

The Cause of Spiritual Stupidity

by George MacDonald

The cause of spiritual stupidity is our lack of trust in God's provision and care for our lives.

Scripture: Matthew 6:31, Matthew 19:21, Mark 8:21, Luke 11:34-37, Luke 11:39-40, Luke 12:29

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Faith And Trust"

Description

George MacDonald preaches on the disciples' lack of understanding when Jesus warned them about the leaven of the Pharisees, focusing on their preoccupation with material concerns like bread instead of trusting in God's provision. He emphasizes the importance of living in the present moment, trusting in God's care, and seeking first the kingdom of God. MacDonald highlights the need to let go of earthly possessions and ambitions that hinder one's relationship with God, urging listeners to cast out distractions and make room for eternal truths in their hearts.

Transcript

'How is it that ye do not understand?'--St. Mark viii. 21.

After feeding the four thousand with seven loaves and a few small fishes, on the east side of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus, having crossed the lake, was met on the other side by certain Pharisees, whose attitude towards him was such that he betook himself again to the boat, and recrossed the lake. On the way the disciples bethought them that they had in the boat but a single loaf: probably while the Lord was occupied with the Pharisees, one of them had gone and bought it, little thinking they were about to start again so soon. Jesus, still occupied with the antagonism of the leaders of the people, and desirous of destroying their influence on his disciples, began to warn them against them. In so doing he made use of a figure they had heard him use before--that of leaven as representing a hidden but potent and pervading energy: the kingdom of heaven, he had told them, was like leaven hid in meal, gradually leavening the whole of it. He now tells them to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees. The disciples, whose minds were occupied with their lack of provisions, the moment they heard the word leaven, thought of bread, concluded it must be because of its absence that he spoke of leaven, and imagined perhaps a warning against some danger of defilement from Pharisaical cookery: 'It is because we have taken no bread!' A leaven like that of the Pharisees was even then at work in their hearts; for the sign the Pharisees sought in the mockery of unbelief, they had had a few hours before, and had already, in respect of all that made it of value, forgotten.

It is to the man who is trying to live, to the man who is obedient to the word of the Master, that the word of the Master unfolds itself. When we understand the outside of things, we think we have them: the Lord puts his things in subdefined, suggestive shapes, yielding no satisfactory meaning to the mere intellect, but unfolding themselves to the conscience and heart, to the man himself, in the process of life-effort. According as the new creation, that of reality, advances in him, the man becomes able to understand the words, the symbols, the parables of the Lord. For life, that is, action, is alone the human condition into which the light of the Living can penetrate; life alone can assimilate life, can change food into growth. See how the disciples here fooled themselves!

See how the Lord calls them to their senses. He does not tell them in so many words where they are wrong; he attacks instead the cause in themselves which led to their mistake--a matter always of infinitely more consequence than any mistake itself: the one is a live mistake, an untruth in the soul, the other a mere dead blunder born of it. The word--connection therefore between their blunder and our Lord's exhortation, is not to be found; the logic of what the Lord said, is not on the surface. Often he speaks not to the words but to the thought; here he speaks not even to the thought, but to the whole mode of thinking, to the thought--matrix, the inward condition of the men.

He addresses himself to rouse in them a sense of their lack of confidence in God, which was the cause of their blunder as to his meaning. He reminds them of the two miracles with the loaves, and the quantity of fragments left beyond the need. From one of these miracles they had just come; it was not a day behind them; yet here they were doubting already! He makes them go over the particulars of the miracles--hardly to refresh their memories--they were tenacious enough of the marvel, but to make their hearts dwell on them; for they had already forgotten or had failed to see their central revelation--the eternal fact of God's love and care and compassion. They knew the number of the men each time, the number of the loaves each time, the number of the baskets of fragments they had each time taken up, but they forgot the Love that had so broken the bread that its remnants twenty times outweighed its loaves.

