

The Spiritual Christian and Carnal Christian

1 Corinthians 3

1 Corinthians 3: *"And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. 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; 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? 4 For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal? 5 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. 7 So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. 8 Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. 9 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. 11 For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. 14 If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. 16 Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? 17 If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are. 18 Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their own craftiness"; 20 and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile." 21 Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours. 23 And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's."*

Background Notes

Just the casual reading of Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth is enough to make us aware that there were a number of problems in this 1st century church. The problem wasn't that they didn't have spiritual gifts, because in chapter 1 the apostle Paul wrote that the Corinthians did not lack in any of the spiritual gifts: "...you come short in no gift"(1:7). The cause of the problems in the church at Corinth wasn't that they lacked spiritual gifts. No. The main problem was that **they were not spiritual**. Having a lot of spiritual gifts does not make you spiritual!

Some Christians never seem to see this distinction. Spiritual gifts are received as part of the package of salvation, and they are developed with use. However, being **spiritual** requires walking in close fellowship with the Lord and obeying His Word. The believers in Corinth had spiritual gifts - but they were not spiritual.

At the end of 1 Corinthians 2, we saw the contrast between the spiritual man and the natural man. The natural man is the unbeliever. Unbelievers do not understand God's Word and God's ways. In fact, it is all foolishness to them.

In stark contrast to the natural man, the spiritual man is the mature believer. Mature believers are led and taught by the Holy Spirit. Mature believers understand the Word of God and the ways of God. Mature believers have the mind of Christ.

In chapter 3 Paul told the Corinthian believers in no uncertain terms that they were not in the “spiritual man” category. They were believers - they were not in the “natural man” category - but they were not **spiritual** believers. In fact, they were unspiritual and carnal (fleshly) and worldly. They didn’t properly understand the message of the cross, and they were putting too much emphasis on the wisdom and glory of this world. As a result, there was jealousy and strife among them, and there were divisions in the church.

Can the same problems exist in any church today? Yes, they sure can! And that leads us to our doctrinal points.

Doctrinal Points

1. A believer can decide to be either spiritual or carnal.

Believers cannot decide what spiritual gifts they will have, have because the Lord decides that. But believers *can* decide whether they will be spiritual or not. As a believer, you can decide whether or not you are going to know God’s Word and obey God’s Word. You can decide whether you are going to run your life by biblical standards and values, or by the world’s set of standards and values. You can decide whether you will be a spiritual believer, or a carnal and worldly believer.

The Corinthians chose **not** to be spiritual. God did not make them unspiritual; they **chose** to be unspiritual. As a result, Paul could only feed them the “milk” of the Word, not the “meat” of the Word. There’s nothing wrong with milk, but milk is the only thing that babies are able to eat, so Paul was indicating that the Corinthian believers were immature - baby Christians. Just as babies grow and mature and move on to eat solid food, so Christians should mature and move on to handle more than just the “milk” or basics of the Word of God.

Listen to the rebuke in Hebrews 5:11-14: *We have much to say about [Jesus Christ], but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

As believers we can be carnal or fleshly because we still have “the flesh,” or the sinful nature. Although we now have a new nature in Christ, we also have the sinful nature that we were born with. And we’ll have that sinful nature until we get our resurrected bodies, so that’s why we still sin, even though we’re Christians. When we don’t “walk after the Spirit,” but rather we “walk after the flesh,” we will be fleshly or carnal (see Galatians 5).

When believers “walk after the flesh” there will be jealousy and strife in the body of Christ, as there was in Corinth (v3). We will be sectarian. We’ll start factions and divisions in the church, as happened in the Corinthian church (v4-5). We will

be worldly in our thinking - self-seeking, seeking our own glory. We'll fail to see that we all are servants in God's garden (v6-8): *"I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor."*

In "God's garden," some believers plant the seeds, and some believers water the seedlings - but God causes the growth! We are all servants, and we have a variety of jobs in God's garden. At the judgment seat of Christ, we will be rewarded on the basis of our own labor - not on the basis of the limelight, or man's praise, but on the basis of our own labor. Verse 8: *"...each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor."*

Do you want to be rewarded at the judgment seat of Christ? It's your choice. A believer can decide to be either spiritual or carnal.

2. A believer can decide to build for either reward or loss.

Verses 10-17: *"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. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire. Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are."*

The building mentioned in these verses is not the Christian life. It is the **Church**. Many times this passage is applied to how we should build up our own personal lives in Christ, but *from the context* we see that the building mentioned here is the Church. In verse 16, the Greek word for "you" is plural. Believers together form the Church, which is the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The foundation of the Church is the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 11: *"For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ."*

There are three categories of builders in the Church. The first type is the worker who builds with gold, silver, and precious stone, materials that will withstand fire. This builder is the spiritually mature believer who builds for God's glory, and this builder will receive reward at the judgment seat of Christ.

The second type is the person who builds with wood and straw, materials that will not withstand fire. This builder is the carnal or fleshly believer who does not build for God's glory, but for self-glory and for selfish agendas. His work will go up in flames. This builder will not receive reward for work that will go up in flames. The fire here is not hell, or some kind of purgatory, but rather a testing fire.

Notice that the carnal or fleshly believer is saved, but it is as if he barely escaped from a burning house (v15). His life is saved, but he loses all his earthly possession. Verse 15, by the way, indirectly is a proof-text for the eternal security of the believer, isn't it? Even carnal Christians are saved - they do not lose their salvation.

The third category of worker is the destructive builder who deliberately works to destroy what God is doing by denying the truth and teaching what is false (v17). Although this worker appears to be “in the church” he is an unbeliever who only professes to be a servant. This worker is not a believer at all, but is in the “natural man” category.

Remember, this is an illustration of the Church as a building being constructed of different types of materials by different workers. The materials that can withstand the fire are the labors for God’s glory by the faithful believers. The materials that cannot withstand the test of fire are the works of carnal or fleshly believers.

As a true believer, what kind of builder are you? A believer can decide to build for either reward or loss.

Practical Application

Don’t deceive yourself.

Verses 18-23: “Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, “He catches the wise in their own craftiness”; and again, “The LORD knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile.” Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours. And you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.”

It’s possible for even Christians to be self-deceived (v18) because of the flesh, or the sinful nature. So be very careful! Don’t fall for the wisdom of this world, no matter how good it sounds. In verses 18 and 20, Paul quoted from Job 5:19 and Psalm 94:11 in support of this point.

And don’t deceive yourself by “glorying” in mere men - even the “Christian superstars”! Recognize that all are servants to help us in our Christian walk and growth. In fact, in that sense everything belongs to us, because God uses all things in His good plans and purposes for our lives.

So don’t lose sight of the big picture because of the appealing wisdom of this world. Don’t deceive yourself!