1 Corinthians 3:1-7

“Can I be a Carnal Christian?”

I wanted to start off by showing this little diagram from CRU. Has anyone seen something like this? Well, you know me, I don’t usually show slides or pictures when I am preaching, but I thought it would be helpful to show this to you, and be a little bit “picturesque.” This tract you can call it shows three different types of people. One is the “natural man” or the unsaved person, the other the spiritual person or the “mature believer” and the other is the fleshly or “carnal” believer. They base this off of 1 Corinthians 3:1, part of our text today. Now if you would have shown this to me in the past, I probably would have agreed with this picture and have thought nothing wrong of it. But after more carefully thinking through what Paul really is saying, I have come to a different conclusion. And because there is confusion, debate, and difficulty over this topic of whether there is such a thing as a “carnal or worldly” Christian, and because there is difficulty in understanding what Paul means when he uses terms like the “natural” man, “spiritual man,” “fleshly” men, “infants,” “milk vs. solid food,” I want to slow the plane down for today and do a little bit of a deep dive into these terms, with our passage serving as the base and backdrop of our overall picture of the meaning of those terms. It’s important to know what these terms means as we go along this passage.

So let’s get into verse 1 of 1 Corinthians 3. “*And I, brothers, was not able to speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to fleshly men, as to infants in Christ*.” Notice first of all he calls them brothers…you don’t call unbelievers brothers, but when a Scriptural author calls his audience, “brothers,” or “brethren,” that means he is considering them as believers. And then he says he was not able to speak to them as to spiritual men, but as to fleshly men. The verb is in the past tense so this likely referring to when he was with them in Corinth in Acts 18 during his one and a half year stay there. Notice he says “as” to spiritual men and “as” to fleshy men. That little word is very important and it shows that because they were new to the faith, Paul didn’t speak to them as if they were matures believers, he spoke to them as if they were infants in Christ, struggling to figure out what it means to live by the Spirit, they were fleshly men, meaning not that they were unbelievers, but that their lives were struggling with their flesh in such a way that it was clear they weren’t mature believers who were walking in step with the Spirit. You may have heard someone describe a new believer as a “baby Christian,” it’s the same idea. They were “infants” in Christ, “infants” in their understanding of the Word of God, and “infants” in their ability to rightly apply the Word of God to their own lives in a way that was pleasing and holy in God’s sight.

That’s why verses 2 and 3 Paul says, “*I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are still not able, for you are still fleshly*…” What happens when you try to give steak to an infant with no teeth? They will choke. They don’t have the jaw power, or the teeth or the “swallowing” power I guess you can say to properly consume a hard piece of steak. No, you give infants what? Milk to drink. Milk isn’t bad here. Paul isn’t downplaying milk. But what is milk verses solid food? Well milk is God’s truth distilled down to its most basic and simple form. For example, take the atonement of Christ. Someone who is on the steady diet of the milk of God’s Word should be able to say that the atonement means that Christ died for my sins, which is true! But he won’t really be able to elaborate on it any further. But if you ask that same question to someone who is moved beyond milk to solid food, someone who has been walking with the Lord a good number of years, he might say, “well the atonement is Christ substituting Himself as the perfect and eternal sacrificial Lamb of God who died in my place to take the penalty I deserved to satisfy the wrath of God.” They might then speak about how in the atonement of Christ, God regenerates, transforms one of His chosen ones from the inside out by the power of the Holy Spirit so that He becomes a new creation and a new creature in Christ.”

That type of an answer comes only through time, experience, and study of God’s Word. Solid food is that type of doctrine and teaching that goes deeper into the same truth of its “milk form.” Both are good and true, but the person who eats solid food is able to mine and understand the depths of its truths. But because of that, he also is better able to apply those truths to his life when it comes to sanctification. Hebrews 5:13-14 describes that reality. Hebrews 5:13-14 says “*For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern both good and evil*.” But sadly, Paul says in verse 2 that they were not able to have solid food back then, and even now they still are not able. They weren’t ready for it. They essentially were the same from when Paul left them to when Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians, several years later…They were still “fleshly,” meaning they were still according to the flesh. Verse 3 continues on explaining what this “fleshly” behavior consisted of. “…*For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men*?” Jealousy was the root problem they had and because they were jealous of each other’s leaders, that created strife and division within the church. And that type of quarreling was no different than how unbelievers acted. They were acting in other words like “mere men,” or men that do not have the Holy Spirit living inside of them.

