

The Natural Realm 02
Miracles and Spiritual Gifts
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Understanding Miracles and Spiritual Gifts

Last week I shared some things having to do with the natural realm. Specifically, I shared some things about God's relationship to the earth and to us in the earth. What I want to do this morning is review a little bit of what we said last time and I want to continue along the same lines, eventually dealing with the purpose and function of miracles and spiritual gifts.

When a person begins to see, by the spirit, the reality of the cross a lot of things begin to change in their heart. That is an understatement. The cross changes in our understanding from a historical event to a present and eternal reality. The cross was once a theological fact upon which we built our beliefs. But as you begin to see this cross by the illumination of the Holy Spirit, it becomes an immovable division that you have to reckon with in your heart. And from that moment on, everything that God begins to show you, he shows you with respect to this division. He shows you every thing that he sees according to its relationship to the cross.

I'm already on a rabbit trail... but it's an important one. The cross is how God sees everything. I was sharing about this on Wednesday night. And my heart got caught up into a view of this that pretty much took over the entire teaching. Just as I was saying what I just said, that the cross is how God sees everything, that statement came into clear view in my heart and it was hard for me to move on. The cross is how God sees everything, how God relates to everything, how God understands everything.

That may sound strange, but it is true. If you have a question about anything...if you have a question about how God sees something, or about God's understanding, a question about anything spiritual, or natural, a question about anything God is doing or has done, your going to find the answer in a greater view of the cross. The cross is God's understanding of you. The cross is God's understanding of life, death, truth, lie, purpose, failure, etc. The cross is what God has done and how God sees what he has done. And everything that God teaches the human soul stands securely on the reality of the cross. You could say it even stronger than that. Every thing that the Lord teaches the human soul is always and forever an increased realization of the cross – of Christ and Him crucified.

For this reason, Paul told the Corinthians that he determined to know absolutely nothing except Christ and Him crucified. Paul understood something. Paul understood that in knowing Christ and Him crucified, we know as God knows. We see as God sees.

In seeing the cross we begin to understand what is and what isn't. What is of God, what is not. What is truth and what is the lie. What is light and what is darkness. What is Christ and what is Adam. What is real and what is empty. What is alive and what is dead. In seeing the cross we see what God sees, and we recognize what God no longer sees. We begin to share his view of this great division. And that has a great affect us. That has the effect in our hearts of understanding what God has put away in what God has established.

And the reason I'm talking about that this morning, is that seeing the cross dramatically effects what we understand God to be doing and not doing in the earth. Seeing the cross dramatically effects what we understand God to be involved in, not involved in, guiding, not guiding, helping with, not helping with.

When you see the cross, you see what God has done, and you see that God is only doing things in the earth that have the effect in our hearts of showing us, or pointing us, to what God has done.

So we talked last week about the nature of God's relationship to the earth. God has ceased his relationship to natural things, to the old man, and the old covenant. That relationship has stopped. God is no longer directing natural things for any natural reasons. There was a time when God gave specific commands to Israel regarding physical sacrifices, natural places, where and how they worship, who they married, where they lived, what they touched, what they didn't touch, etc. those days are over. God related to the natural realm in that way because of the old covenant that was the physical shadow of what we have come to in Christ.

Now all of what was once the physical and natural, what was once type and shadow, has become spirit and truth. What does that mean? That means for you and I who are in Christ, our relationship with God is concerned with one thing and one thing alone. Not if we go somewhere on Sunday's. Not what we do in our career. Not how much we tithe. Not who we marry or where we live. Our relationship with God has to do with the realm and reality of spirit and truth. **Every thing that is substantial to God is not natural. Relating to God, pleasing God, serving God, loving God, every aspect of spiritual life and growth has to do with our souls experience of, conformity to, and glorification of the living son of God who is our life.**

We have great misunderstandings about this in the church. And we still, like the Jews that Paul argued with, **try to find so much spiritual relevance in our favorite natural things.** We want all of our favorite natural things to have spiritual relevance because that justifies our heart's preoccupation with them. That justifies the way that we live in and for the earth.