Having thus questioned them like children, and listened as to the answers of children, he turns the light of their thoughts upon themselves, and, with an argument to the man which overleaps all the links of its own absolute logic, demands, 'How is it that ye do not understand?' Then they did understand, and knew that he did not speak to them of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees. He who trusts can understand; he whose mind is set at ease can discover a reason.

How otherwise than by rebuking and quelling their anxiety, could those words have made them see what then they saw? What connection was there between 'How many baskets took ye up?' and 'How is it that ye do not understand?' What had the miracles to do with their discovering that when he spoke of leaven, it was not of the leaven of bread? If not of the leaven of bread, how did the reference to those miracles of bread make them recognize the fact?

The lesson he would have had them learn from the miracle, the natural lesson, the only lesson worthy of the miracle, was, that God cared for his children, and could, did, and would provide for their necessities. This lesson they had not learned. No doubt the power of the miracle was some proof of his mission, but the love of it proved it better, for it made it worth proving: it was a throb of the Father's heart. The ground of the Master's upbraiding is not that they did not understand him, but that they did not trust God; that, after all they had seen, they yet troubled themselves about bread. Because we easily imagine ourselves in want, we imagine God ready to forsake us. The miracles of Jesus were the ordinary works of his Father, wrought small and swift that we might take them in. The lesson of them was that help is always within

God's reach when his children want it--their design, to show what God is--not that Jesus was God, but that his Father was God--that is, was what he was, for no other kind of God could be, or be worth believing in, no other notion of God be worth having. The mission undertaken by the Son, was not to show himself as having all power in heaven and earth, but to reveal his Father, to show him to men such as he is, that men may know him, and knowing, trust him. It were a small boon indeed that God should forgive men, and not give himself. It would be but to give them back themselves; and less than God just as he is will not comfort men for the essential sorrow of their existence. Only God the gift can turn that sorrow into essential joy: Jesus came to give them God, who is eternal life.

Those miracles of feeding gave the same lesson to their eyes, their hands, their mouths, that his words gave to their ears when he said, 'seek not ye what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of doubtful mind; for your Father knoweth that ye have need of these things;' 'Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.' So little had they learned it yet, that they remembered the loaves but forgot the Father--as men in their theology forget the very *Qeou logoV*. Thus forgetting, they were troubled about provision for the day, and the moment leaven was mentioned, thought of bread. What else could he mean? The connection was plain! The Lord reminds them of the miracle, which had they believed after its true value, they would not have been so occupied as to miss what he meant. It had set forth to them the truth of God's heart towards them; revealed the loving care without which he would not be God. Had they learned this lesson, they would not have needed the reminder; for their hearts would not have been so filled with discomfort as to cause them mistake his word. Had they but said with themselves that, though they had but one loaf, they had him who makes all the loaves, they would never have made the foolish blunder they did.

The answer then to the Lord's reproach, 'How is it that ye do not understand?' is plainly this: their minds were so full of care about the day's bread, that they could not think with simplicity about anything else; the mere mention of leaven threw them floundering afresh in the bog of their unbelief. When the Lord reminded them of what their eyes had seen, so of what he was and what God was, and of the foolishness of their care--the moment their fear was taught to look up, that moment they began to see what the former words of the Lord must have meant: their minds grew clear enough to receive and reflect in a measure their intent.

The care of the disciples was care for the day, not for the morrow; the word morrow must stand for any and every point of the future. The next hour, the next moment, is as much beyond our grasp and as much in God's care, as that a hundred years away. Care for the next minute is just as foolish as care for the morrow, or for a day in the next thousand years--in neither can we do anything, in both God is doing everything. Those claims only of the morrow which have to be prepared to-day are of the duty of to-day; the moment which coincides with work to be done, is the moment to be minded; the next is nowhere till God has made it.

