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Singleness of Eye

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Luke 11:33-36.

I want to preface what I have to say with a brief personal word. I think what will be said may be very testing to many of us and difficult to understand or receive, but I want to say to you that this word has been deeply searching my own heart and giving me some very serious exercise before the Lord for some days past, so much so that not until now was I sure that it was a word for others, to be passed on. I say that because I want you to understand and believe that I am not preaching at you, but that this is something which must really be a matter for our mutual exercise and concern.

The Single Eye and a Luminous Body

Having said that, let us come to this Scripture. First of all, what may seem a little technical - the endeavour to arrive at the exact meaning of these words. "*When thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light. When it is evil, thy body also is full of darkness*". The translation is not quite accurate or exact, and that would be well understood because it would be very difficult indeed to grasp the meaning of an exact translation, for here it does not mean that we possess light. The whole body full of light does not mean, and it does not say in the original, that we possess light, but it says exactly: "We are light". It does not really say "full of light", although it is so translated, but it says, "Thy whole body shall be luminous". Do you see a very fine difference? There is a difference between possessing light and being light, receiving light and being luminous, and that is exactly the meaning here. It is

not subjective in the first instance, it is objective. It is not a reference to your mind, that your mind shall be enlightened, that you shall possess light in your mind. It says "your body", and the body is the objective side of us, while the mind is the subjective.

You will see that is borne out by the context. You have a glance at that chapter. You will see there is a reference by the Master to "*this evil generation (which) seeks after a sign*", and He says, "*there shall no sign be given to it but the sign of Jonah*" (Luke 11:29). Now then, Jonah was a sign. Jonah's presence was a matter of illumination; his very presence, his bodily presence on the earth was a matter of illumination; that is, it was a matter of testimony by his personal presence. Then the reference to the queen of Sheba and the result of the queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon was that she, by her very presence, was a testimony to that glory. I think you have got to the heart of the matter.

So it is testimony, it is effectiveness, it is intrinsic value, it is our registration in the world that is referred to here in terms of light. It is not a matter of knowledge; it is a matter of being, "Thy whole body shall be luminous". It is being. It is not having, and it is not knowing here, but what we are personally. I trust that is quite clear, and if so, we are able to go on with the further meaning of the single eye. What we have said is reached and better understood by this principle that is enunciated of the single eye.

"*When thine eye is single, thy whole body also is luminous*". "*The lamp of thy body is thine eye*". The body that is the vessel of light, of testimony, demands a lamp to make it luminous. The Master here says that that lamp is the eye, and then He says that singleness of eye makes for a luminous body. We will talk more about that luminous body in a moment. Do not get wrong ideas about that. But singleness of eye makes for a luminous person being present in this world; a sign. If we start with Jonah, that is perfectly clear. Jonah's death, burial and resurrection was a sign and it became a personal matter so that he was luminous as a personal testimony to resurrection, triumph over death and death's judgment, and the cause of judgment - sin. That was the full message for Nineveh. And the queen of Sheba embodies the principle. One thing you notice about the queen of Sheba was her singleness of eye. She had heard a report. She did not say, "I do not believe it, it is exaggerated." She did not put some other construction upon it. She said, "I am going to see." Singleness of eye will lead us to personal investigation into matters, whether the report be good or evil. The contrary to singleness of eye would be prejudice, suspicion, mistrust. She went, she saw, and because singleness of eye predominated with her, she became a mighty witness in the far country to the greatness of Solomon and the greatness of Solomon's God. That by the way.

What Singleness of Eye is

What is singleness of eye? How does it work? What does it mean? If we were using another phrase, we would say it is a circumcised heart, for it is just here that the whole question of the intrusion of a second consideration is found. You cannot have singleness if there are two. Singleness obviously means just one, not the intrusion of a second thing, which second thing is in the main, if not entirely, the intrusion of self-interest. Numerous and deep-rooted are its forms; deeper than our consciousness, deeper than our intention, deeper than our will that something should be, deeper than we can reach, this self-life is seated and rooted and its intrusion, consciously or unconsciously, destroys or prevents singleness of eye. Singleness of eye is the utter exclusion of all self-consideration and self-interest in any way whatever; a complete, unreserved concern and abandonment to the glory of God.

