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Spiritual Understanding

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Matthew 13:1-9, 11, 14-15, 19, 23, 51

You will probably note that one word occurs in all these varied verses - the word 'understanding' in its different forms. I have recently been very much impressed with the necessity for spiritual understanding.

This parable is, I expect, as familiar to you as any of the parables of the Lord Jesus, and you know that it has its setting in what are called 'the parables of the kingdom', that is, in our Lord's teaching concerning the kingdom of Heaven. However, we have to see it in a larger setting, for this book which goes by Matthew's name does make the definitions very clear as to the differences between the Kingdom of Heaven and the other kingdom. Indeed, this book sees this contrast being drawn, pressed and forced to the point of ultimate destiny. There were the two kingdoms: that kingdom in which the Jews were naturally, and the Kingdom of Heaven to which the Lord Jesus was calling men and women. Through this book you find those two kingdoms in very strong contrast and opposition, so that the Jewish rulers, teachers and leaders are found to be increasingly antagonistic to the Kingdom of Heaven until the issue is pressed at last in the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus, that issue being the destinies which are here in view and involved, the destiny of those in the Kingdom of Heaven and the destiny of all others who are not in that Kingdom.

The Lord Jesus, in His teaching concerning the Kingdom of Heaven, is working on a selective line, for

He is drawing out from the other kingdom a people for the Kingdom of Heaven, those who will enter and be born into that Kingdom. He speaks on the one side of "an evil and adulterous generation" (Matthew 12:39), which is the other kingdom, and then, on the other side, He speaks of "the sons of the kingdom" (Matthew 13:38), and that is so different.

Now right in that setting stands this most familiar of all parables, that which we call 'The Parable of the Sower'.

It is tremendously impressive that the Lord Jesus makes this whole issue turn upon one thing. This immense issue of the two kingdoms, the two destinies, the two courses, the two kinds of people, turns upon this one thing of spiritual understanding. It is worth looking again at these verses which we have read:

"By hearing ye shall hear, and shall in no wise *understand*... Lest haply they should perceive with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and *understand* with their heart... When anyone heareth the word of the kingdom and *understandeth* it not, then cometh the evil one... And he that was sown upon the good ground, this is he that heareth the word, and *understandeth* it... Have ye *understood* all these things?"

Before we can go further, we must see that there are three realms to be recognized as realms of relationship between us and God.

First, there is the realm of the unsearchableness and inscrutability of God and His ways. He cannot be understood, He is past finding out, and altogether defeats the last attempts of the wisest of this world to explain Him. That is a true realm recognized in the Scriptures.

Then there is another realm in which we are called upon to obey and go on with the Lord in blind faith, and without any explanations from Him. Sometimes, we would say, He *will* not explain Himself. He just calls on us to go on believing Him without any kind of understanding or explanation. We know we have to go on, but that is all we do know. We do not know why we must take a certain course beyond that the Lord has said that we must. We have to wait. That is another realm that is clearly recognized in the word of God.

But there is a third realm - and these are not contradictory - and that is the realm of education and instruction unto spiritual intelligence, and understanding, and the Word of God makes a lot of that.

When this struck me as I was reading this parable, I was led off, and finally turned up my concordance. I was greatly impressed with the place that this word 'understanding' has! It occupies several columns, going right through the Bible, and there are many different connections. There is far too much for us even to glance at now, but how important and valuable understanding is! What a lot really does hang upon spiritual understanding and intelligence! How essential it is for the Lord's people, in a day of crisis and perplexity, difficulty and confusion, to have somewhere, by some means, spiritual understanding! It was a great thing in Israel's history that the men of Issachar had "understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do" (1 Chronicles 12:32). I am sure that strikes a chord in us! Oh, that there was such a capacity, such a faculty and such a ministry amongst us in these days of confusion and perplexity - that there were those who had "understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do"! It is saving in such times if there is that gift!

Think of those men on the Emmaus road. What a position and a state they were in! Their world had collapsed and everything had gone - until He opened their eyes and they understood the scriptures. A new world was recovered instantly, and a new hope and prospect were saved by spiritual understanding.

Oh, the tremendous value and importance of spiritual understanding! However, let us be quite clear as to what it is and what it is not.