So we talked about these things last time. And then I mentioned something that I've come to see is a common fleshly response to a spiritual realization. We see the cross, we see the great division, we understand something of what Paul means when he says that he was crucified to the world, and then we jump from there into assuming that God is therefore not involved in any natural decisions, directions, choices, etc.. But that is not true. That is not true because **there is something in the earth that is not of the earth. There is something in the earth that is purely spiritual and that has been joined eternally to God's son.**

And we mentioned that while God is not involved and invested in natural things for natural reasons, He is still a very involved with any decisions, choices, issues, that have to do with the growth of his body, the church, into the fullness of his son. **God is invested in the earth, but God's investments in the earth are not earthly. God will direct natural decisions that have to do with place and time, but God's directions are always towards spiritual reality.**

Let me say something that is Scripturally obvious, but probably doesn't enter our minds very often. **God is dealing in the earth exclusively with the body of Christ. God has no other business with the earth outside of His church.** He has no other relationship with the earth except as the body of His Son. And he is dealing with the body of Christ according to the finished work of the cross and towards our growing up in Christ. Unto the fullness of the measure of the stature of Christ.

I challenge you to find one Scripture in the New Testament that relates God's activity to anything outside of his church. The only exception to this, which really isn't an exception, is the way that He draws and invites the calls the unbelieving world to become a part of the body of Christ where He can have relationship with them. So God will touch the world outside of His church to draw the world to His Son. But still his dealing in earth is with and for the body of Christ.

So, will God direct you away from a particular career choice because it might involve an eventual pay cut? I doubt it. But God might direct you away from a career if it will have any effect on your relationship to, or experience of, the body of Christ. Will God help you pick out a spouse that is a great cook? Good luck with that. But, if we are willing to hear it, God might have something to say about our relationships in the flesh that are not conducive to true fellowship in the Spirit. I think you get the picture.

What I'm trying to say is that God's old covenant relationship to natural things and natural shadows has ceased because all of those pictures have become realized in spirit and truth. God is not our tour guide through the natural realm. He's not handing out detailed instructions for earthly living or making Himself available to you as a financial advisor. The new covenant is a relationship that God has with a people in His Son. The new covenant is purely spiritual. It involves the earth only because we have this treasure in earthen vessels. But this relationship that we have with God in Christ is purely heavenly.

The gate, the door into the heavens is the church. I mean, the door is obviously Christ Himself, but that door is on the earth, the door is in the church. **And what becomes part of the church in the earth becomes part of the relationship with God in the heavens. And what refuses to be joined to the church in the earth is shut out from God in the heavens.** The heavens has relationship with only one Man, and those who live in and by Him.

This is not any different than what Jesus says in Matthew 16. Do you remember the story of where Peter says, "you are the Christ, the son of the living God!" Jesus says to Peter, "flesh and blood has not revealed that to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And upon this rock I will build my church". And then he continues and says, "and to you I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven."

Do you see what He means? The church is the house of heaven. Bethel. The church is where men and women from the earth enter into a purely heavenly relationship. Jesus says, "Peter, I'm giving you the keys to heaven." Not as a Pope! He's not talking about man's leadership. He's not even talking about Peter as an individual. He's talking about the church. The church holds the keys. The church is where access is gained to the heavens, and that which is joined to the church is bound to God in the heavens. And that which refuses this door, these keys, is loosed from the heavens, without relation to God.

The church is not earthly, but the church stands on the earth as the door to the heavens. And God's relationship with the earth is through the church. God's relationship with humanity in this covenant is a purely heavenly thing. And we have to understand the implications of this.

And while we're on this subject today, I thought it might be a good opportunity to share some thoughts about spiritual gifts and miracles. Maybe some of you are wondering what the two have to do with each other. But in my mind, what we've been talking about here with respect to the natural realm is the perfect foundation for understanding what I believe is the function and purpose of miracles and spiritual gifts. And I'd like to share a few things about that from 1 Corinthians 13.

The church today is head over heels in love with spiritual gifts. And the reason that we are head over heels in love with spiritual gifts is generally because we are head over heels in love with the natural realm. And the reason that we are head over heels in love with the natural realm, is because we are head over heels in love with ourselves. The natural realm is the realm in which Adam finds his gain. We don't care much about the gain that the Scripture declares to be spiritual and eternal in Christ. That is too often a foreign and abstract realm to our hearts. We care much more about the gain that God can give in our personal circumstances situations and struggles. Most people would rather see a passing physical sign or wonder in the earth much more than they would desire to see an eternal reality that the cross has accomplished in the heavens.

Generally speaking, we love signs and wonders because we love the realm in which they operate and the man that benefits from them. That is why most of the crowds followed Jesus. They certainly didn't follow Him because they liked His teachings about the judgment of the cross.

