

The Knowing of the Son

by George MacDonald

The sermon explores the nature of Christ's words, the importance of spiritual understanding, and the relationship between God and humanity, emphasizing the need to recognize Christ as the son of God.

Scripture: Matthew 7:24, John 5:37, John 6:63, John 14:9, 2 Corinthians 3:18

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Christian Obedience"

Description

George MacDonald delves into the concept of recognizing the voice and shape of God, emphasizing the importance of truly knowing and obeying His word. He challenges the idea of relying solely on the exact words attributed to Jesus in the Bible, highlighting the need for a deeper spiritual understanding and connection with God's truth. MacDonald encourages individuals to seek the spirit of Christ within themselves, rather than focusing on proving it to others, and stresses the significance of living a life aligned with the teachings and will of Jesus.

Transcript

Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape. And ye have not his word abiding in you; for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not.--John v. 37, 38.

We shall know one day just how near we come in the New Testament to the very words of the Lord. That we have them with a difference, I cannot doubt. For one thing, I do not believe he spoke in Greek. He was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and would speak their natural language, not that which, at best, they knew in secondary fashion. That the thoughts of God would come out of the heart of Jesus in anything but the mother-tongue of the simple men to whom he spoke, I cannot think. He may perhaps have spoken to the Jews of Jerusalem in Greek, for they were less simple; but at present I do not see ground to believe he did.

Again, are we bound to believe that John Boanerges, who indeed best, and in some things alone, understood him, was able, after such a lapse of years, to give us in his gospel, supposing the Lord to have spoken to his disciples in Greek, the very words in which he uttered the simplest profundities ever heard in the human world? I do not say he was not able; I say--Are we bound to believe he was able? When the disciples became, by the divine presence in their hearts, capable of understanding the Lord, they remembered things he had said which they had forgotten; possibly the very words in which he said them returned to their memories; but must we believe the evangelists always precisely recorded his words? The little differences between their records is answer enough. The gospel of John is the outcome of years and

years of remembering, recalling, and pondering the words of the Master, one thing understood recalling another. We cannot tell of how much the memory, in best condition--that is, with God in the man--may not be capable; but I do not believe that John would have always given us the very words of the Lord, even if, as I do not think he did, he had spoken them in Greek. God has not cared that we should anywhere have assurance of his very words; and that not merely, perhaps, because of the tendency in his children to word-worship, false logic, and corruption of the truth, but because he would not have them oppressed by words, seeing that words, being human, therefore but partially capable, could not absolutely contain or express what the Lord meant, and that even he must depend for being understood upon the spirit of his disciple. Seeing it could not give life, the letter should not be throned with power to kill; it should be but the handmaid to open the door of the truth to the mind that was of the truth.

'Then you believe in an individual inspiration to anyone who chooses to lay claim to it!'

Yes--to everyone who claims it from God; not to everyone who claims from men the recognition of his possessing it. He who has a thing, does not need to have it recognized. If I did not believe in a special inspiration to every man who asks for the holy spirit, the good thing of God, I should have to throw aside the whole tale as an imposture; for the Lord has, according to that tale, promised such inspiration to those who ask it. If an objector has not this spirit, is not inspired with the truth, he knows nothing of the words that are spirit and life; and his objection is less worth heeding than that of a savage to the assertion of a chemist. His assent equally is but the blowing of an idle horn.

'But how is one to tell whether it be in truth the spirit of God that is speaking in a man?'

You are not called upon to tell. The question for you is whether you have the spirit of Christ yourself. The question is for you to put to yourself, the question is for you to answer to yourself: Am I alive with the life of Christ? Is his spirit dwelling in me? Everyone who desires to follow the Master has the spirit of the Master, and will receive more, that he may follow closer, nearer, in his very footsteps. He is not called upon to prove to this or that or any man that he has the light of Jesus; he has to let his light shine. It does not follow that his work is to teach others, or that he is able to speak large truths in true forms. When the strength or the joy or the pity of the truth urges him, let him speak it out and not be afraid--content to be condemned for it; comforted that if he mistake, the Lord himself will condemn him, and save him 'as by fire.' The condemnation of his fellow men will not hurt him, nor a whit the more that it be spoken in the name of Christ. If he speak true, the Lord will say 'I sent him.' For all truth is of him; no man can see a true thing to be true but by the Lord, the spirit.

