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The Theme of Understanding in the Gospel of Matthew

The Importance of Understanding

The parable of the sower establishes the importance of understanding for Matthew's Gospel: the good soil that bears fruit stands for "the one who hears the word and understands it" (13:23). Compare this with Mark 4:20 (the ones who "hear the word and accept it") and Luke 8:15 ("the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart").

Also in this parable, the seed devoured by birds is explained thus: "When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart" (Matt. 13:19).

The Disciples as People Who Are Given Understanding

Three times the disciples of Jesus are portrayed as people who understand the word of Jesus, but only after that understanding is given to them:

- "'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes'" (13:51).

- “Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (16:12).
- “Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist” (17:13).

All three references are unique to Matthew. Indeed, a parallel reference in Mark 8:21 indicates the disciples’ continued lack of understanding.

The Disciples’ Understanding Marks Them as Distinctive

The disciples are contrasted with the masses of people who follow Jesus without understanding:

To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. . . . The reason I speak to them in parables is that “seeing they do not perceive, and hearing they do not listen, nor do they understand.” With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah that says, “You will indeed listen, but never understand. . . .” (Matt. 13:11, 13–14)

Concluding Observations

Understanding is not a prerequisite for salvation, but it is for “bearing fruit.” With regard to mission, understanding almost seems more important than faith. The disciples are people of “little faith” in Matthew, yet they are given the Great Commission in 28:18–20. The Canaanite woman in 15:21–28 is a person of “great faith,” yet she is

not given any commission to go and make disciples (see also the centurion with remarkable faith in 8:5–13).

Understanding must be given by God (through Jesus). In 11:25, Jesus prays, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants.”