Of course, it is not worldly wisdom and acute, natural, intellectual acumen. In this Gospel by Matthew the people who are most in evidence are the teachers and rulers of Israel, the scribes and Pharisees, the people who knew it all and gave the interpretation and explanation of everything. They are in the forefront of the scene on the stage here, but later Paul said about them that theirs was the wisdom of men, not the wisdom of God, "which none of the rulers of this world knoweth: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Corinthians 2:8). It was the wisdom of this world that crucified the Son of God. So spiritual understanding is not that!

It is not that we have a great and wonderful religious tradition with all the oracles handed down to us, and we stand possessed of the great inheritance of religion. That is not spiritual understanding! It is quite evident that you can have all that and still go wrong. There was a man in the New Testament who said that he had everything along that line, and yet he was the most vehement antagonist of Jesus of Nazareth and all who were of that way. He pursued them unto distant cities, haled men and women to prison - yet he was a man with the largest tradition. So spiritual understanding is not that!

Further, it is not a wealth of truth and Christian teaching. Again, it is possible to have that and not have spiritual understanding.

What is it, then? To begin with, it is the combination of two things. First of all, it is the result of the direct action of the Spirit of God upon the spirit of man. By nature our spirit is in death, and the Spirit of God acts to raise it from the dead and bring it into life. And it is our spirit which is the organ of spiritual understanding. If we are normal we have a natural understanding, but by nature we do not possess this faculty, this organ of spiritual understanding. It is dead, or dormant, until the Spirit of God acts upon it, and then we are aware that we have a new faculty - a faculty of discrimination. We know from that moment, without being told anything about it, what we should do and what we should not do, what is right and what is wrong. It is a new faculty, but that faculty is indwelt and actuated by the Spirit of God, and is not acting independently. "The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God" (Romans 8:16).

Therefore the combination of these two things, the resurrection into life of our own spirit and becoming indwelt by the Spirit of God, constitutes the organ and function of spiritual understanding. It begins in simple ways, but education in the Christian life proceeds upon that basis, and that alone.

There is a link formed by this action of the Holy Spirit between knowledge and conscience. Note that, for it is a very important thing. There is a link between knowledge and conscience, which is a new conscience or consciousness. That explains the tragedy of many Christian lives. They have a lot of knowledge without any conscience about it. It is not a knowledge which produces a consciousness of life, and so there is inconsistency and contradiction. They know the teaching, the doctrine, the truth and what the Word of God says, but there is no deep exercise in their hearts that gives them,

on the one side, a bad time for any inconsistency and, on the other side, great joy in realizing that they are being well-pleasing unto the Lord. This link, you see, is what is meant by spiritual understanding. 'I *know* that that is mere knowledge, information, or truth, but I *understand* when the thing affects me, when it touches my life, and when it brings me up short on matters.' That is spiritual understanding.

You see, in this chapter all those people received the Word. They received the ministry of the sower and the seed, but with three parts of them it came to nothing in the end. They had the word, they had the sower as much as anyone, and they had Christ. He was present, and they had the word of the Lord. All the potentialities of the Lord's presence, His work and His Word were with them and were there for everyone. It was not that He gave more lavishly to some than to others. They all had the same possibilities, but only a fourth part showed anything for it, and the Lord said: 'There is one reason only. The three classes failed in the end because they had no spiritual understanding. They had the word, the Lord and everything, but they might just as well have never had them for all the value that accrued. The one class showed a return, greater measures, because they had spiritual understanding.' What did it mean? Well, surely it just meant that these people laid the word to heart. They discerned and recognized something of the significance, the meaning, the importance and the destiny that were bound up with the word.

Dear friends, these are not the words, nor is this just teaching. The Lord Jesus was not just broadcasting ideas and saying: 'You can take it or leave it.' There is something here that is going to affect us in relation to the ultimate issue of the Kingdom of Heaven.

A seriousness of attitude is the beginning of understanding. It is put like this in the Old Testament: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). What is the fear of the Lord? It is taking Him and His word really seriously. Anything that comes from the Lord is of tremendous consequence, and that is the beginning of spiritual understanding.

Now look at the parable and you see what are the values of spiritual understanding.

Spiritual understanding means that that which comes from the Lord finds a place for itself in us. There is a receptivity in the heart. In the first scattering of the seed the birds of the air found it an easy prey because of lack of receptivity. It just stayed on the outside, on the surface, and did not enter in at all. And so it was stolen. Spiritual understanding means that we draw the word in, take it in and apply ourselves to it. There is a receptivity about us.

