

'The Most Important Thing Is Spiritual Understanding'

by T. Austin-Sparks

Spiritual understanding is the most important thing in the Christian life, as it allows us to understand the Kingdom of God and our place in it.

Scripture: Matthew 13:1

Topics: "The Kingdom of God", "Spiritual Understanding"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the critical importance of spiritual understanding in the Christian life, as illustrated in Matthew 13 through the parable of the sower. He explains that while many may hear the Word of God, true understanding comes from the condition of one's heart and the willingness to respond to God's call. The sermon highlights that spiritual understanding is essential for entering the Kingdom of God, and warns against the dangers of superficial faith and divided hearts. Sparks encourages believers to seek a deeper relationship with the Lord, urging them to ask for spiritual insight and to be fully committed to God's purpose. Ultimately, he stresses that spiritual understanding is the key to experiencing the fullness of the Kingdom.

Transcript

We are going to read the Word of God in the Gospel by Matthew, chapter thirteen, verses one to seventeen:

"The same day went Jesus out of the house, and sat by the sea side. And great multitudes were gathered together unto Him, so that He went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. And He spake many things unto them in parables, saying, 'Behold, a sower went forth to sow; and when he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up: some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth: and when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them: but others fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.'

And the disciples came, and said unto Him, 'Why speakest Thou unto them in parables?' He answered and said unto them, 'Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to

them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance: but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Esaias, which saith, By hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall not perceive: for this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest at any time they should see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and should understand with their heart, and should be converted, and I should heal them.' But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, 'That many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them; and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them.'"

And then verses fifty-one and fifty-two:

"Jesus saith unto them, 'Have ye understood all these things?' They say unto Him, 'Yea, Lord.' Then said He unto them, 'Therefore every scribe which is instructed unto the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old.'"

For some weeks before I knew that I was coming to Manila, the Lord was speaking to me about a certain matter. And then when I knew that I was coming, the Lord indicated that that was the matter about which He wanted me to speak to you. I feel that it is the most important matter in the Christian life. I hope that you will take note of that statement. What is the most important thing in the life of a Christian? It is: "SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING." I do not think that there is anything more important for us than spiritual understanding. Perhaps you noticed that that is the matter around which this thirteenth chapter of the Book of Matthew circles. Everything centers in and focuses upon this matter of SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING!

The Lord Jesus is here speaking about the Kingdom of God. That is the great subject with which He was occupied. It is the all inclusive matter, the Kingdom of God. Everything is gathered into this matter of the Kingdom of God. We must understand that the Kingdom of God is an eternal matter. It goes right back into the past eternity. It comes through all ages of time; then it is completed in the eternity which is to come. All that we have in the Bible is gathered into this one matter, the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is God's Sovereign Rule. The Government of God is over all things in the universe, and especially in this world. That Kingdom was given by the Father to His Son as the Son's inheritance. In the beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews, we have these words about God's Son. It says, "Whom He appointed heir of all things." That must have taken place before this world was created. God, the Father, appointed His Son heir of all things. In other words, He gave to the Son the Kingdom. God's Kingdom is God's Son's eternal right. The Son of God is appointed to reign over all things.

The next thing that is revealed to us in Scripture is that man was created in order to be a joint heir with Jesus Christ in the Kingdom of God. God created man in order that man should reign together with His Son. Again, in the same letter to the Hebrews, the question is taken up: "What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?" "Thou madest Him to have dominion over the works of Thy hands." "Thou hast put all things under His feet." So we have these three things to begin with; (1) God the Father over all things. The Kingdom belongs to God, the Divine rule over all things. (2) The Son is given a place beside the Father in the Throne. The Father says to the Son, "Sit Thou on My right hand, until I make Thine enemies the footstool of Thy feet." (3) And then man is created in order to share the Kingdom with the Son. Those are the first three things, the first three things in the Bible.

Then we begin again. The next thing is that man handed over that Kingdom to Satan. Man gave his inheritance into the hands of the devil. So that Satan became the prince of this world. And the Kingdom of this world was taken away from God's Son. There was this usurper who came into the place of the Son of God. The Apostle John says, "the whole world lieth in the wicked one" (1 John 5:19b). That is number (4).

