

*1 Corinthians 3:1-4 (2b-4)***PREFACE**

In Chapter Two Paul detailed the difference between the “natural man” (the unbeliever) and “he who is spiritual” (the believer in possession of the Spirit of God), in how the former cannot receive the things of God and the latter can.

Now, at the beginning of Chapter Three, he says—and we can hear the regret, even sorrow in his voice—that back when he stood before the Corinthians and presented to them the gospel of Christ crucified, they couldn’t handle it. They were so accustomed to the slippery sweetness of the culture in which they lived that the meat of God’s word presented to them by the apostle became like thin gruel.

Oh, they believed. Even after two years (perhaps more) Paul still addresses them as “brethren.” In the second verse of this letter he describes them as

...the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: (1 Corinthians 1:2)

These were Christians who were and—we learn in our passage today—*remain* in a struggle against their fleshly nature, no doubt influenced mightily by the fleshly nature of the society in which they dwell. So Paul says that even though they are believers, he must still speak to them as if they are not, because they are still behaving as “mere men.”

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1-4.**v2b**

Indeed, even now you are not yet able.

So far in Chapter Three Paul has been speaking in the past tense, referring back to the time he was standing in front of the Corinthians. Now, at the end of v2, and the beginning of the next sentence, he declares that nothing has changed in this department. Again: The writing of this letter would have been at least two years after his visit—perhaps longer—and the church was still having problems in this area.

Not yet able to do what? To receive what he had to offer—i.e., the fullness of the gospel message. And why were they “not yet able” to receive the word?

v3

for you are still fleshly.

ESV: for you are still of the flesh (*sarkikos*).

David Garland: They hankered after the more exquisite charms of clever oratory to tickle their ears, which made the simplicity of the word of the cross seem bland and elementary. If Paul’s message looks like milk to them, it discloses that they are not as mature or spiritual as they think.

A. T. Robertson does a splendid job of sorting out the Greek for us. For the one brave enough to wade into his delineation of the various Greek terms employed by Paul in this paragraph, there is profit. But for right now let's just focus on his definition, in the handout, of the word translated "fleshly" in the NASB.

KJVs: carnal; ESV: of the flesh; NIV: worldly

"*Sarkikos* means adapted to, fitted for the flesh, one who lives according to the flesh."

A. T. Robertson: *Sarkikos*, unlike *sarkinos*... means **adapted to, fitted for the flesh (*sarx*)**, **one who lives according to the flesh (*kata sarka*)**. Paul by *psychikos* describes the unregenerate man, by *pneumatikos* the regenerate man. Both classes are *sarkinoi* made in flesh, and both may be *sarkikoi* though the *pneumatikoi* should not be. The *pneumatikoi* who continue to be *sarkinoi* are still babes (*nepioi*), not adults (*teleioi*), while those who are still *sarkikoi* (carnal) have given way to the flesh as if they were still *psychikoi* (unregenerate).

Sidebar: Let me take just a moment here to address the disagreement that arose during last week's session. It is not my job, nor my place, to get everyone to agree with me. My job is to offer, by the grace of God and the working of the Holy Spirit, exposition of God's word.

I have only recently learned that to some in the evangelical community the term "carnal Christian" can be a red flag because of a certain sect that believes that so long as one says the right words, prays the right prayer, one is a Christian no matter how one lives his life after. Thus today the term "carnal Christian" represents in their mind a fraudulent gospel and theology that preaches one can live any way one likes and still call oneself a Christian.

My use of the term "carnal" is used quite simply in the same way the KJVs use it in our text—as a synonym for "fleshly," an alternate English word to express the Greek *sarkikos*. So permit me to reduce this down to three bullet points pertinent to the understanding of our text:

- Is it possible for one to be a believer in possession of the Holy Spirit, yet spend his entire life on a path of rebellion against Christ without any subsequent repentance, and still go to heaven? **No.**
- Is it possible that a person who believes himself to be a Christian, passes through a period of rebellion and only then realize he never was a Christian in the first place, but then after this period realize his need for Christ and become a believer? **Yes.**
- Is it possible for a true believer in possession of the Spirit of God to, for a brief period of time (remember, the "brethren" in Corinth had remained "fleshly" for over two years), take a left turn in his faith-walk, behaving more like the world around him, yet repent, confess his sin and return to fellowship with the Lord? **Yes.**

John MacArthur: Christians can be carnal. That is, they can behave in carnal ways. But "carnal Christian" is not a plane of spiritual existence where one can remain indefinitely. Carnality is never spoken of by Scripture as a perpetual state for believers. In other words, while Christians can be carnal in their behavior, they are never carnal by nature.