It raises very many practical questions. Can we rejoice in the work of God without being the instrument, without feeling at all bad that we are not the instrument and just rejoice in the work without any place being given to us in it? Or in seeing the work of God being done and going on, do we at once get into it with self-pity or with our own ambition and desire to have some place in that, which is not a pure, utterly selfless desire, completely circumcised in heart? Can we rejoice and be thankful when the gospel is preached even of contention? You remember Paul. "*Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife... thinking to raise up affliction for me in my bonds*" (Phil. 1:15-17). Oh, their motive! Unholy motive, the evil of that heart that is not singleness of eye, that is not purity of heart. But what was Paul's reaction, "There is something wrong here; people like that ought not to be allowed to preach the gospel. The Lord ought not to use that"? Paul said, "No, whether it be even of contention, whether it is with that evil motive, I rejoice that the gospel is preached anyway!" That is singleness of eye.

Can we be even used of the Lord in any way, many ways, not only in public ministry or spoken ministry, but in other ways - in practical service, in giving - and then disappear? Go right away at once behind the curtain? It is the Lord's interest, not ours - hands off; glad to be used, but out of sight at once, not peeping round to get the appreciation or thanks for what we have done, or to have some place in things because we have helped them. All such matters go to the heart of this whole question of singleness of eye. Can we let go, and stand right back? You must not misunderstand what I am saying because there is another way of interpreting it - being careless, indifferent, "Let them get on with it!" That is only another form to the contrary of purity of heart. But I mean being out of it ourselves, letting go.

A Sole Concern for the Glory of God

It opens up a wide field and involves in very many questions and matters, but it all amounts to this, does one thing alone matter - the glory of God? It was the spirit of John the Baptist that made him so great - "*He must increase, but I must decrease*" (John 3:30). It was the Spirit which made Paul so great a man before God: "*I know how to be abased*" (Phil. 4:12), to be left out, all this if only the Lord gets His place, gets His ends. This is purity of heart. "*The pure in heart... shall see God*" (Matt. 5:8). The one man in the Old Testament of whom it is said that he saw God was Moses. "*Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men that were upon the face of the earth*" (Num. 12:3). How utterly selfless in interest Moses was! That is why he saw God. He was pure in heart, pure from this insinuation of self-interest, concern for place, for notice, for gratification, satisfaction, or anything else. Oh, how selfish we are! There is a lot bound up with this.

The One To Whom God Will Commit Himself

The Lord Jesus did come, and He did come to show in Himself the kind of person to whom God would commit Himself, to whom God would let go Himself. It is a tremendous thing for such as God to let himself go to someone else, commit Himself, so to speak, to put Himself into the hands of another with perfect assurance and content and say, "I can trust Myself with that one, I need not be reserved where they are concerned. I can give them My secrets, I can open up to them My hidden things, I can trust them with blessing, with power, with scope for service, ways of usefulness: I know quite well self will not come in there; it is safe". Who of us could say that of ourselves? I cannot; I do not think you can.

But what leads to this? Is it not our deep, agonising concern before God that He will be able to commit Himself to us that we might be the more to His glory and more used by Him? Does that not concern you? Do you, with me, desire above all other things that the Lord should be able to be with us and to make us a blessing and to use us and to open the way before us, and not all the time to have to say, "I must go steady there, they are taking it into their own hands to get glory for themselves. They have become masters instead of servants"? Are you concerned about that? If you are not, of course this word has nothing for you, but if so, surely this is a word to our hearts. How will the Lord commit Himself? The Lord Jesus is the great example. He came to show, for God was with Him. That was the testimony of the apostles. He *"went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with Him"* (Acts 10:38). Oh, that is what we are after in our hearts, not the using, not the fame, not the popularity, the publicity, no, but just that God should get glory and have His way. He puts His finger upon the secret - the single eye, purity of heart.

