

YADA': THE UNIQUE HEART OF TRUE CHRISTIANITY

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For many years I have been contemplating the special-ness of our movement in the area of the heart. When I came to our movement I found very special relational aspect of true Christianity. I have called it the “heart” ever since I was studied with in Milwaukee. What I experienced was different than I had experienced in any religious group before. It was, in fact, the difference between being a person who knew about God and had some association with him, and being a person who truly knows God through a true personal relationship with him. The things our movement has gone through the last 2 years has caused me to search the Scriptures to better understand that which I have been calling “heart”. In the last few months I have come to understand that the “heart” is what is involved in the OT concept of *yada'*, the Hebrew word for “know”. In this article I will attempt to explain that concept, a concept that I think distinguishes us from nearly all other movements of today that I am aware of¹, a concept that I would urge everyone to hold on to and never surrender, a concept when experienced is basically the watershed of spiritual life and death.

Matthew 7:21-23 states”

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you.’ Away from me, you evildoers!” (emphasis mine).

For a long time I have felt this was talking about a personal relationship with God but did not understand the depth of what it meant until I studied out the Hebrew word *yada'*. The big question is “What does it mean to be known by God and to know God”?

The Greek word here in Matthew 7:23 is *ginosko*. Of the 946 times *yada'* is found in the Hebrew OT² over 490 times it is translated by *ginosko* in the LXX (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament)³. Hence *ginosko* is the major Greek word used for *yada'*. The Greeks however did not have a word that translates *yada'* with its full meaning. The closest term the Greeks had was *ginosko*. The Greek term *ginosko* designates predominately an intellectual concept which is not the predominate concept involved in *yada'*. The major emphasis of *yada'* includes *subjective* dimensions of knowing not just the objective.⁴ Groome states,

¹ That does not mean there are not those out there who have experienced what we (or I) have but that generally I am just unaware of them in my experience.

²The information on Hebrew words occurrences in this paper are from John R. Kohlenberger III and James A. Swanson, *The Hebrew-English Concordance to the Old Testament With the New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 120, hereafter designated as *HECOT*. This reference is on page 617.

³*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds, translated by J. T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), vol. 5, 453, hereafter designated by *TDOT*. Cf., Edwin Hatch and Henry Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), vol 1, 267-70.

⁴Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper & Roe, 1980), 141.

. . . in Greek philosophy *ginoskein* has a predominant meaning of ‘intellectual looking at’ an object of scrutiny and strongly connotes objectivity . . . For the Hebrews *yada*’ is more by the heart than by the mind, and the knowing arises not by standing back from in order to look at, but by active and intentional engagement in lived experience . . . the Hebrews had no word that corresponds exactly to our words *mind* or *intellect*.⁵

“*Yada*” has the basic meaning of “to perceive, know”⁶. Its semantic range is broad and also embraces definitions such as “find out”, “know by experience”, “recognize”, “acknowledge”, “know a person, be acquainted with”, “be skillful”, “teach”, “make known”⁷, as well as “to notice”, “learn”, “to know sexually, have intercourse with, copulate”, “to have experience”, and “to take care of someone”⁸. This word for the most part involves *knowledge gained through experience*⁹. It thus basically indicates *experiential knowledge*¹⁰. This is contrary to much of our modern day understanding of “knowledge” and its acquisition which largely involves pure thought by one’s own contemplation or mere verbal transmission of information from teacher to student in a classroom setting. That is not to say that *yada*’ does not include these types of knowledge and teaching but that it has as its major dimension *experientially gained* or *relationally gained* knowledge.

With respect to “knowing” God, the Old Testament use of this term is enlightening. Consider the following verses:

1. Jer. 16:21 states,

“Therefore I will teach (*yada*’) them--this time I will teach (*yada*’) them my power and might. *Then* they will know (*yada*’) that my name is the LORD”.

Here knowing God comes from him causing them *to experience* his power and might.

2. Ezek. 30:8 states

⁵ Groome, 141. W. Schottroff (*TLOT*, vol. 2, 514) concurs stating:

. . . the meaning of *yada*’ in Hebr. would be insufficiently stated if one were to limit it strictly to the cognitive aspect . . . without simultaneously taking into account the contractual aspect of the meaning, e.g., the fact that *yada*’ does not merely indicate a theoretical relation, a pure act of thought, but that knowledge, as *yada*’ intends it, is realized through practical involvement with the obj. of knowledge.

The New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, 5 vols., edited by Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), vol. 2, 410, (hereafter designated as *NIDOTT*) also concurs stating, “The fundamentally relational character of knowing (over against a narrow intellectual sense) can be discerned, not the least in that both God and human beings can be subject and object of the vb.”