'How am I to know that a thing is true?'

By doing what you know to be true, and calling nothing true until you see it to be true; by shutting your mouth until the truth opens it. Are you meant to be silent? Then woe to you if you speak.

'But if I do not take the words attributed to him by the evangelists, for the certain, absolute, very words of the Master, how am I to know that they represent his truth?'

By seeing in them what corresponds to the plainest truth he speaks, and commends itself to the power that is working in you to make of you a true man; by their appeal to your power of judging what is true; by their rousing of your conscience. If they do not seem to you true, either they are not the words of the Master, or you are not true enough to understand them. Be certain of this, that, if any words that are his do not show their truth to you, you have not received his message in them; they are not yet to you the word of

God, for they are not in you spirit and life. They may be the nearest to the truth that words can come; they may have served to bring many into contact with the heart of God; but for you they remain as yet sealed. If yours be a true heart, it will reverse them because of the probability that they are words with the meaning of the Master behind them; to you they are the rock in the desert before Moses spoke to it. If you wait, your ignorance will not hurt you; if you presume to reason from them, you are a blind man disputing of that you never saw. To reason from a thing not understood, is to walk straight into the mire. To dare to reason of truth from words that do not show to us that they are true, is the presumption of Pharisaical hypocrisy. Only they who are not true, are capable of doing it. Humble mistake will not hurt us: the truth is there, and the Lord will see that we come to know it. We may think we know it when we have scarce a glimpse of it; but the error of a true heart will not be allowed to ruin it. Certainly that heart would not have mistaken the truth except for the untruth yet remaining in it; but he who casts out devils will cast out that devil.

In the saying before us, I see enough to enable me to believe that its words embody the mind of Christ. If I could not say this, I should say, 'The apostle has here put on record a saying of Christ's; I have not yet been able to recognise the mind of Christ in it; therefore I conclude that I cannot have understood it, for to understand what is true is to know it true.' I have yet seen no words credibly reported as the words of Jesus, concerning which I dared to say, 'His mind is not therein, therefore the words are not his.' The mind of man can receive any word only in proportion as it is the word of Christ, and in proportion as he is one with Christ. To him who does verily receive his word, it is a power, not of argument, but of life. The words of the Lord are not for the logic that deals with words as if they were things; but for the spiritual logic that reasons from divine thought to divine thought, dealing with spiritual facts.

No thought, human or divine, can be conveyed from man to man save through the symbolism of the creation. The heavens and the earth are around us that it may be possible for us to speak of the unseen by the seen; for the outermost husk of creation has correspondence with the deepest things of the Creator. He is not a God that hideth himself, but a God who made that he might reveal; he is consistent and one throughout. There are things with which an enemy hath meddled; but there are more things with which no enemy could meddle, and by which we may speak of God. They may not have revealed him to us, but at least when he is revealed, they show themselves so much of his nature, that we at once use them as spiritual tokens in the commerce of the spirit, to help convey to other minds what we may have seen of the unseen. Belonging to this sort of mediation are the words of the Lord I would now look into.

'And the Father himself which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape. And ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not.'

If Jesus said these words, he meant more, not less, than lies on their surface. They cannot be mere assertion of what everybody knew; neither can their repetition of similar negations be tautological. They were not intended to inform the Jews of a fact they would not have dreamed of denying. Who among them would say he had ever heard God's voice, or seen his shape? John himself says 'No man hath seen God at any time.' What is the tone of the passage? It is reproach. Then he reproaches them that they had not seen God, when no man hath seen God at any time, and Paul says no man can see him! Is there here any paradox? There cannot be the sophism: 'No man hath seen God; ye are to blame that ye have not seen God; therefore all men are to blame that they have not seen God!' If we read, 'No man hath seen God, but some men ought to have seen him,' we do not reap such hope for the race as will give the aspect of a revelation to the assurance that not one of those capable of seeing him has ever seen him!