Their lack of bread seems to have come from no neglect, but from the immediacy of the Lord's re-embarkation; at the same time had there been a want of foresight, that was not the kind of thing the Lord cared to reprove; it was not this and that fault he had come to set right, but the primary evil of life without God, the root of all evils, from hatred to discourtesy. Certain minor virtues also, prudence amongst the rest, would thus at length be almost, if not altogether, superseded. If a man forget a thing, God will see to that: man is not lord of his memory or his intellect. But man is lord of his will, his action; and is then verily to blame when, remembering a duty, he does not do it, but puts it off, and so forgets it. If a man lay himself out to do the immediate duty of the moment, wonderfully little forethought, I suspect, will be found

needful. That forethought only is right which has to determine duty, and pass into action. To the foundation of yesterday's work well done, the work of the morrow will be sure to fit. Work done is of more consequence for the future than the foresight of an archangel.

With the disciples as with the rich youth, it was Things that prevented the Lord from being understood. Because of possession the young man had not a suspicion of the grandeur of the call with which Jesus honoured him. He thought he was hardly dealt with to be offered a patent of Heaven's nobility--he was so very rich! Things filled his heart; things blocked up his windows; things barricaded his door, so that the very God could not enter. His soul was not empty, swept, and garnished, but crowded with meanest idols, among which his spirit crept about upon its knees, wasting on them the gazes that belonged to his fellows and his Master. The disciples were a little further on than he; they had left all and followed the Lord; but neither had they yet got rid of Things. The paltry solitariness of a loaf was enough to hide the Lord from them, to make them unable to understand him. Why, having forgotten, could they not trust? Surely if he had told them that for his sake they must go all day without food, they would not have minded! But they lost sight of God, and were as if either he did not see, or did not care for them.

In the former case it was the possession of wealth, in the latter the not having more than a loaf, that rendered incapable of receiving the word of the Lord: the evil principle was precisely the same. If it be Things that slay you, what matter whether things you have, or things you have not? The youth, not trusting in God, the source of his riches, cannot brook the word of his Son, offering him better riches, more direct from the heart of the Father. The disciples, forgetting who is lord of the harvests of the earth, cannot understand his word, because filled with the fear of a day's hunger. He did not trust in God as having given; they did not trust in God as ready to give. We are like them when, in any trouble, we do not trust him. It is hard on God, when his children will not let him give; when they carry themselves so that he must withhold his hand, lest he harm them. To take no care that they acknowledge whence their help comes, would be to leave them worshippers of idols, trusters in that which is not.

Distrust is atheism, and the barrier to all growth. Lord, we do not understand thee, because we do not trust thy Father--whole-hearted to us, as never yet was mother to her first-born! Full of care, as if he had none, we think this and that escapes his notice, for this and that he does not think! While we who are evil would die to give our children bread to eat, we are not certain the only Good will give us anything of what we desire! The things of thy world so crowd our hearts, that there is no room in them for the things of thy heart, which would raise ours above all fear, and make us merry children in our Father's house! Surely many a whisper of the watching Spirit we let slip through brooding over a need not yet come to us! To-morrow makes to-day's whole head sick, its whole heart faint. When we should be still, sleeping or dreaming, we are fretting about an hour that lies a half sun's--journey away! Not so doest thou, Lord! thou doest the work of thy Father! Wert thou such as we, then should we have good cause to be troubled! But thou knowest it is difficult, things pressing upon every sense, to believe that the informing power of them is in the unseen; that out of it they come; that, where we can descry no hand directing, a will, nearer than any hand, is moving them from within, causing them to fulfil his word! Help us to obey, to resist, to trust.

The care that is filling your mind at this moment, or but waiting till you lay the book aside to leap upon you--that need which is no need, is a demon sucking at the spring of your life.

'No; mine is a reasonable care--an unavoidable care, indeed!'

'Is it something you have to do this very moment?'

'No.'

'Then you are allowing it to usurp the place of something that is required of you this moment!'

'There is nothing required of me at this moment.'

'Nay, but there is--the greatest thing that can be required of man.'

'Pray, what is it?'

'Trust in the living God. His will is your life.'

'He may not will I should have what I need!'

'Then you only think you need it. Is it a good thing?'