⁶ *The Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, by Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, translated by Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1997), vol. 2, 508, hereafter designated as *TLOT*.

⁷ Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs in *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 393-94, hereafter noted as *BDB*.

⁸ *TLOT*, vol. 2, 390-92.

⁹ Lawrence O. Richards, *Christian Education: Seeking to Become Like Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 33.

¹⁰ There are only a relatively few times it means “intellectual” knowledge.

“Then they will know (*yada*) that I am the LORD, when I set fire to Egypt and all her helpers are crushed”.

Here knowledge of God comes through experiencing his character of justice and wrath. This concept of “knowing that I am the LORD” occurs over 65 times in Ezekiel alone indicating relational knowledge coming through experiencing his judgments.

3. Hosea 2:19-20 states:

"And I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and in justice, in loving kindness and in compassion, And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness. *Then* you will know (*yada*) the Lord" (NASB).

Here one sees that knowing the Lord is a result of experiencing his righteousness, justice, loving kindness, compassion, and faithfulness.

4. Hosea 6:2-3 states,

“He will revive us after two days; He will raise us up on the third day that we may live before Him. So let us know (*yada*), let us press on to know (*yada*) the Lord. His going forth is as certain as the dawn; And He will come to us like the rain, like the spring rain watering the earth” (NASB).

Here knowledge of God is obtained through experiencing Him reviving them and giving them rain. They would not know God however if they did not press on in faithfulness to experience his character. Knowing God comes from experiencing God’s faithfulness, mercy, and provision.

5. One of the most important passages in the OT is Jer. 31:34. It reads,

“No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know (*yada*) the LORD,’ because they will all know (*yada*) me, from the least of them to the greatest”, declares the LORD. "***For*** I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (emphases mine).

The word “For” here indicates that knowing the LORD comes about as a *result* of a person experiencing the LORD’s forgiveness and his forgetting their sins. Knowing God thus comes by *experiencing* his grace.¹¹

All of these passages indicate knowing God involves interpersonal experience with his character. God is allowing people to know him through experiencing his character. Knowing God however also involves our response to him. It is associated with one’s obedience to him (I Sam. 2:12; Job. 18:21), fear of him (I Ki. 8:43; II Chron. 6:33), serving him (I Chron.28: 9), belief in him (Is. 43:10), trust in him (Ps. 9:10; Prov. 3:5-6)¹² confession of one’s sin (Ps. 32:5), and knowledge of the Torah or his Word (Ps.

¹¹To know God is, as Terence E. Fretheim states, “is to be in a right relationship with him, with characteristics of love, trust, respect, and open communication”, *NIDOTTE*, vol. 2, 413.

¹² *TLOT*, vol. 2. 518.

119:79)¹³. It thus “involves not just theoretical knowledge but acceptance of the divine will for one’s own life”¹⁴.

Knowing God can be summarized as coming from one’s personal life experience of the relational blessings or discipline of God as a result of one’s trusting in and following him. Knowing God involves experiencing his character and willingly submitting to him as LORD.

So we see that when used in the New Testament, in a Hebrew context (Matthew was written to a Jewish audience), the word “know” (*ginosko* in Greek) takes on more than an intellectual concept. It takes on an experiential interpersonal relational meaning. So when we see the statement in Matt. 7:23, “I never knew you”, it is not talking about intellectual knowledge but character or relational knowledge. This fits perfectly into the context of Matt. 7:15-23 which states:

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize (*epiginosko*, an intensive form of *ginosko*)¹⁵ them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize (*epiginosko*) them. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew (*ginosko*) you. Away from me, you evildoers!"

Our knowledge, our *yada*’ of people, occurs when we experience their character (verses 15-20). You can be sure that people are false prophets if they do not produce good fruit. God’s knowing of us also occurs by his experiencing our character (verses 21-23). Even though one might do things, things which are good, there can be an interpersonal relationship, a heart knowing, which is lacking. As is typical of Matthew, relationship with God was more than outward show or actions, it must involve the heart (e.g., Matt. 15:8-9).

God tests us to see what is in our heart to “know” us. Consider Deut. 8:1-2:

Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase and may enter and possess the land that the LORD promised on oath to your forefathers. Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you *in order to know (yada’)* what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his command (emphases mine).

¹³ *NIDOTTE*, vol. 2, 413.

¹⁴ *TDOT*, vol. 5, 478.

¹⁵ This word is also, the majority of the time, the Greek translation of *yada*’ in the LXX.