The one utterance is of John; the other of his master: if there is any contradiction between them, of course the words of John must be thrown away. But there can hardly be contradiction, since he who says the one thing, is recorder of the other as said by his master, him to whom he belonged, whose disciple he was, whom he loved as never man loved man before.

The word see is used in one sense in the one statement, and in another sense in the other. In the one it means see with the eyes; in the other, with the soul. The one statement is made of all men; the other is made to certain of the Jews of Jerusalem concerning themselves. It is true that no man hath seen God, and true that some men ought to have seen him. No man hath seen him with his bodily eyes; these Jews ought to have seen him with their spiritual eyes.

No man has ever seen God in any outward, visible, close-fitting form of his own: he is revealed in no shape save that of his son. But multitudes of men have with their mind's, or rather their heart's eye, seen more or less of God; and perhaps every man might have and ought to have seen something of him. We cannot follow God into his infinitesimal intensities of spiritual operation, any more than into the atomic life-potencies that lie deep beyond the eye of the microscope: God may be working in the heart of a savage, in a way that no wisdom of his wisest, humblest child can see, or imagine that it sees. Many who have never beheld the face of God, may yet have caught a glimpse of the hem of his garment; many who have never seen his shape, may yet have seen the vastness of his shadow; thousands who have never felt the warmth of its folds, have yet been startled by

No face: only the sight

Of a sweepy garment vast and white.

Some have dreamed his hand laid upon them, who never knew themselves gathered to his bosom. The reproach in the words of the Lord is the reproach of men who ought to have had an experience they had not had. Let us look a little nearer at his words.

'Ye have not heard his voice at any time,' might mean, 'Ye have never listened to his voice,' or 'Ye have never obeyed his voice;' but the following phrase, 'nor seen his shape,' keeps us rather to the primary sense of the word hear: 'The sound of his voice is unknown to you;' 'You have never heard his voice so as to know it for his.' 'You have not seen his shape;'--'You do not know what he is like.' Plainly he implies, 'You ought to know his voice; you ought to know what he is like.' 'You have not his word abiding in you;'--'The word that is in you from the beginning, the word of God in your conscience, you have not kept with you, it is not dwelling in you; by yourselves accepted as the witness of Moses, the scripture in which you think you have eternal life does not abide with you, is not at home in you. It comes to you and goes from you. You hear, heed not, and forget. You do not dwell with it, and brood upon it, and obey it. It finds no acquaintance in you. You are not of its kind. You are not of those to whom the word of God comes. Their ears are ready to hear; they hunger after the word of the Father.'

On what does the Lord found this his accusation of them? What is the sign in them of their ignorance of God?--'For whom he hath sent, him ye believe not.'

'How so?' the Jews might answer. 'Have we not asked from thee a sign from heaven, and hast thou not point-blank refused it?'

The argument of the Lord was indeed of small weight with, and of little use to, those to whom it most applied, for the more it applied, the more incapable were they of seeing that it did apply; but it would be of great force upon some that stood listening, their minds more or less open to the truth, and their hearts drawn to the man before them. His argument was this: 'If ye had ever heard the Father's voice; if ye had ever known his call; if you had ever imagined him, or a God anything like him; if you had cared for his will so that his word was at home in your hearts, you would have known me when you saw me--known that I must come from him, that I must be his messenger, and would have listened to me. The least acquaintance with God, such as any true heart must have, would have made you recognize that I came from the God of whom you knew that something. You would have been capable of knowing me by the light of his word abiding in you; by the shape you had beheld however vaguely; by the likeness of my face and my voice to those of my father. You would have seen my father in me; you would have known me by the little you knew of him. The family-feeling would have been awake in you, the holy instinct of the same spirit, making you know your elder brother. That you do not know me now, as I stand here speaking to you, is that you do not know your own father, even my father; that throughout your lives you have refused to do his will, and so have not heard his voice; that you have shut your eyes from seeing him, and have thought of him only as a partisan of your ambitions. If you had loved my father, you would have known his son.' And I think he might have said, 'If even you had loved your neighbour, you would have known me, neighbour to the deepest and best in you.'