We love miracles for the same reason that we love movies -- the temporary thrill to the human soul. We love spiritual gifts, not generally because of how a are meant to function in the Lord's body, but because of the power that works in us, the attention and praise that they afford us, the thrill of the supernatural, the illusion of personal spiritual greatness. I am not saying these things as one who does not believe in spiritual gifts. I'm saying these things as one who believes in, and has experienced, nearly every spiritual gift.

I'm not saying any of this because I don't believe in spiritual gifts and miracles. I'm saying it because I do believe in them. I believe that they exist, that they are given by the Lord. But I believe that they are given by the Lord with purpose. They are given with a particular function...**and we are often far too enamored with them to understand their function. We are too excited about what they accomplish in the earth to turn to see where they are pointing us in the**

heavens. And for this reason, I believe that we often misunderstand what they are and what they are for.

So I want to spend the rest of our time this morning looking at what Paul says about spiritual gifts in first Corinthians 13. To understand spiritual gifts, or anything spiritual for that matter, we always have to keep in mind God's ultimate intention. What is God doing? God is glorifying himself through the impartation and increase of Christ in your soul. We become participants in his glorification by becoming partakers of his life, his nature, his person, his increase. And that relationship, and that reality, and that nature is called love. The nature and reality of Christ is perfected in you in what Paul calls love.

And I'm just going to have to leave that alone this morning. I won't get anything said about spiritual gifts if I start trying to share my thoughts about love. I would like to do that sometime soon. This past Friday we spoke about love at one of our groups and I thought it was an outstanding conversation. But for right now let me just say that first Corinthians 13 compares the "tastes" of Christ experienced through spiritual gifts to the substance of Christ experienced in love. That is what this chapter is about. If you'll recall, the previous chapter ended by saying, "desire spiritual gifts, and yet I will show you a more excellent way".

So what we have in first Corinthians chapter 13 is Paul doing exactly that. He is comparing spiritual gifts to what he calls a more excellent way. What is that more excellent way? It is the reality of love. And he describes love in several verses. Love never fails, it never fall short. There is no self gain in love, because there is no self in love. Love is always the fullness of him. It is the full experience and expression of Christ's relationship with His Father.

Spiritual gifts, however, are only shadows of him. They are like tastes of spiritual reality that break into the natural realm. They are like small slices of Jesus touching the natural -- testifying, demonstrating, declaring. But as Paul says, they are "in part". They are not the fullness. Love is the fullness. They are not substance. Christ is the substance.

When God allows people to function in spiritual gifts, and to experience spiritual gifts, he is allowing them to experience a taste of something spiritual and eternal and Christ in the natural realm. Its like taking a little sliver of the wisdom that is Christ and touching somebody's circumstance with it. Its like taking a little slice of the knowledge of Christ and speaking it over somebody in a word of knowledge. Its like ministering a quick touch of his life to somebody in the form of a physical healing. These are all "in part". These are all little tastes, little touches of Christ. But they are not the substance, they are not the fullness.

These gifts are certainly from God (whenever man isn't faking them were conjuring them up through hype.) But though they are from God they are natural invitations into spiritual and eternal substance. They are not an end in themselves, they are the invitation. They are an opened door through which someone can look if they want to see God's fullness.

These "tastes" of God in the form of spiritual gifts and miracles function primarily for new Christians and unbelievers to assure them of God's reality and truth and love. They do not actually teach us God's reality and truth and love. But they allow young Christians with very unrenewed minds, minds that have only known the natural

realm, hearts that have only loved physical things, to realize that God is real in a way that they cannot deny. **God approaches their heart in the realm that they understand in order to lead their heart into a realm that He must reveal.**

In order for anybody to actually learn God's truth, reality, love, life, the son of God himself who is God's truth, love, life must be revealed in them. In order to grow up as a Christian the substance and the fullness of Christ himself must of course become far more real to us than the tastes in the natural realm. But again, God in his wisdom and kindness provided a way that natural minds can be introduced to spiritual realities. But in the natural, man can only taste the Lord in part.

