not getting hold of it, just pause for a moment. Do not go away saying, "I did not get anything this morning, I did not understand". Rather say, "What is the matter with me? Was there something of the Lord there and I have missed it? What has happened to me? Is something necessary in my case? Am I lacking? I must give heed and ask the Lord about it, if something has got to be made good in my case, that I get more of what the Lord is wanting by this faculty of spiritual understanding either being brought in or developed more fully". That is the very simplest thing that we can do, and we must do it.

The whole question of the result of God's Word coming to us is before us, the whole issue of God's end in the ministry of His Word, the whole matter of spiritual fruitfulness. "Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit" (John 15:8), God's end is spiritual fruitfulness. "For all that is bound up with this, I must have spiritual understanding, and I must have more spiritual understanding." So that, to even view the question of spiritual understanding from afar off necessitates our exercise in this way, "I am not getting all that I might be, all that others seem to be getting. The difficulty must be in myself. There is something there that is in the way; it must be dealt with."

### **The Rocky Ground - The Need to Count the Cost**

In the case of the second group, the rocky ground people, what would spiritual understanding mean in their case? Simply this - "I see, I hear; if I accept that, if I fall into line with that, it is going to cost me something, tribulation is going to arise because of that word, it is going to land me into difficulties if I follow the Lord in that way. I shall come up against people and people will come up against me. I shall find I may be ostracised, isolated, all sorts of things may happen." You can visualise what will happen if you are going on with God when He gives His Word, for a word from God will always raise some kind of issue, do not make any mistake about it. It is no easy way to go on with God in His revealed will.

If you are going to be faithful to what God reveals to you, it is going to cost. Do not have any illusions about that. And a small quantity of spiritual understanding will bring to this - that is going to cost, what am I going to do about it? These people did not count the cost. They received, and when persecution came, they were offended; they went, that is the end. We must take the whole consequence of obedience to the Lord into view when we are presented with the challenge, and settle it. The day will come when I shall meet the consequence of this response of mine to the Lord; when that day comes, I will know what it is, I have taken it in advance. That is spiritual understanding in its essence, and will lead not only to continuance and stamina, but to fruitfulness.

### **The Thorny Ground - The Need to Put First Things First**

As to that third group: thorny ground people, spiritual understanding would at least mean this: "Well, I must put first things first anyway; yes, there is the care of this world, there are all these other things that would preoccupy, get in the way, but I see what the effect will be. I must see to it that this that the Lord is seeking and is after has the first place, whatever it means. Things have got to bend, have got to be made to subserve God's end. It would be better for me to cut down my business, seeing to it that when God speaks other things do not come in as diversions, but that that, if kept as

the most sacred responsibility, everything has to be held in relation to that." Much more could be said about it, but this is the simple attitude of spiritual understanding. Social appointments and engagements may be held sacredly and looked after, but in their place, not getting into the place of the primary. That is not easy, but you see, spiritual fruitfulness does not just happen, does not just come about willy-nilly. If there is anything about this parable at all, it is this truth: that God's end is only reached by being tremendously serious about it, nothing frivolous, nothing superficial, no mere mental reaction, and trying to have a good time. No, this is business.

Cost, tribulation, adversity, scorching sun because of the Word; other things, good in their place, perhaps right and proper in their measure, but they have all got to be handled seriously in relation to the thing. What has God said, what is God after, what has God revealed? We are dealing with the Word of the living God. We can go out from a gathering and begin at once to talk about all the things of common life. The parable is fulfilled in our very midst: the enemy taking the Word away - preoccupations, diversions - the Word gone. Oh, there ought to be some very serious business done every time the Lord speaks, and it must be held into its place and not allowed to be lost. What has been the fruit of the last time the Lord spoke? Try it out that way. How many times have you heard the Lord speaking, how many times has the Word of the Lord been spoken in your hearing? How much fruit has resulted from all or any part of it? That depends on your exercise over it, and not a bit upon your having heard it.

It is spiritual fruitfulness, therefore; although it may be in a fourth part, it must be there, and it is there that His Word does not return void. May we be found there.