

1 Corinthians 3:1-11 – “Combatting Carnality”

In the first couple of chapters Paul has been talking about 2 types of people: The *natural man* and the *spiritual man*.

- The **natural man** is the unsaved person. Paul referenced him in **1 Cor 2:14**, *“But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.”* (meaning they don’t grasp these truths of God) He’s not been born again, he’s living for sensuality, he’s governed by the sin nature. The natural man has no inkling towards the things of the Spirit. That’s why you can make the greatest case for Christ to the natural man yet they can just look at you with a blank stare as though you’ve been trying to describe the law of physics to a 3 year old.
 - “The colorful Vance Havner advises: The wise Christian wastes no time trying to explain God’s program to unregenerate men; it would be casting pearls before swine. He might as well try to describe a sunset to a blind man or discuss nuclear physics with a monument in the city park. The natural man cannot receive such things. One might as well try to catch sunbeams with a fishhook as to lay hold of God’s revelation unassisted by the Holy Spirit. Unless one is born of the Spirit and taught by Him, all this is utterly foreign to him. Being a Ph. D. does not help, for in this realm it could mean ‘Phenomenal Dud!’”^{6 1}
- The **spiritual man** is the man who has been born again. Paul referenced him in **1 Cor 2:12**, *“Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.”* There’s been a transformation that has taken place: *“And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins” (Ephesians 2:1)*. The spiritual man is now understanding the things of God as the Spirit leads him and gives discernment.

But now in Chapter 3 we’re introduced to another man; a third man – the *carnal man*. This is actually a subgroup of the spiritual person; the believer. This is a person who has been saved, yet he is still grappling with and living to some extent, for the things of the flesh.

⁶ Vance Havner, further documentation unavailable.

¹ MacDonald, W. (1995). *Believer’s Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments* (A. Farstad, Ed.; p. 1753). Thomas Nelson.

- For those who are believers we're in the plane on our flight towards heaven. The spiritual man is the one who's taking his flight in first class. The carnal man is the one who's on that flight, yet he's flying in the cargo area. The natural man has yet to realize there's a plane to board.
- Everybody falls into one of two categories – natural or spiritual (unsaved or saved). But the saved also fall into one of two categories – immature or mature.

1. The Characteristics of the Carnal Christian – 3:1-4

3:1 - *And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ.*

Now some might say that the term carnal Christian is really an oxymoron. That a person that is truly saved isn't going to be carnal. But look at who Paul is addressing – **brethren**. These are believers. He also says they're **babes in Christ**. In other words, these people are in Christ, and they're in Christ because they are saved through Christ.

- It would be easier for me to just say if you're in the flesh then you're not saved. But I've come to know over my years that you just can't write somebody off. Right when I begin to think they're not a true Christian they do something that reveals how wrong I was and how big God's grace really is.
- And to be clear, when we speak of carnality, we're talking about those that allow the flesh to sway them and where the appetites of the natural man still win out over the things of the Spirit. But isn't this a struggle we can all have at times?
- Paul himself would say in **Romans 7:14–19**, *"For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. ¹⁵ For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. ¹⁶ If, then, I do what I will not to do, I agree with the law that it is good. ¹⁷ But now, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me. ¹⁸ For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. ¹⁹ For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice."*
- Now please don't try and use this to think that you can be a Christian and just live in the flesh all you want and feel you're ok.

- John would write in **1 John 3:6**, "*Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him.*"
- Again, some clarification is needed because we're all guilty of sin. What John has in mind is the individual who habitually sins and remains in that lifestyle that is absent of the Spirit. We should not be looking for ways to satisfy the flesh but to crucify the flesh and live in the Spirit.
- **Galatians 5:24**, "*And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*"

So, the carnal person is saved and has the Spirit in them. Everyone who puts their trust in Jesus has the Spirit in them. But we still struggle against the old nature, the fallen flesh. Though the carnal Christian has the Spirit in them they are not fully in the Spirit.

The Spirit is ***dwelling*** in them, but the Spirit is not ***defining*** them.

Paul says I couldn't ***speak to you as to spiritual people***. They wouldn't have grasped these things yet, it was over their heads. And Paul is a little surprised with this because he would have thought that they would have progressed already by this time, but they were still being immature and acting like babies.