'Yes, it is a good thing.'

'Then why doubt you shall have it?'

'Because God may choose to have me go without it.'

'Why should he?'

'I cannot tell.'

'Must it not be in order to give you something instead?'

'I want nothing instead.'

'I thought I was talking to a Christian!'

'I can consent to be called nothing else.'

'Do you not, then, know that, when God denies anything a child of his values, it is to give him something he values?'

'But if I do not want it?'

'You are none the less miserable just because you do not have it. Instead of his great possessions the young man was to have the company of Jesus, and treasure in heaven. When God refused to deliver a certain man from a sore evil, concerning which he three times besought him, unaccustomed to be denied, he gave him instead his own graciousness, consoled him in person for his pain.'

'Ah, but that was St. Paul!'

'True; what of that?'

'He was one by himself!'

'God deals with all his children after his own father-nature. No scripture is of private interpretation even for a St. Paul. It sets forth God's way with man. If thou art not willing that God should have his way with thee, then, in the name of God, be miserable--till thy misery drive thee to the arms of the Father.'

'I do trust him in spiritual matters.'

'Everything is an affair of the spirit. If God has a way, then that is the only way. Every little thing in which you would have your own way, has a mission for your redemption; and he will treat you as a naughty child until you take your Father's way for yours.'

There will be this difference, however, between the rich that loves his riches and the poor that hates his poverty--that, when they die, the heart of the one will be still crowded with things and their pleasures, while the heart of the other will be relieved of their lack; the one has had his good things, the other his evil things. But the rich man who held his things lightly, nor let them nestle in his heart; who was a channel and no cistern; who was ever and always forsaking his money--starts, in the new world, side by side with the man who accepted, not hated, his poverty. Each will say, 'I am free!'

For the only air of the soul, in which it can breathe and live, is the present God and the spirits of the just: that is our heaven, our home, our all-right place. Cleansed of greed, jealousy, vanity, pride, possession, all the thousand forms of the evil self, we shall be God's children on the hills and in the fields of that heaven, not one desiring to be before another, any more than to cast that other out; for ambition and hatred will then be seen to be one and the same spirit.--'What thou hast, I have; what thou desirest, I will; I give to myself ten times in giving once to thee. My want that thou mightst have, would be rich possession.'

But let me be practical; for thou art ready to be miserable over trifles, and dost not believe God good enough to care for thy care: I would reason with thee to help thee rid of thy troubles, for they hide from thee the thoughts of thy God.

The things readiest to be done, those which lie not at the door but on the very table of a man's mind, are not merely in general the most neglected, but even by the thoughtful man, the oftenest let alone, the oftenest postponed. The Lord of life demanding high virtue of us, can it be that he does not care for the first principles of justice? May a man become strong in righteousness without learning to speak the truth to his neighbour? Shall a man climb the last flight of the stair who has never set foot on the lowest step? Truth is one, and he who does the truth in the small thing is of the truth; he who will do it only in a great thing, who postpones the small thing near him to the great thing farther from him, is not of the truth. Let me suggest some possible parallels between ourselves and the disciples maundering over their one loaf--with the Bread of Life at their side in the boat. We too dull our understandings with trifles, fill the heavenly spaces with phantoms, waste the heavenly time with hurry. To those who possess their souls in patience come the heavenly visions. When I trouble myself over a trifle, even a trifle confessed--the loss of some little article, say--spurring my memory, and hunting the house, not from immediate need, but from dislike of loss; when a book has been borrowed of me and not returned, and I have forgotten the borrower, and fret over the missing volume, while there are thousands on my shelves from which the moments thus lost might gather treasure holding relation with neither moth, nor rust, nor thief; am I not like the disciples? Am I not a fool whenever loss troubles me more than recovery would gladden? God would have me wise, and smile at the trifle. Is it not time I lost a few things when I care for them so unreasonably? This losing of things is of the mercy of God; it comes to teach us to let them go. Or have I forgotten a thought that came to me, which seemed of the truth, and a revelation to my heart? I wanted to keep it, to have it, to use it by and by, and it is gone! I keep trying and trying to call it back, feeling a poor man till that thought be recovered--to be far more lost, perhaps, in a note-book, into which I shall never look again to find it! I forget that it is live things God cares about--live truths, not things set down in a book, or in a memory, or embalmed in the joy of knowledge, but things lifting up the heart, things active in an active will. True, my

