

On Spiritual Knowledge (Saint Symeon the New Theologian)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



We recently posted an article on the importance of spiritual reading here <http://bit.ly/2F4xYBq>.

The position of the Church has always been, however, that we need help and guidance if we're to understand Scripture in depth. Thus, as early as the Apostolic age (Acts 8, 30-31), Philip encounters an Ethiopian reading the Book of Isaiah. 'Do you understand what you're reading?' He replied, 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' This is a strange answer because the man can obviously read and the words are simple enough, a lamb being led to slaughter, but it's only when Philip explains the deeper meaning of the prophecy that the man can understand. The passage also illustrates the need for humility in approaching the Scriptures: if the eunuch hadn't admitted his inability to comprehend such an apparently simple text, he'd never have received the explanation.

This is what Saint Symeon the New Theologian has to say on the subject at the beginning of his 49th Discourse. [WJL].



On spiritual knowledge and the fact that the treasure of the Spirit is concealed within the letter of Holy Scripture and is not apparent to all, but to those who have acquired within their soul the grace of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual knowledge is like a house built between Greek and secular knowledge, in which house there's a locked chest- knowledge of the divine Scriptures- and the untellable riches which are stored within these Scriptures, that is divine grace. Those who enter the house aren't able to see this wealth unless they open the chest. But the chest can never be opened with human wisdom, so all those people who think in a secular manner don't know the spiritual treasure which is inside the chest of spiritual knowledge. Just as, if they lift the chest onto their shoulders, they still won't be able to see the treasure within it, so even if they were to read and memorize the whole of the divine Scriptures, as though they were a single psalm, they wouldn't be able to recognize the grace of the Holy Spirit concealed in them. What's inside the chest can't be revealed by looking at the chest and, by the same token, what's in the divine Scriptures can't be revealed by the writing. How is this so? Imagine that you see a little chest, securely locked on all sides and that, from its weight and external beauty you think, or you learn from others, that it contains

treasure. Imagine also, that you put it on your shoulders and walk away with it to wherever you're going. Of what benefit would it be to you if it stayed locked, if you didn't open it, if you never in your life saw the treasure or the lustre of the precious gemstones, the pearls, the gold inside it. And what would be the benefit to you if you never managed to get at even a little of that treasure to buy food and clothing and instead, as we've said, you kept it locked and sealed all your life? It would be full of valuable treasure, yet you could die of starvation, thirst, or lack of clothing. Obviously, it would be of no benefit at all.

Consider, my friend, that the same is true of spiritual matters, as well. The chest is the Gospel of Christ and the rest of the Holy Scriptures which have eternal life locked away inside them as well as the other inexpressible, everlasting good things, as Christ Himself said: 'Search the Scriptures, for in them is eternal life'. [He also said] 'Those who love me will keep my commandments and the Father will love them and I will manifest myself to them'. So when God dwells in us and manifests Himself to us, then we consciously see, that is, we recognize in practice the divine mysteries that are concealed within the divine Scriptures. Let no-one be deceived into thinking that there's any other way that the chest of knowledge can be opened, that the good things therein can be otherwise enjoyed or that we can gaze upon and participate in them. But what are these good things I'm talking about? Perfect love for God and for other people; disdain for all things visible; mortification of the flesh and the members of the flesh on this earth; rejection of every wicked and shameful desire. And since the dead don't think or feel at all, so let us also not conceive any wicked desire at all, or allow ourselves to feel the power that any evil desire might have over us. Instead, let's remember the commandments of our Saviour Jesus Christ, as well as immortality, incorruption, everlasting glory, the Kingdom of Heaven and the adoption we've been granted by renewal in the Holy Spirit. We should recall that we've become sons of God*, gods by grace, and heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ. Together with this, we should remember that we've acquired the mind of Christ, that is the Holy Spirit, and that through Him we see God and Christ Himself Who dwells in the Godhead yet walks among us in a way we can perceive.

So those who heed God's commandments and keep them succeed in enjoying these things in abundance, together with the inexpressible benefits which come through opening the chest, that is through opening the spiritual eyes of the soul and the contemplation of what is concealed in the divine Scriptures. The others (who haven't known what we've been talking about, haven't experienced or encountered them), haven't tasted the sweetness and the immortal life of these

divine words. Instead, they boast and place the hope of their salvation purely on learning the Scriptures by heart. After death they will be judged more severely than those who never heard of the Scriptures at all. Because some of them are deluded through ignorance and distort the Scriptures, explaining them to suit their own purposes, in an effort to make their own rules, these being that we can be saved without meticulously observing God's commandments and that we can utterly deny the power of the Scriptures... How is it possible for people to learn, to recognize, even to conceive these things at all unless they've experienced the presence of the Holy Spirit, that is His radiance, His illumination, His residence within them? How is it possible for people to understand these mysteries if they've never felt within themselves the rebirth, reshaping, renovation and alteration which is from the Holy Spirit?

**** As was mentioned in relation to another article recently, this is short-hand for the affirmation- astonishing and scandalous for those times- that everyone, men and women, would henceforth be accorded the same status. This is why 'children of God' simply isn't a good enough translation here. Women were already God's children, no doubt most of them were loved by parents, husbands and children, but Christ utterly transformed the way they were regarded, and demanded for them the same privileged position that, until then, had been reserved for men [WJL].***