- There is a time and season for that. There is something very cute and fun with having a new baby in the family. They captivate you and entertain you, but if after 5 years, 10 years, 20 years, they are still doing the things of a babe (crawling on the ground, eating with their hands, making a mess from both ends) it's not going to be so entertaining. That fun is going to lose a little of the magic.
- Sadly, this is the case for some Christians. They may not know it because their own fleshly fulfillment blinds them to their condition. But when you see a person who has been a Christian for a period of time still acting in a way where you wonder if there was ever a conversion experience – it's equal to seeing a 20 year old sitting in a high chair with more food on their face than in their mouths.

3:2 - *I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able;*

Milk is good. I love milk, especially in cereal. But I can't live off a steady diet of milk and cereal. I need more than that if I'm to be healthy.

- When Paul came to them in Corinth he gave them milk – the pure milk of the Word (1 Peter 2:1-3). It's where they were at. But he didn't expect them to remain there.
- It's wonderful to see a baby enjoying some milk and sucking on a bottle. A baby is not ready for solid food. I was enjoying some incredible pizza the other night while visiting my grandson. And I can't wait to share some pizza with him. But if I tried to shove some of that yummy barbecue chicken pizza in his mouth at 1 week old, it wouldn't have gone to well. There's a time for that. But if at 12, 16, 20 years old they're still refusing pizza and only drinking a bottle, you've got some problems!

Paul wanted to bring some solid food into their diet, something that would really grow them in their faith, but they weren't ready to receive it.

- **Hebrews 5:12–14**, *"For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. ¹³ For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. ¹⁴ But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."*

What's the difference between the milk of the Word and the solid food of the Word?

- Milk is learning the basic truths of who Jesus is and what He's done for us. But the solid food takes us beyond that and gives us understanding of what Jesus is now doing and how that should impact our lives today.
- John Courson said: "The baby Christian only knows, 'Jesus loves me, this I know.' But as great a truth as that is, he has not gone on to see who Jesus is presently and what's ahead prophetically."²

So may we be taking in a complete diet of God's Word that we might grow and mature and not be like a baby who's absolutely dependent on someone else.

So one indicator of a carnal Christian is their **diet**, or lack of a healthy diet. Another indicator of a carnal Christian is their **divisiveness**.

² Courson, J. (2003). *Jon Courson's Application Commentary* (p. 1028). Thomas Nelson.

3:3 - for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?

The congregation at Corinth were having a hard time getting along. What's at the center of this? Self. This was an immature view to have.

- It's not unlike a couple toddlers having playtime together. You could have a floor covered in toys, but guess what toy they're gonna want? The toy the other one has! And they're going to fight for that toy and eventually one is going to get hit over the head and it's not going to be fun.
- This was the church at Corinth. They were fighting, they were being envious of each other, and a lot of strife and division was occurring. It wasn't fun!

When you are living the carnal life – a life that is living for self, and the gratification of self, you will find yourself coming apart. These Corinthians could testify of that.

- Illustration: There was a church where the pastor and the worship leader were not getting along. As time went by this began to spill over into the worship service. The first week the pastor preached on commitment and how we all should dedicate ourselves to the service of God. The song leader led the song "I Shall not be Moved."

The second week the pastor preached on tithing and how we all should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The song leader led the song "Jesus Paid it All."

The third week the pastor preached on gossiping and how we should all watch our tongues. The song leader led the song "I Love to Tell the Story." With all this going on, the pastor became very disgusted over the situation and the following Sunday told the congregation that he was considering resigning. The song leader led the song "Oh Why Not Tonight?"

As it came to pass, the pastor did indeed resign. The next week he informed the church that it was Jesus who led him there and it was Jesus that was taking him away. The song leader led the song "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

So Paul says with all this divisiveness going on, they were **behaving like mere men**. He's referencing those who are of the world, the natural, unregenerated person.

In doing so, they were resembling the world more than they were the church.

- It's a very sad thing when the church is indistinguishable from the world. There should be a noticeable difference.

- These Corinthians however allowed their own selfish, envious desires to win out. It didn't need to be that way because God's given us of His Spirit, and it's His Spirit that brings about new life and power to live differently. They didn't need to let their flesh control them.
- In the same way we need to rely on the Lord Jesus to empower us to not gratify or fulfill the impulses of the flesh.
- **Romans 13:14**, *"But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts."*

3:4 - *For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal?*

Again, this is linking back to chapter 1 where Paul had to address the situation in the church at Corinth where party lines were being drawn and people were boasting in who they were following, and more so, boasting in themselves for feeling like they had made the right choice.

But Paul just flat out calls this behavior carnal, fleshly, worldly, and immature. This is the idea here.