Now number (5). The Son cannot be eternally deprived of His inheritance, but He has come to win it back again. So the Son of God left the Father's side and came down into this world. He came to redeem the Kingdom unto Himself and unto His Father. The Son of God was manifested to destroy the works of the devil. So He came to preach the Kingdom of God, and to redeem the Kingdom unto Himself and unto God, and to redeem man as the instrument of the Son for reigning with Him in the Kingdom. So that in and through Christ Jesus, we are called back into the eternal Kingdom, into the Kingdom of God.

Now you notice that this Gospel by Matthew is all about the Kingdom of God. And this chapter thirteen is a particular chapter in relation to the Kingdom of God. But we will come back to where we began. The Kingdom of God can be lost because of one thing. We may miss our inheritance in Christ because of one thing. All that the wonderful Kingdom means may be missed because of this one thing. The Lord Jesus focuses the whole of the Kingdom of God upon this matter of SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING. And He prescinded, He foreknew, to illustrate this matter of spiritual understanding with this parable. He makes this matter of spiritual understanding the most terrible thing on the one side. He says if you have not got spiritual understanding, you may miss it all. And He says on the other side, if you have spiritual understanding, that is the way into the Kingdom. So we come to this parable, as it is called, of the sower. It is a simple explanation of the meaning of spiritual understanding.

Now the Lord Jesus gave that parable to a great multitude of people. They were perhaps all Jews, that is, they had all the history of the Old Testament behind them. They knew all that the Old Testament contained. They knew all that Moses had written. They knew all that the prophets had spoken and written. They had that wonderful possession of the Old Testament. And yet the Lord Jesus spoke to them about the Kingdom, just like little children. In a sense, any little child can understand the parable of the sower. It is a very pretty little story for children: 'A sower went forth to sow. And as he sowed, some seeds fell by the way side; and some seeds fell on the rocky ground; and some seeds fell among thorns; and then some seeds fell on the good ground.' Who cannot understand that? If Jesus had said to the multitude, 'Do you understand?' they would say, 'Of course we understand.' What do you understand? Well, the sower went forth to sow, and this is what happened to his seeds. But Jesus said, 'You do not understand at all. You do not understand a little child's story.' And even the disciples did not understand. Think of the disciples of Jesus not understanding that!

If I were to ask anybody here tonight, if they understand the parable of the sower, they would say, 'Of course we understand.' Anybody could understand a sower going forth to sow. The disciples of Jesus did not understand. And they came to Him and they said, "Explain to us the parable of the sower." What they really meant was, 'You mean something more than You are saying. There is something behind Your story, and we do not get what it is. Now will you explain it to us?' So He gave the explanation. Then He asks them, "Have you understood?" Oh, yes, we understand. But it is quite evident that for the rest of their life until Jesus was crucified, they did not understand. They were among that great crowd of people who live today, who think they understand the truth, but they do not. They have got all the words of Christian teaching. They have got all the doctrines of the New Testament. They have the Book itself, and the Book is well within their heads. They can quote the Scripture from anywhere and still they have not spiritual understanding. That is possible, dear friends. It is possible to have all the teachings without having the

spiritual understanding. And all the trouble in Christianity today is because of this absence of spiritual understanding.

Now I am not going to spend time on all the details of this parable. You know what the Lord Jesus said about the seed and various results. But before we come to those details, let us notice one or two general truths.

First of all, the sower is the Lord Jesus Himself. It is from the Lord Himself that the Words must come. What we receive of the Word of God must come to us directly from the Lord Jesus. So it is said, the sower is the Son of God. What is the seed? Now note, Jesus calls it the Word of the Kingdom. If any man receives or when a man receives the Word of the Kingdom, the Word of the Lord Jesus is intended to bring us into the Kingdom. That is the all inclusive purpose of the Word of God. Not that we should know the Bible, although it is a very good thing to know the Bible. Not that we should commit the Bible to memory, and have it all in our heads. That is a very good thing. But God's object is that the Word of God should bring us into the Kingdom.

Now notice the different kinds of ground upon which the Word fell. How many kinds of ground are there here? We would say for the moment there are four, or there are six. These different kinds of ground represent different kinds of people.