If you look to the Ministry of Jesus Christ on the earth or to the Ministry of Paul the apostle you can see that spiritual gifts operated with the intention of turning heads so that hearts would hopefully follow. Jesus said things like, if you don't believe the word that I speak to you, at least believe because of the works. Or, this wicked and perverse generation always demands a sign. **Jesus did not come to do miracles. Jesus did miracles to announce that he had come.**

And so in first Corinthians 13, Paul tells us that these gifts function "in part" until "that which is perfect is come". The "perfect" here is not the second coming of Christ. It is not the completed Bible as others say. The perfect that Paul mentions here is the substance that replaces the shadow. It is the fullness that takes the place of the part.

So in the absence of him who is wisdom, I might need a word of wisdom from the body. In the absence of the faith of the son of God reigning in my soul, I might need a spiritual gift of faith. In the absence of the full knowledge of God that grows in us through the revealing of Christ, someone can share a word of knowledge with me. When I do not know the power of his resurrected life, I may be convinced that there is such a thing by witnessing the physical healing.

All of this is fine and real, but it doesn't actually transform the soul. It is a real taste of God but it does not conform us to the image of Christ. It is a real "part" of what Christ is, and yet in the coming of fullness I look less and less to find Jesus in these parts. Again, the fullness is love. **And I think we have all seen that it is possible for Christians to walk in these giftings and still know nothing of this love. In fact that is how Paul starts this chapter.** "If I speak in the tongues of men and angels and have not love..."

So we are not denying the reality of these gifts and miracles in any way. We are simply trying to understand their function. Many people in the charismatic or Pentecostal Church act like these gifts are for the spiritually mature. But I believe it is quite the opposite. These gifts exist by the kindness of God for those who are not mature, but rather need some form of spiritual reality brought down to their level, the natural level. God is willing to do this. We see this willingness in the Ministry of Jesus, and in the miracles of the book of acts. We see this willingness even today in the church through healings and revivals and things of that nature. But God's desire is never that we stay with the part, or fall in love with the tastes in the natural realm. God's desire is that we grow up like Paul did.

This is why Paul says in first Corinthians 13 "when I was a child I thought like a child, reason like a child, etc.... but when I became a man I put childish things away." Childish things are not fake. Childish things are not of the devil. They are simply

not the things that make for maturity. For example, why would you who are coming to be rooted and grounded in the love of God need a prophetic word for me telling you that God loves you?

And so in the remainder of this passage Paul likens these "childish things" to "seeing dimly as in a mirror". And then he likens "the perfect coming" to "seeing face to face". Do you see what he's saying here? This is not different than second Corinthians chapter 4 where Paul says that we are seeing Christ face to face when his light shines in our heart. We are putting off the dim view of him seen only through tastes of spiritual reality in natural experiences and gifts. And we are putting on a clear view of him as we see him face-to-face, revealed in us by his father.

Notice the verb tense in verse 11 -- "when I **became** a man". Paul is speaking at this time as one who had put off childish things. That doesn't mean that he ever stopped ministering spiritual gifts. But it does mean that his relationship with the Lord had progressed from the shadow to substance. His experience of Christ had come from the part to the fullness. There was a day in Paul's history where God knocked him down with a blinding natural light. That day God got Paul's attention. But that was not the day that Paul's soul was conformed to the image of Christ. Even though that experience was dramatic in the natural realm it was not nearly as dramatic for Paul's soul as when the fullness began to put away the part.

Let me just close by mentioning a couple matters of unhelpful translation. In verse 10 of first into 13 the word that is usually translated "when" (as in "when that which is perfect is come") is NOT the Greek word "when" but rather the word "whenever", or "as often as". It is strong number 3752 if you want to look at up. My point is simply that "the perfect coming" is a process. Inasmuch as, or to the measure that, the perfect has come (Christ, the substance, not the shadow) to THAT measure, we have put off the shadow, the dim view, the dark glass, the part.

The word "when" makes it sound like we're dealing with an event in time or an event after the death of the body, or something like that. But it is a progressive inward encounter with the substance of our salvation, the fullness of our salvation, that grows us up from the child to a man.

One more thing. The word "now" in verse 12 ("now we see in part") should not be translated "now", but rather "still yet we see". The Greek word for now is *nun* and it is the word you find in verse 13 (*now* these three remain, faith, hope, and love). The Greek word that is mentioned in verse 12 ("now we see in part") is Strong's number 737, which you can look up if you want to. It means "just now, even now, presently".

So it doesn't mean that "now", as in "while we live on the earth" we can only hope to see dimly. It actually is saying just the opposite. Its saying "just now, at present, still yet" we see dimly....but the perfect is being revealed and putting away the shadow.