Note the use of the word “know” here. Surely an all-knowing God “knew” what was in their hearts from an intellectual perspective! So what does this mean? Our study of *yada*’ would indicate that God wanted to *experience* what was in their hearts through experiencing their obedience. This is how God knows them and can know us! It is not just about raw works but about relationship experienced through actions toward God and he toward us. He wants to know us personally and wants us to know him personally. He wants to experience our character. He wants to live out life with us it seems. Just as his love for us would not be real unless his heart and actions work together to allow us to experience his character, so our love for him is not real unless our heart and actions, work together to allow him to experience us. No wonder James 2 states that faith without works is dead and that works complete our faith! Works complete our personal relationship with God! They do not make us merit that relationship (that is a totally erroneous perspective). Obedience is our allowing God to experience us. This is how God *knows* us.

When I reflect on what I experienced in our movement it brings me great joy to see how those who studied with me prepared me to meet my God, prepared me to experience (*yada*’) Him, and prepared me to allow him to know (*yada*’) me! I am so glad they helped me dig deeply into what sin¹⁶ I had so I could really experience His character of forgiveness, grace, and love. No wonder Jesus said, “. . . *he who has been forgiven little loves little.*” (Luke 7:47). The more we admit our sin, the more we will be able to love God, and know him, and God know us! I am so glad people helped me to come to a place of brokenness over my sin. God’s love became so real when that happened as I experienced his offer of grace in an incredible way. I am so glad that people helped me to understand that experiencing God involves listening to him through the reading of his word and that God experiencing me involves me praying and crying out to Him. No wonder David was a man after God’s own heart. I can see it in the Psalms where he opens up his heart to God and God experiences what is in his heart. I am so grateful that my leaders were hard on sin. They were protecting my *yada*’ with God. I am so thankful that many of my disciplers in the past insisted on my obedience to God!¹⁷ They were (whether or not they knew it) helping me with my *yada*’ with God and others. I am so grateful that people who disciplined me helped me to learn what total openness is and urged me to express it! Relationships do not exist without it whether they are relationships with others or with God. No wonder John 3:20-21 states:

Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever *lives* by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.

¹⁶ Most religious groups today do not do this and do not prepare people to *yada*’ God, nor him to *yada*’ them.

¹⁷ I admit the way it was done was not always correct or for the right reasons as one tended to obey just because some one said to and not because it came from the heart, nor was there always an understanding of experiential/relational knowing of God. I do believe, however, that many began their Christian walk with *yada*’ but gradually gave it up for serving and following men. I believe and pray that they can re-establish their *yada*’ and if we can now look to the future through the concept of *yada*’ and urge people to obey God as a way of knowing him and being known by him, we will save many from death and cover a multitude of sins (James 5:20).

Living by the truth means you are open with your life. Your deeds are seen plainly, you are an open book to allow God (and others) to test your character and actions and work through you. *Yada'* helps make sense of this! Loving the light, loving Jesus, means being open and allowing others and God to experience your character.

It is no wonder Jesus could say in John 8:31-32, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. *Then* you will know (*ginosko*) the truth, and the truth will set you free". It is experiential knowledge that is spoken of here. Truth is to be experienced. Jesus is the truth and Jesus is to be experienced. Experiencing this truth will set one free. Holding to Jesus' teachings is the first step. It is a way of loving him! It is a way of having an interpersonal experiential relationship with God. Holding to his teachings makes you his disciple and this actively engages you in *yada'*!

Yada' helps me understand that loving God means obeying him. He indeed knows (*yada'*) us relationally when he is loved. He experiences our character when we love him. I Jn. 5:3 states, "This is love for God: to obey his commands". Love is connected with actions and heart and one's being. Mark 12:28-31 states,

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. *Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*' The second is this: '*Love your neighbor as yourself.*' There is no commandment greater than these.

The love God wants is not intellectual ascent but love that comes from all your heart, all your soul (person), all your mind, and all your strength. In other words, the love God wants to experience from us involves our whole being (including our body and its actions). To love someone else will also mean *that your heart, mind, soul, and body is involved just as when a person loves himself.* Loving someone is the act of allowing them to know you. Receiving love from them is an act of you experiencing or knowing them.

Are you engaged in *yada'*? Is God knowing you? Are you knowing God? What will God say to you on that judgment day? Will he say "I never knew you" or "I don't know you" or will he say "Well done, good and faithful servant! . . . Come and share your master's happiness!"? Are you letting God experience the real you? Are you allowing yourself to experience the real God?

Brothers and Sisters, this is, I believe, the greatest blessing I experienced as a result of those in our movement who disciplined me and studied with me. It helped me to know God and God me. It helped me to become a true disciple, a true son of God. It helped God to become my true father. I owe them my life. I owe God my life. I hope you have also experienced this blessing, this salvation. Let us never give up *yada'*!