David M. Choi

Perception

Calvary Baptist Church of New Haven

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**Scripture Reading:**

Ephesians 1:15-23

**Introduction:**

Well we are in the midst of a new sermon series on the book of Ephesians, where we’re looking at what it means for us to live in a manner worthy of Jesus Christ. I started us off a few weeks ago with the first half of the opening chapter. There we saw that we are given new meaning and real purpose in Christ as our lives begin to revolve less around us and more around God.

Today we’ll be focusing on the latter half of the opening chapter, while paying special attention to vv.17-18, in order to hear what Paul now has to say about the topic of spiritual *perception*. In other words, the question we are dealing with here is this: how do we see and know what is real?

The title of my message is “Perception,” because here we are not simply dealing with sight apart from knowledge, nor knowledge apart from sight, but rather the close link between the two. And as we’ll see, for Paul, perception is about *having a living-gospel awareness for the way things really are*. So, in the time we have together, I want to talk about what he means by this and how this comes about.

**Born In Darkness:**

At the beginning of book seven in Plato’s *Republic*, there is what’s called the allegory of the cave. Plato gives us this illustration primarily to demonstrate the effects of education on human nature, or a lack thereof. And it goes like this.

There are human beings imprisoned in a cave far beneath the earth. These humans have always lived there, never having visited the outside world. They can’t in part because they don’t know there is an outside world to begin with; the other reason is because they’re tightly shackled to one of the walls inside the cave. Because natural light doesn’t make its way inside, the cave is very dark. The only light source they have is the fire behind them. And all they’re able to see are the shadows cast on the wall in front of them, shadows produced by various objects (like plants and animals) that make their way past the fire. Not knowing they’re mere shadows, however, they assume that these shadows are the real things. The story ends when one person somehow frees himself, and climbs up out of the cave. For the first time, he sees the sun, and by it the objects themselves, which he only knew previously by their shadows.

According to Plato, we are like the shackled cave-dwellers, building realities out of shadows and phantoms, if we remain in ignorance and simply take as true what our culture hands to us. However, he thinks we can become free once we enlighten our minds through education and philosophy.

Now Paul, along with the rest of scripture, seems to be confirming something similar, namely, that we are initially born in darkness, unable to see what’s real. Like the imprisoned cave-dwellers, we see things in the form of shadows, and taking them to be true we construct realities out of them. But whereas Plato thinks we can escape this darkness by mere intellectual enlightenment and ascent, Paul says there needs to take place *in our hearts* a *spiritual* enlightenment, because the actual darkness we’re born into is not primarily one of ignorance but one of sin. As the Psalmist writes in Psalm 51:5, “Behold, I was brought forth *in iniquity*, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

James K.A. Smith notes that we moderns, like Plato, have a tendency to think of our brains as our greatest and highest faculty, when in reality it is our hearts that make us who we are.[[1]](#footnote-1) Tim Keller says we can see this in the Old Testament, in the way it talks about our hearts as the *seat* of our minds, as well as our wills and our emotions.[[2]](#footnote-2) And so, if we fail to see this, we will fail to see how our hearts are actually controlling and shaping our thoughts and our perceptions.

So what does this mean? It means if your heart is not formed properly, nothing else will be formed properly either. If your heart remains unenlightened, the whole construct of your reality will also remain unenlightened. It will be based on nothing but shadows. And the apostle Paul gets this, which is why, for him, perception is not merely a brain – or intellectual – issue, but more fundamentally a heart issue. This helps to explain why so many of us can know a lot of things about the bible while not actually having our worldviews, or our perceptions, changed by it, because our hearts themselves have not been transformed and enlightened.

So how can we then accomplish this? It says by receiving a new kind of wisdom. To be sure, not the wisdom of secular philosophy and human education, but rather the wisdom that comes from the Spirit of Christ, who we receive through prayer. Indeed, it is no mere accident that here Paul is praying a prayer, rather than speaking a simple declarative statement. That is, Paul is not *telling* his audience that they have the Spirit of wisdom; he is *praying* that they might have it, because he knows the Spirit of wisdom is not something Christians possess as their own. It’s something they have to seek from God, again and again, because that Spirit of wisdom *is* God, who is wholly other.[[3]](#footnote-3) (This is why at our prayer meetings, we *ask* God for wisdom.)