If the Lord were to appear this day in England as once in Palestine, he would not come in the halo of the painters, or with that wintry shine of effeminate beauty, of sweet weakness, in which it is their helpless custom to represent him. Neither would he probably come as carpenter, or mason, or gardener. He would come in such form and condition as might bear to the present England, Scotland, and Ireland, a relation like that which the form and condition he then came in, bore to the motley Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. If he came thus, in form altogether unlooked for, who would they be that recognized and received him? The idea involves no absurdity. He is not far from us at any moment--if the old story be indeed more than the best and strongest of the fables that possess the world. He might at any moment appear: who, I ask, would be the first to receive him? Now, as then, it would of course be the childlike in heart, the truest, the least selfish. They would not be the highest in the estimation of any church, for the childlike are not yet the many. It might not even be those that knew most about the former visit of the Master, that had pondered every word of the Greek Testament. The first to cry, 'It is the Lord!' would be neither 'good churchman' nor 'good dissenter.' It would be no one with so little of the mind of Christ as to imagine him caring about stupid outside matters. It would not be the man that holds by the mooring-ring of the letter, fast in the quay of what he calls theology, and from his rotting deck abuses the presumption of those that go down to the sea in ships--lets the wind of the spirit blow where it listeth, but never blow him out among its wonders in the deep. It would not be he who, obeying a command, does not care to see reason in the command; not he who, from very barrenness of soul, cannot receive the meaning and will of the Master, and so fails to fulfil the letter of his word, making it of none effect. It would certainly, if any, be those who were likest the Master--those, namely, that did the will of their father and his father, that built their house on the rock by hearing and doing his sayings. But are there any enough like him to know him at once by the sound of his voice, by the look of his face. There are multitudes who would at once be taken by a false Christ fashioned after their fancy, and would at once reject the Lord as a poor impostor. One thing is certain: they who first recognized him would be those that most loved righteousness and hated iniquity.

But I would not forget that there are many in whom foolish forms cover a live heart, warm toward everything human and divine; for the worst-fitting and ugliest robe may hide the loveliest form. Every

covering is not a clothing. The grass clothes the fields; the glory surpassing Solomon's clothes the grass; but the traditions of the worthiest elders will not clothe any soul--how much less the traditions of the unworthy! Its true clothing must grow out of the live soul itself. Some naked souls need but the sight of truth to rush to it, as Dante says, like a wild beast to his den; others, heavily clad in the garments the scribes have left behind them, and fearful of rending that which is fit only to be trodden underfoot, right cautiously approach the truth, go round and round it like a shy horse that fears a hidden enemy. But let each be true after the fashion possible to him, and he shall have the Master's praise.

If the Lord were to appear, the many who take the common presentation of thing or person for the thing or person, could never recognize the new vision as another form of the old: the Master has been so misrepresented by such as have claimed to present him, and especially in the one eternal fact of facts--the relation between him and his father--that it is impossible they should see any likeness. For my part, I would believe in no God rather than in such a God as is generally offered for believing in. How far those may be to blame who, righteously disgusted, cast the idea from them, nor make inquiry whether something in it may not be true, though most must be false, neither grant it any claim to investigation on the chance that some that call themselves his prophets may have taken spiritual bribes

To mingle beauty with infirmities,

And pure perfection with impure defeature--

how far those may be to blame, it is not my work to inquire. Some would grasp with gladness the hope that such chance might be proved a fact; others would not care to discern upon the palimpsest, covered but not obliterated, a credible tale of a perfect man revealing a perfect God: they are not true enough to desire that to be fact which would immediately demand the modelling of their lives upon a perfect idea, and the founding of their every hope upon the same.

But we all, beholding the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image.

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