Verses 4-5 continues, “*For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not mere men? What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave to each one*.” We’re not your Lords or masters, we’re here to serve YOU!!! Verse 6 “*I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth*.” We each had a part to play but none of us have a monopoly on the entire process of salvation. It’s not Paul that planted, watered, and caused the growth. It’s not Apollos that planted, watered, and caused the growth. Verse 7 “*So then, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth*.” Wait, so the who plants is not anything either? Didn’t he start it? Nope, it was God who planted, watered, and caused the growth. God was just gracious enough to use us as vessels of his redemption, but He gets the glory because He causes the fruit to come, He causes the growth! As Dave Paine has put it, God has not only sovereignly ordained the ends, but he has sovereignly ordained the means to that end.” And because He has sovereignly ordained the means as well as the ends, He gets all the glory for every step of the process.

Now, going back to the subject of the “carnal Christian,” I hope you have seen that according to 1 Corinthians 3:1, that there is no such thing as a “carnal Christian” as Scripture recognizes it. Scripture recognizes the “natural man” which is an unbeliever, and the “Spiritual man” which is a mature believer, but not a “carnal Christian.” Rather what Paul is saying here is that these Corinthian believers were acting LIKE/AS IF they were unbelievers, LIKE/AS IF they were of the flesh, they were acting LIKE/AS IF they were people who did not have the Holy Spirit. Another word that appears in the New Testament often is “mature.” The Greek word is “teleios” which can be translated “perfect” or “mature” depending on the context. We have seen that used in Hebrews 5:14 where the author says that “*solid food is for the mature*...” You can replace that with Paul’s word “spiritual.” “Solid food is for the “spiritual,” or those who are filled and walk according to the Spirit and not the flesh. The “Spiritual” believer according to 1 Corinthians 2:15 is one who is able to examine all things, meaning he is able to examine his own life, other’s lives, and see where there is sin to be repented of and how they can live best for the glory of God. For example, Galatians 6:1 says “*Brothers, even if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are SPIRITUAL, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, each of you looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted*.” A “spiritual” or “mature” believer is able to discern sin either in his own life or in someone else’s and have the fortitude to confront that sin to help that believer be restored back to a right relationship with God. We know there were hardly any “spiritual” or “mature” believers in the church of Corinth because they were tolerating the sin and even being proud of a man who was having an immoral relationship with his stepmother. If there were any “spiritual” believers there, that man’s sin would have already been confronted.

It’s kind of funny in that early on in my Christian life, when I was still quite immature in my doctrine and practice compared to now, you can say when I was still for the most part on “milk,” I held to (what I think is now) the correct view that there was no such thing as a worldly or carnal Christian, but not for the right reasons. You see I thought that there was no such thing as a carnal Christian because I couldn’t possibly imagine that a believer could still willfully sin or sin egregiously. I had a perfectionistic and borderline legalistic outlook on Christian sanctification. But as the years went by walking with the Lord, and I went on to seminary, and as I experienced more of the reality of the church and of believers and saw that believers do and are capable of committing acts of sin that we might characterize as unbelievers, I changed my position to allow for the possibility of a Christian being a carnal or worldly Christian. My changed position was more in line with what I saw Scripture portraying the struggle and battle of the believer between the Spirit and their fleshly impulses.