As we see in v.15, however, Paul is not saying that we have to ask God for wisdom because we somehow lack faith. No, in fact, it’s precisely the opposite. The only reason why we can go to God in prayer is because of the faith he has given to us. And so, it’s *because* of faith we can turn to God, and with open hands ask him for wisdom. And when we pray for the Spirit of wisdom, what we’re really doing is we’re asking God to speak into our hearts *that which is true* and to uncover our eyes to see *that which is real*. So, Paul is admonishing us to follow his example in this, to begin on our knees in prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to shine its light into the sinful darkness of our hearts, so that we might see and know what we would not be able to see and know otherwise.

**Enlightened Hearts:**

And what exactly is that? We find the answer in the following verses: *having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might*.

Here Paul isn’t really saying anything new. He is merely summarizing and pointing our attention back to the opening doxology of vv.3-14. And what these verses are really doing is they are witnessing to the reality of God that is revealed to us in Jesus Christ. That it is, moreover, not a reality among other realities, but *the* reality, since it is the only one that isn’t based on phantoms and shadows.[[4]](#footnote-4) As we saw, for Paul, this reality has been revealed to us through faith, but it is through faith we must now live into the mystery of this reality.

Just as Paul’s beginning prayer is no mere accident, so, too, this gospel summary repetition is no mere accident. Paul’s repetition serves to indicate that seeing the world through Christ is something we have to grow in, that is, it doesn’t happen all at once overnight.

One of my favorite movies is The Matrix. Early in the movie, Morpheus has a dialogue with Neo, who he’s about to free, or unplug, from the matrix. When Neo asks Morpheus what the matrix is, Morpheus gives a chilling answer: “The Matrix is everywhere. It is all around us… You can see it when you look out your window, or when you turn on your television. You can feel it when you go to work, when you go to church, when you pay your taxes. It is the world that has been pulled over your eyes to blind you from the truth.” Neo asks, “What truth?” “That you are a slave, Neo, like everyone else you were born into bondage, born into a prison that you cannot smell or taste or touch.” Once Neo is brought into the real world we find him passed out, lying on a metal table. He wakes up a bit, and seeing Morpheus standing over him he ask why his eyes hurt. Morpheus responds, “You’ve never used them before.”

Similarly, the world of sin is like the matrix, blinding us from what’s real. Faith brings us out of that, yet because we’ve lived in darkness for so long our eyes have atrophied – we’ve never used them before. Thus, our eyes have to adjust and get used to the light, in order to see things with greater precision and clarity. Nonetheless, faith does not mean we thereby completely escape all darkness. We walk through life in partial darkness until the Lord returns. In 1 Corinthians 13:21, Paul attests to this: “Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I now know is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Our eyes are constantly adjusting to the light, but because darkness remains we see things only in part.

To be clear, sin does not dictate the ultimate limits of our perception. It is God and God alone who gives and takes away understanding. It is God who gives sight to the blind, like with Bartimaeus, and it is God who takes it away, like with Saul on his way to Damascus. “Who has made man’s mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?”[[6]](#footnote-6) And so, while we momentarily see things in part, sin does not determine our ultimate perception of reality (thanks be to God!), but rather the Spirit of Christ who will shed light within our dark hearts to expand our vision and heighten our awareness of God’s reality within the world.

**Deeper Into Things:**

In v.20, Paul adds that that same Spirit at work within you, gradually enlightening the eyes of your heart over time, is the same Spirit that raised Jesus Christ from the dead and seated him at the Father’s right hand. We see there is a turn happening here. The Spirit who reveals to us the hope of the gospel now lifts our gaze to the place wherein our hope lies. It is the eternal reality beyond our grasp and comprehension. It is the Lordship of Jesus Christ, who is *far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come*.

What Paul is doing is he is directing our attention to the power of God, but also to the reality of that power now being worked out in the world as well, because the world has now been claimed and conquered by Christ through his death and resurrection.[[7]](#footnote-7) In the gospel, we see that God’s grace is never contingent upon human circumstances. So, though we might not always see it, we know there is always more happening beneath the surface. It is the Spirit of wisdom who grants our minds the ability to penetrate the surface, to see into the depths of what God is now doing in the world and in creation, that is, to see his invisible grace at work among us. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it:

The person is wise who sees reality as it is, who sees into the depth of things. Only that person is wise who sees reality in God. Knowledge of reality is not just knowing external events, but seeing into the *essence of things*. The best-informed person is not the most intelligent. Precisely the best-informed people are in danger of missing the essential amid the variety… Wisdom is recognizing the *significant* within the factual.”[[8]](#footnote-8)

This is why we are able to see hope when all seems hopeless; light when all seems dark; and beauty when all seems to be lost in ruins. Moreover, this is why we are able to extend forgiveness to those who have wronged us; love to those who vehemently hate us; and comfort and peace to those who are broken and suffering.