Now I want you to notice this: The same Lord comes with the same Word to every kind of person. The Lord Jesus knew that some people would be like the way side ground, but He did not say, 'Oh, I know that they are no good; I am not going to give them My Word. I know quite well that they will not bear much fruit so I shall not waste My Word on them. Leave them where they are.' And, then, what about the rocky ground people? Well, I know quite well how they will respond. I know, of course, that they will be very pleased to have it. They say, 'Oh, this is very good. I see that I am going to get something from this.' And then after a little while, things begin to get difficult, persecution and suffering arises and they are not interested any longer. That is the end of them. Jesus knew all about them before He started it. But He did not say, 'I just waste My time, if I give them My Words. I will leave them alone.' And what about these thorny ground people? Well, they were the people who are very much occupied with the business of this world, commerce is their great concern, how to make the most money and how to make it quickly. Their business is everything to them, and then their profession is taking up all their time. And the others, they are altogether concerned about the pleasures of this life. 'I know quite well that their business and their profession and their pleasures will just choke the Words I give to them. I will not waste My time on them.' Jesus never said anything like that. And He did not say, 'Now I know that this is good ground. I will concentrate all My attention upon this. I know that they will give Me what I want, so they are the only people I am interested in.' No, He never said anything like that.

Jesus brought His Word and brings His Words to all kinds of people. Why does He do that? Now all you business men here tonight would not do that. And you very spiritual people would not do that. You would say, 'That is not using common sense. That is not good business. It is not good judgment to do that. Let us concentrate only upon what we are sure of. It is bad business to take any notice of those other unreliable people.' But you see the sense of Jesus is different from our sense. And that is where SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING comes in, so different from the natural understanding.

Why did Jesus do this thing which the men of the world would call foolish? He did it for one reason. He puts the responsibility for His Word upon everybody. The reaction to the Word of God is our responsibility

when once He has given it. When once the Lord has brought to us His Word, He has put the responsibility away from Himself unto us. He says to the way side man, 'You can have just as much as the good ground man if you like.' He says to the rocky ground man, 'This Word of Mine can do in you just as much as it can do in anybody else.' He says to the thorny ground people, 'My Word is just as powerful for you as it is for anybody.'

Now what would you really say if God's Son had come into this world only to save the good people, those people of fine character, those people who had everything in themselves. And if He left everybody else aside, I know what you would say. You would say that is not fair; that is not righteous. Here I am a poor kind of creature. My makeup is of the poor kind. I am just like a way side creature. My heart is a very stony ground heart. I know that I have a great love for this world. Does that mean that I have no chance to get into the Kingdom? It would not be right, would it?

So Jesus comes with His Word and He says, 'This Word has ITS same power to all kinds of people.' What you are naturally is not the point. Now He comes to the point. Do you notice one word that repeatedly occurs in these parables? It is the word: "HEART." Heart, a good heart, IT IS A MATTER OF THE HEART, it is not a matter of your poor kind of humanity. It is altogether the matter of where your heart is. Have you got a heart for the Lord? Have you got a heart for the Kingdom of God? Really, this is a heart matter. For the Lord says, If you really have a heart, that is going to mean SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING. So He takes the terrible passage from the prophecy of Isaiah, which saith, "By hearing ye shall hear, and shall in no wise understand; and seeing ye shall see, and shall in no wise perceive; for this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed." The prophet had given the Word of God to these people. The Word of God was read in their hearing every day and every week. But they had not got a heart for the Word of God. They did not respond from their hearts. So the Lord brought the judgment upon them. He says, 'You have closed your eyes; I will close them. You have closed your ears; I will close them. When you want to see, you will not be able to see. When you want to hear, you will not be able to hear. I will take away from you the power of spiritual understanding.' There is a warning for us here. I am afraid we sometimes do meet Christians like this.

May I say this very solemn word to some young Christians? It may be that you have been brought up in a Christian home. You know what your parents have taught you about the Lord. It may be that you have been taken to the meetings; perhaps you were in Sunday school. You know all about it. Yes, you know about the Lord Jesus. You know what is in the Bible. But you are not going on with the Lord. Perhaps you are breaking the heart of your parents. You are not just rejoicing in the Word of God. You are not really a living Christian, taking your place amongst the people of God, coming to the help of the Lord against the mighty evil forces. If you are a Christian at all, you are only a Christian in name. Something happens to you, or something is happening to you, that which you had is being taken away. You are losing the power of spiritual understanding. You are losing the power of spiritual sight and spiritual hearing. You see all that is going on amongst the Lord's people, but it does not interest you very much. You hear all that is said in the meeting, or in the home, but it does not matter to you.