- Paul was even willing to put down and possibly offend his own fan club! Could you imagine what that could do for someone's ego? But Paul was in the Spirit and living to glorify the Lord. And he saw that could only happen in a greater corporate way when people were walking in the Spirit rather than the flesh.

"When we don't grow, several things happen, all of which are bad. First, we lose sight of the real goal that Christ has for us, and that is to become spiritual persons. Then, we look a lot like people who are not Christians. Lostness and spiritual infancy look a lot alike. Finally, both the individual and the church suffer. Prolonged immaturity creates self-doubt, an extended dependence on leaders, and a bridge for sin in the life of the individual. It is only as we do grow that we are able to face adult problems, minister to others, and overcome temptations."³

2. The Truth About the Work of God – 3:5-11

3:5-6 - *Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.*

³ Chafin, K. L., & Ogilvie, L. J. (1985). *1, 2 Corinthians* (Vol. 30, p. 51). Thomas Nelson Inc.

Ministers is the Greek word *diakonos*, and it simply means “servant”. Paul and Apollos were nothing special, they were just servants of the One who is special. They’re serving God and carrying out His work. They brought the good news of Jesus, but it was the Lord that gave to each one (both in assigning the tasks to His servants, and in giving life to that which was planted).

Paul uses an analogy from agriculture. This was popular in this area and time of course. Jesus used these same illustrations, especially when sharing the parable of the soils. The soil was a condition of our hearts, and the seed was the Word of God.

Paul takes this same analogy and links it to the work he’s been partnering in with others. Planting a seed is important. And just as important is watering that seed. Each person played a significant and necessary role, but it’s God who actually created the life to come forth.

“What each of us is able to do in the church is an undeserved gift from the Lord’s hands. Bend the knee and give him thanks!” (Lenski, as quoted from Constable)

3:7 - *So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.*

Don’t be looking at yourself as someone so wonderful and special. Just because God may be using you does not mean that God needs you to accomplish His work. He gives the increase, He produces life – we can’t!!

So don’t look at yourself as something to be praised when we’re really just being a vessel for God to do His work through. He brings the fruit.

- Nobody should be elevating a minister over and above another. They are simply God’s vessel carrying out a specific task for God.
- When we become preoccupied with the servant, it opens things up for favorites, for parties, for divisions. When we’re occupied with the Master, we will be unified and operating as one.

3:8 - *Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.*

How are we one? Because we’re all working for the same goal and outcome, which is people coming to know Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

- You might do a different part or have a different role in that process, but we’re all working towards that same end = saved lives!

- Don't try to hijack someone else's work or think that their role is better. Every single one of us will be rewarded for what we have done in the name of Jesus!
- God sees all you do, even if it's not very glamorous, it's honoring to God and used by God. And He will bless you for it.

3:9-10 - *For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. ¹⁰ According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.*

Again, Paul and Apollos were nothing special, it didn't matter who you followed or aligned with, they were all just **God's fellow workers**. They're all just carrying out His work.

- What's exciting about this is that God actually brings us along to partner with Him. He could easily get the job done quicker and cleaner without us. But there's a sweetness of fellowship that happens as we carry out God's work. He's invited us in to much more than just being saved and waiting for heaven, He's invited us in to serve Him and be used by Him for His work.

The church at Corinth is also seen as a **field** by which the seed of the Word has been planted. He's made sure that seed will be watered, and that the seed can have optimal conditions for it to grow.

As a **building** – Paul moves from agriculture to architecture.

Paul now talks about the foundation of the building. He had come and put down the foundation in Corinth, and others had come and built upon it, but the key is the kind of foundation that is laid. The foundation was Jesus Christ.

- When Jesus Christ was talking to Peter up in Caesarea Philippi, He asked Him, *who do you say that I am?* To which Peter responded, *You are the Christ the Son of the living God.* And Jesus replied by saying, *on this rock I will build my church.*
- In other words, it was upon that confession that Jesus is indeed the Son of God. The foundation on which the church is built is upon Jesus Christ – that He is the Messiah, the Saviour, that He is God. It's not built upon Peter, Mary, or Rome, but upon Jesus.

- That's why we must **take heed how** [anyone] **builds on it**. There's no point adding things to it that are not of Christ. It won't mesh. We'll see that as we continue on through Chapter 3.

3:11 - *For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.*

Now there are lots of foundations that can be laid, but only one will stand the test of time. Only one will weather the storms of life. That's the foundation of Jesus Christ. This foundation will never let you down. What are you building your life upon?