I am not, for a moment, questioning your motives. I cannot question my own motives as I know them on the surface. You would all say, "All that I am and all I have is for the Lord; it is at the Lord's disposal. I do not want to have any secondary interest at all." We are all like that, but so often we are our own greatest enemies, and I am not speaking to you about the things of which you may be conscious. We shall, of course, have to face things which come into this realm as we know them; as we are able to discern them, we have to face them quite seriously. But I know this, that *"the heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly corrupt"* (Jer. 17:9). *Deceitful* - and we really do not always know our own motives, and the motive is only manifest sometimes when the Lord has given us a little extra rope of liberty and blessing, and then we begin to be very pleased with it and with ourselves, instead of humbly, broken-heartedly, going down before the Lord in worship that such as we, could ever be considered in the realm of His using. It is what is there. That is why I speak of circumcision of heart, getting right down inside.

Well, the opposite to singleness, of course, is dividedness, and you know how often the Lord Jesus, when He was here in the flesh, used that word "cannot", and how often He used the phrase that is here in our portion: "No man does this or that to things." *"Men do not put new wine into old bottles"* (Matt. 9:17) — two opposite things; *"men do not put a piece of new cloth upon an old garment"* (Matt. 9:16) - two different things. *"Ye cannot serve God and mammon"* (Matt. 6:24). *"Unless you leave all, you cannot be My disciples"* (Luke 14:33). These "cannots" just touch this: there can be no two things where the Lord is concerned, only one thing, singleness of eye. Pride and jealousy are only forms of self-interest. When David returned from slaying the giant, the women came out and sang, *"Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands"* (1 Sam. 18:7). Saul said, *"They have ascribed unto David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed but thousands. And Saul eyed David from that day and forward"*, eyed him with an evil eye. He was jealous, and I think it was David's singleness of eye that was the great characteristic of his life.

The Heart the Seeing Organ

The eye is the seeing organ, and eye and body here must not be interpreted physically. The Lord is not talking about the literal, physical eye, and the literal, physical body. He is speaking in symbols, as always in the Gospels. The eye and body here are symbolical. If you follow through the rest of the New Testament, you know that the heart is the spiritual eye of man, and the body is his personal presence in any location. If it is the heart that is the seeing organ, then it is an affection. The heart is the seat of affection, of love. Love then becomes the great seeing organ, the thing which is the lamp of a man's presence, that makes him luminous in this world. Love - not teaching, not what he has,

but what he is: the embodiment of Divine love. Now we are caught. All of us are brought right to the last issue by that. For is not love essentially singleness? True love is single, has one object, one interest, one motive. A lot of other things have got to be done, but they are done in order to get them out of the way in order that the object of love might be the occupation.

Love is singleness. Love is utterly selfless. Oh, God have mercy upon us that our love is so often not that kind of love. We think it is love, but there is a good deal of selfishness about what we call love, drawing to ourselves, making even the object of love, our professed love, serve our ends. That is the tragedy of the world today, of married life. It is called love, but what is it? Serving the selfish ends of man. But true love "*seeks not its own*" (1 Cor. 13:5) says the apostle, but is utterly selfless, and when it is like that, we are luminous. Men can see by our presence, they can see God, see Christ, see a lot, perhaps all that they need to see, by our being here or there. We are luminaries - not by a teaching, not by what we have, but we are that. That is singleness of eye, that is purity of heart, and again I say at the end, that is the only ground on which the Lord is free to commit Himself to us. If we turn the light of the Lord's glory upon every situation, every matter, and we do not say, "This is quite permissible and harmless" for that is negative. We are positive; we say, "Is this to the glory of God?" That is the positive side, that is the single eye. The Lord grant it to us!