There are a lot of Christians like that. And this very thing is happening to them. They are in danger of losing all SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING. And, therefore, they are losing all the wonderful meaning of the Kingdom of God, of sharing the Kingdom with God's Son, of reigning together with Him in glory. You are in danger of missing it. Spiritual understanding is the necessity. And SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING COMES FROM HAVING A HEART FOR THE LORD. Not being way side Christians, people who really do not have a mind for the Lord. Here comes the Word with all the mighty possibilities. Because you have not

got a mind for the Lord, it means nothing.

Or you may be the rocky ground kind, superficial nature, living only on the surface of things, showing that is true by a quick response. Oh, that is a lovely thing to see young people make a quick response to the Lord. But if you have lived as long as I have, you will know that many of those who have jumped very quickly and say, 'Oh, here is something for me', do not last very long. They come to see that the Kingdom of God is not just for their blessing, but for the Lord's glory. You see, there is a wrong idea of Christianity, that it is something all for our good, so we want the blessing, we want the good. We say like Peter said one time, 'not my feet only, but my head and my hands.' He said that because he wanted everything he could get for himself. Later on, he came to see that everything was to be for the Lord. And he did not lose anything when he came to see that. When his heart was changed, and he now had a heart only for the Lord, then he came into the fullness of the Kingdom.

Oh, what about the thorny ground? These are the people that have all these wonderful occupations in this life, business and profession and pleasure. And these things take first place with them. Their hearts are divided hearts. A bit of their heart wants the Lord, but the larger bit wants this world. Their heart is not wholly set upon the Lord. They are in danger of missing the Kingdom. It is not until the Lord has the whole heart that we come into the real meaning of the Kingdom. Paul prayed for the believers of Ephesus, that the Lord will give them a spirit of wisdom and revelation; that the eyes of their hearts might be enlightened. What is your reaction to the Lord? Is it really a whole hearted reaction?

Now I am coming back to that disputed point on how many different kinds of ground there are. You say four: way side, the rocky, the thorny, and the good. Is that all? But what about the different kinds of good ground? The Lord says even the good ground brought forth, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold. So that even the good ground can be different. It can produce three different degrees of the Kingdom. We can leave the one hundredfold people. That is quite all right. But what about the sixty and the thirty? There must be something wrong even with good people. Why are not all the good people a hundredfold?

Oh, yes, there are people whose hearts are not rebellious to the Lord. They are not the people who say, 'I will not have the Lord's Words.' They make response to the Lord, and it comes from their hearts. But some good people have reservations. Some very good people say, 'Now if I go all out for the Lord, you know what my friends will think of me? You know what the people in my church would say about me. And you know, perhaps, my position in business will be interfered with. I must be very careful. I must not lose my influence with others. I must think about what other people will think and say. Now my committee expects this of me. If I really go all out for the Lord, my committee will be very angry. Perhaps they will ask me to resign.' You see what I mean?! Very good people, but they are influenced by policy.

I was talking to a man once, and as I talked to him, he saw what I was meaning. And when I finished, this is what he said. 'Yes, Mr. Sparks, you are quite right. I quite agree with you. But if I was to go the way that you are going, I should offend all my friends. And in my work for the Lord, people would begin to withdraw their support money. So I must think about my people and about the Lord's work.' These are very good people, very devoted to the Lord. There is no doubt about it that they love the Lord, but you see this reservation. It says that Caleb of the Old Testament, that he had another spirit, and he wholly followed the Lord. He, with one other man, Joshua, of that whole generation came into the Kingdom. That is what we mean by SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING.

I say to you: HAVE YOU UNDERSTOOD ALL THESE THINGS? I have much more to say to you about spiritual understanding. But, oh, how important it is! They should have eyes to see, to see behind the things that are done by Satan, and see the meaning of the Lord. These people only heard His Words, and saw His works, but they did not understand the meaning. And they lost so much. Ask the Lord to give you spiritual understanding. And if you do not understand, do not say, 'I do not understand.' Go to the Lord and say, 'Lord, make me to understand.' 'Open the eyes of my heart.' That will show that you mean business with the Lord. And if you mean business with the Lord, the Lord will mean business with you.

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