In the next place, spiritual understanding means an endurance of and through what the Lord gives. The life of the seed on the rocky ground was short, so the history of that bit of the work of God was very short-lived. There was no real endurance. Spiritual understanding is the basis and the means of the spiritual endurance of the work of God in our hearts and in our lives. That is very clear and, I think, very simple. It is so possible, as we know, to hear it all and, in a way, know it all. Then, when the real test is applied, things begin to get difficult, the sun rises with scorching heat, and we get into the fires, the adversities and the suffering, all our knowledge means nothing. All that we have heard and all that has come to us just stands for nothing, and our spiritual history goes. I am afraid that is how it is with many - there is no endurance through the scorching sun and the fires.

Then, what about this that fell among thorns? "And the thorns grew up, and choked them." Spiritual understanding has a wonderful power to set up in us a resistance to this world and its fires, but

there was no resistance here. The thorns sprang up and choked the seed. They were not challenged and subdued. The Lord's explanation shows that there was no resistance because there was no spiritual understanding, no real spiritual apprehension.

Give me men and women, however simple according to the standards of this life, who have spiritual insight, spiritual discernment, spiritual judgment, spiritual sensitiveness and spiritual aliveness to the things of God! There is a wonderful resistance in those lives when other things come along with their appeal - the thorns, the cares and the pleasures which come along to spoil and overpower the work of God - and this resistance is because of spiritual understanding. You meet people like that, but you also see people driven away from the Lord by adversity or by prosperity. When you ask yourself why that is you have to say: 'Well, the root of the matter was evidently not in them. They had the things, but not the *meaning* of them. They really did not understand where they were and what it all meant.'

Spiritual understanding means depth, and that brings us to the fourth class. Everything depends upon our having depth.

Oh, for more of this spiritual understanding that has these results! First a receptivity, which means that we embrace the truth. Then an endurance against all adversity and temptation. Then a resistance to everything that comes to us which is not true or right, and finally a depth that lays hold and reproduces.

Now, spiritual understanding is shown quite clearly in the Word to be essential to a sound beginning in the Christian life. Why is it that such a large proportion of those who seem to make a good beginning do not go on? They fall away and you cannot find them after a little while. Why? Because they did not have a beginning in understanding what all this is about, what it means, what it implies and what it involves. It was an appeal on the outside, perhaps a very powerful one and so they made their answer, but where are they after a little while? Spiritual understanding, says the Lord Jesus here, is the answer to that. Be very sure that your converts understand! Do not be satisfied with any light and superficial spiritual catch phrases, but seek to get them truly grounded in the Word of God and rooted in *obedience to that Word*.

The unproductive soils, by their very contrast, illustrate for us the essentials of a spirit of understanding. The opposite of the hardened ground is the heart which is ready to receive with meekness the seed which is sown in it. Always the Lord requires of His children that they have a teachable spirit. Those who are self-assured and independent give little opportunity for the Word to do its cleansing and transforming work. So the first requisite for an understanding heart is simple dependence and a genuine humility, with a willingness to abandon one's own conceits in order to allow God to do His own work of correcting and reshaping according to His will.

Then there is the stony ground, the opposite of which is surely a heart softened and broken under the hand of God. This is not natural to any of us, for even the weakest nature can be strong and stubborn in its unwillingness to submit to the inward working of the Word. Even though the experience may be painful to the flesh, it is essential that our own strength and self-esteem should be set aside to make room for God. Without such experiences of being broken down and opened up by the working of the Cross it is not possible to become spiritually sensitive to the will of God.

Finally, it is essential to be single-minded if we are really to understand the ways of God. Whether

the "thorns" be ugly or whether they be seemingly beautiful, if they are rivals to God's speaking then they must not be tolerated. Spiritual understanding means the ruthless setting aside of lesser things in order to make room for God. The man who is truly taught of God is the man who makes it his daily exercise and delight to give absolute priority to the hearing and obeying of the voice of God.

We need to pray that among the children of God there may be an increase of spiritual understanding in the knowledge of Him, and we need to remind ourselves that the essentials to such an understanding are humility, brokenness and singleness of heart.