lost thought might have so worked; but had I faith in God, the maker of thought and memory, I should know that, if the thought was a truth, and so alone worth anything, it must come again; for it is in God--so, like the dead, not beyond my reach: kept for me, I shall have it again.

'These are foolish illustrations--not worth writing!'

If such things are not, then the mention of them is foolish. If they are, then he is foolish who would treat them as if they were not. I choose them for their smallness, and appeal especially to all who keep house concerning the size of trouble that suffices to hide word and face of God.

With every haunting trouble then, great or small, the loss of thousands or the lack of a shilling, go to God, and appeal to him, the God of your life, to deliver you, his child, from that which is unlike him, therefore does not belong to you, but is antagonistic to your nature. If your trouble is such that you cannot appeal to him, the more need you should appeal to him! Where one cannot go to God, there is something specially wrong. If you let thought for the morrow, or the next year, or the next month, distress you; if you let the chatter of what is called the public, peering purblind into the sanctuary of motive, annoy you; if you seek or greatly heed the judgment of men, capable or incapable, you set open your windows to the mosquitoes of care, to drown with their buzzing the voice of the Eternal!

If you tell me that but for care, the needful work of the world would be ill done--'What work,' I ask, 'can that be, which will be better done by the greedy or anxious than by the free, fearless soul? Can care be a better inspirer of labour than the sending of God? If the work is not his work, then, indeed, care may well help it, for its success is loss. But is he worthy the name of man who, for the fear of starvation, will do better work than for the joy that his labour is not in vain in the Lord? I know as well as you that you are not likely to get rich that way; but neither will you block up the gate of the kingdom of heaven against yourself.

Ambition in every shape has to do with Things, with outward advantages for the satisfaction of self-worship; it is that form of pride, foul shadow of Satan, which usurps the place of aspiration. The sole ambition that is of God is the ambition to rise above oneself; all other is of the devil. Yet is it nursed and cherished in many a soul that thinks itself devout, filling it with petty cares and disappointments, that swarm like bats in its air, and shut out the glory of God. The love of the praise of men, the desire of fame, the pride that takes offence, the puffing-up of knowledge, these and every other form of Protean self-worship--we must get rid of them all. We must be free. The man whom another enslaves may be free as God; to him who is a slave in himself, God will not enter in; he will not sup with him, for he cannot be his friend. He will sit by the humblest hearth where the daily food is prepared; he will not eat in a lumber-room, let the lumber be thrones and crowns. Will not, did I say? Cannot, I say. Men full of things would not once partake with God, were he by them all the day.

Nor will God force any door to enter in. He may send a tempest about the house; the wind of his admonishment may burst doors and windows, yea, shake the house to its foundations; but not then, not so, will he enter. The door must be opened by the willing hand, ere the foot of Love will cross the threshold. He watches to see the door move from within. Every tempest is but an assault in the siege of love. The terror of God is but the other side of his love; it is love outside the house, that would be inside--love that knows the house is no house, only a place, until it enter--no home, but a tent, until the Eternal dwell there. Things must be cast out to make room for their souls--the eternal truths which in things find shape and show.

But who is sufficient to cast them out? If a man take courage and encounter the army of bats and demon-snakes that infests the place of the Holy, it is but to find the task too great for him; that the temple of God will not be cleansed by him; that the very dust he raises in sweeping is full of corruptive forces. Let such as would do what they must yet cannot, be what they must yet cannot, remember, with hope and courage, that he who knows all about our being, once spake a parable to the end that they ought always to pray, and not to faint.

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