In this, we see that the Spirit not only expands our vision of what’s out there, but also enables us to see deeper into the essence of things. The Spirit takes us beneath the surface to see reality in light of who God is and what he is now doing within creation. And because God does most of his work beneath the surface, we as Christians must be attune to this if we are to be faithful. Which, again, is why we need supernatural wisdom and God’s revelation in Christ. But how can we trust that God will do this? We can trust that God will do this from what he says in Amos 3:7, “The Lord God does nothing without revealing his [plan] to his servants and prophets.”

Who does God reveal his plan to now? It is his church. *God put all things under Christ’s feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all*. It is by our worship, fellowship, communal disciplines and practices, that God reveals to his church what he is doing in us and in the world. For this reason, we cannot receive this wisdom apart from what God is doing in the church. For instance, because we are finite, God expands our vision through others, to see things in new and exciting ways; because we are sinners, God corrects and realigns our perception through others; because we are ignorant, God helps us to see into the deeper significance of things through others, through their life and testimony.

In short, what God is doing within the church is he is giving, restoring, expanding, and deepening our perceptions, to see what is really real for the sake of faithful obedience.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**Application:**

To help us have a better grasp of what’s at stake, I’ll close with this example. Along with some of the older folks in this room, I am working through a book, called *The Emotionally Healthy Church* by a guy named Peter Scazzero, a pastor in Queens, New York.

In the opening introduction, Scazzero talks about a trip he took with his family to the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. He talks about how he got sicker and sicker over the course of the trip. What started with light aches and pain, soon became violent coughs, which then turned into him coughing up blood and phlegm. Seeking help, a medical doctor onsite diagnosed his condition as pneumonia. However, a native of the area, whom he encountered later, knew right away that it wasn’t pneumonia but rather High Altitude Pulmonary Edema, which is a severe form of altitude sickness. Given the right diagnoses, he was quickly rushed to the hospital, and properly treated for his condition.

Scazzero almost died because of a misdiagnoses. Though the physician’s diagnoses dealt with his symptoms, the doctor didn’t take into account the full reality of his condition, only a superficial one at best. Yet the nonmedical native was able to give the right diagnoses, not because of her medical expertise per se, but because she took the reality of their setting into account, which allowed her to understand the underlying causes of his symptoms.[[10]](#footnote-10)

We see that physicians put their patients’ lives in jeopardy when they don’t work within the context of their symptoms. So, too, Christians put their souls, not to mention the souls of others, on the line when they don’t take into account the full reality of God and his action within the world.

**Conclusion:**

For this reason, we ask God to open up to us the living reality of the gospel, and to enlighten our hearts so that we would truly understand it. We ask God to renew our hearts and minds, to see and know the world in the way that he does. And we ask God to give us greater awareness into what he’s doing beneath the surface, so that we as Christians would be attune and sensitive to the Spirit’s promptings and the needs others. May we ask God for the gift of perception as we continue to humble ourselves before the Lordship of Jesus Christ, who fills all in all.

**Benediction:**

Go now in the strong name of the Godhead, three-in-one. Go in the name of God the Father, who does not abandon you to darkness but sends forth light, go in the name of his Son Jesus Christ, who came, lived, died and rose again for you, who is light, revelation, and the hope of glory. Go in the name of God the Holy Spirit, who goes with you, who enables you to perceive the imperceptible for the sake of greater obedience, who opens your eyes to see more of Christ, who opens your heart to receive his love, who opens your hands so that you can embody him to a hurting and broken world. Go in the name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Go in peace.

1. James K.A. Smith, *You Are What You Love* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2016), 1-5. Smith puts it in terms of our “loves”. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Tim Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking Publishers, 2015), 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2017), 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. From the New Living Translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Exodus 4:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Barth, Ephesians, 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 29-30. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Keith L. Johnson, *Theology as Discipleship* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2015), 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Peter Scazzero*, *The Emotionally Healthy Church,* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 13-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)