But now, most recently, having more closely examined what 1 Corinthians 3, verse 1 really is saying, I have once again returned back to that former position I once had, but not for the reasons I originally had. I don’t believe there is a third category that Scripture recognizes of a “carnal believer” because believers never sin…they do sin and we sometimes sin really terribly! (think about King David!) But it’s because believers are no longer characterized by the flesh, they longer are enslaved to the flesh to obey its desires, it’s because their identity is a “Christian” a little Christ. Just as how you wouldn’t say I am a “murdering Christian,” a “lying Christian,” a “fornicating Christian,” an “idolatrous Christian,” or a “transgender/gay Christian,” you wouldn’t call yourself a “Carnal Christian.” You’re a “Christian, period.” You are saved once for all unto Him to live for Him and obey Him. You are no longer marked and defined by those sins, though you may struggle with the temptation to do those sins in your flesh. It’s important that we also think that way because the mind is a powerful thing, and if we convince ourselves enough that “I am probably a carnal Christian” “I am probably a carnal Christian,” we will get ourselves stuck in that mindset and make it even harder to get out of certain sinful patterns of life! So if you are struggling with a certain sin dear friend, remind yourself that you are not a “name the specific sin + Christian” but you are a “Christian,” a saint of God.

Now, today, I wouldn’t say there is such a thing as a “carnal Christian” because it can be misleading in that it implies it’s ok to be in full blown rebellion and sin against God while at the same time identifying and professing to be a believer. I think it does a disservice to people in the church by giving them a false security that they are truly in the faith when in reality they may not be in the faith. Now I get in part why people believe there is a third category of people in Scripture for “carnal believers,” because they want to avoid the other extreme of legalism and Christian perfection where they don’t want people to think that if you sin once or even sin really badly, you are going to lose your salvation or you are going to hell forever. There are plenty of legalists like that around that, trust me, we don’t need more of. So I get it. But I hope you see that my point is that that specific phrase or wording “carnal or worldly Christian” is just not helpful in our understanding of our sanctification. It only serves to confuse things rather than clarify things. Rather, I would argue that what’s more accurate or more helpful for us is to acknowledge and say that Christians are capable of sinning and do sin, sometimes terribly sins, but true Christians do not stay that way, because God will not allow them to stay that way. There might be periods in their life where a child of God is dry, dull, rebellious, sinful, or hard-hearted, but if God loves His child, and if God has saved His child, He will make sure to bring them back to righteous living. And the way God does that may not look pretty or nice, it may be very painful for that erring believer, but He will discipline that child back to Him if He loves and owns that child.

I mentioned before pre salvation and post salvation is like you in a car. Before the Holy Spirit came into your life and saved you, you were like a driver in a car whose gearstick was set only to Reverse. So when you accelerated with your foot, you could only go backwards into sin and unrighteousness. But when you were saved by Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit came into your life, the Spirit unlocked the gearstick from Reverse into the “Drive” position so that now when you accelerate, you could now drive forward unto the dawn of righteousness. You still have the capacity to go reverse, but now you can go forward. And now, not only are you in the car, the Holy Spirit is in the car with you, his hand over your hand as you switch to the “D” position, his foot over your foot, as your foot depresses on the accelerator.

Do Christians still sin? Yes. Do Christians still horribly sin? Yes. Can Christians remain in their sinful lifestyle on earth forever? No. Is there such thing as a “carnal or worldly Christian”? No. No for the same reason that there is no such thing as a “murdering Christian, lying Christian, fornicating Christian, and thieving Christian.” A Christian may have a tendency to get angry and have the temptation for it to develop into murderous thoughts. A Christian may have the temptation to lie. A Christian may have the temptation to lust in their hearts or tempted to steal something that catches his eye. No, the old man has gone. The new has come. No longer does the old man of sin dictate and order you around to where you have to obey him. Christ has set you free from him. He has crucified your old nature, with all its sinful passions at the cross and has now given you a new nature that longs to obey and please Jesus Christ. Does that describe you? Or are you still hiding comfortable behind that label of “carnal Christian” wanting to appear godly or saved, but still wanting to indulge in your pet sins? You can’t have one foot in the world and the other foot in Christ. You are either in Christ or out. You are either of the world or not of the world. Jesus said in Matthew 6:24 that *“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other.*” You can’t serve your sin and serve Christ at the same time. Which is your master? Is it your sin? Or is it the Lord Jesus Christ?

Benediction:

1 Thessalonians 5:23

***“****Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*