Let me close this topic with a summation by Gordon Fee.

Fee: Like the preceding passage, this paragraph has had its own history of unfortunate application. Very often the text has been used in the debate over eternal salvation, or whether the saved can ever be lost. The implication is often that because these people are believers, yet “carnal,” it is therefore permissible to be “carnal Christians.” That, of course, is precisely the wrong application, and flies full in the face of what concerns Paul. There is no question that Paul considers his Corinthian friends believers and that they are in fact acting otherwise. But Paul’s whole concern is to get them to change, not to allow that such behavior is permissible, since not all Christians are yet mature. Paul’s language is ironic, not permissive. The eternal destiny of such people, were they to persist in their “merely human” ways, depends on how one views the various warning texts in this letter (e.g., 6:9-11; 10:1-13). But *this* text is not speaking to that question. We would do well to let it carry Paul’s own point, not to use it for a theological concern of our own making. Spiritual people are to walk in the Spirit. If they do otherwise, they are “worldly” and are called upon to desist. For the apostle, remaining worldly is not an option.

In this passage Paul speaks to members of the Corinth church who were believers, who *were* spiritual in the sense of Chapter Two (possessing the Spirit of God), who considered themselves to be spiritual men in the sense of Chapter Three (living lives controlled by the Spirit of God), who nonetheless were *behaving*—still, at least two years after their conversion—as men of the flesh, in a fleshly manner, in a carnal manner.

If we set aside any controversy over eternal salvation, “once saved always saved,” “perseverance of the saints” et al, we can all agree that as believers we need to guard against living in a fleshly manner. This need not always be a conscious decision: “I am going to live for a while as if I am not a Christian.” In fact, I would dare say that it is rarely such a cold decision. More often than not it seeps into our life like a virus, unawares, almost innocently, until one day we realize our flesh has overwhelmed the influence of the Spirit in our life.

The world in which the Corinthians lived was not unlike ours today. They were surrounded by, enveloped in a cesspool that stood against everything of their Christian faith. Without diligence the standards of the society could and did seep into individual lives, as well as the church itself. This is the situation Paul is addressing. And then he gives some of the evidence for this.

For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, Paul broached this subject earlier; in fact it was the first topic he mentioned immediately after his greeting in Chapter One.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-11.

Now he returns to it as evidence to back up his position that they were and remain “fleshly.”

jealousy = *zelos* = from <G2204> (zeo); **properly heat, i.e. (figurative) “zeal”** (in a favorable sense, ardor; in an unfavorable one, jealousy, as of a husband [figurative of God], or an enemy, malice) :- emulation, envy (-ing), fervent mind, indignation, jealousy, zeal; **rivalry**; **here, a zeal for oneself over others.**

strife = *eris* = of uncertain affinity; **a quarrel, i.e. (by implication) wrangling :- contention**, debate, strife, variance.

This ugly behavior in a church is indicative of individuals being controlled by the flesh, rather than being controlled by the Spirit.

Read James 3:15-18.

and are you not walking like mere men?

When one is nothing more than a human being, as every one of us is at birth, the behavior Paul describes is perfectly acceptable—indeed, expected. Looking out for oneself, a zeal for always coming out ahead of the rest of the pack—all part and parcel of living in the world. But when we are in fact something *more* than a human being—something more than mere flesh and bones—a *spiritual* being—then this behavior is *unacceptable*. A spiritual person (Ch. 3) lives and walks by the Spirit, “a life characterized by self-sacrificing love, and where power is manifest through weakness” (Grindheim).

v4

Then Paul loops back to the problem he raised earlier in this letter and uses it to bolster his case for their carnal behavior.

For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not mere men?

That is how the *world* operates: one group against another, one faction struggling for superiority against the others, always looking to come out on top. That is not how a spiritual person behaves. That is how a natural, *unspiritual* human being behaves.

Let’s close by reminding ourselves of what should be the contrast between natural and spiritual, between walking in the Spirit and walking in the flesh.

Read Galatians 5:16-26.

“*Sarkikos*, unlike *sarkinos*...means adapted to, fitted for the flesh (*sarx*), one who lives according to the flesh (*kata sarka*). Paul by *psychikos* describes the unregenerate man, by *pneumatikos* the regenerate man. Both classes are *sarkinoi* made in flesh, and both may be *sarkikoi* though the *pneumatikoi* should not be. The *pneumatikoi* who continue to be *sarkinoi* are still babes (*nepioi*), not adults (*teleioi*), while those who are still *sarkikoi* (carnal) have given way to the flesh as if they were still *psychikoi* (unregenerate).”

FIRST CORINTHIANS

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