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Sermon Notes

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Christians, Yet Acting Carnally

1 Corinthians 3:1-4

As we come to 1 Corinthians 3: 1-4, we are coming to a text that has been a battleground for decades... for here, we come face to face with the idea of the CARNAL CHRISTIAN.

The “Carnal Christian” doctrine tries to wrestle with the reality of sin that all genuine Christians have after they’ve come to Christ... but it does so in a way that can be very misleading.

John Reisinger has this to say:

“Many who regularly occupy church pews, fill church rolls, and are intellectually acquainted with the facts of the gospel never strike one blow for Christ. They seem to be at peace with his enemies. They have no quarrel with sin and, apart from a few sentimental expressions about Christ, there is no biblical evidence that they have experienced anything of the **power** of the gospel in their lives. Yet in spite of the evidence against them, they consider themselves to be just what their teachers teach them -- that they are '*Carnal Christians*'. And as carnal Christians they believe they will go to heaven, though perhaps not first-class, and with few rewards.

The most serious aspect of this situation is ... not the carelessness of these church-goers, it is the error of their teachers who, by preaching the theory of '**the carnal Christian**', have led them to believe that there are three groups of people, -- the unconverted person, the 'carnal Christian' and the 'spiritual Christian'.”

This is an issue that I had to address very early in my Christian life.

I was converted my Junior year at MIT by a fraternity brother who was involved with Campus Crusade for Christ... now known as Cru. The first time I heard the gospel explained, it was by the Cru director at MIT who used the “Four Spiritual Laws,” the booklet Campus Crusade has used for decades to seek to lead people to Christ.

Soon after I was converted, I began to be disciplined through Cru as well... and the discipleship was excellent. But one of the tools they used has become increasingly questionable to me... it was called "The Holy Spirit" booklet or "the Blue Booklet" ... it was designed for people who had already prayed to receive Christ, but who were struggling to live the Christian life. At the center of the booklet was the concept of "The Carnal Christian" ... and the radical notion that the human race could be divided into three categories: unregenerate (non-Christians), regenerate (Christians), and CARNAL Christians... people who were Christians, regenerated (Born-again), with their sins forgiven, definitely going to heaven when they die... BUT living lives no different than non-Christians – living just like the world

To illustrate this idea, the Blue Booklet, the "Holy Spirit Booklet" used three diagrams, which I have labelled as "The Non-Christian", "The Spirit-filled Christian," and "The Carnal Christian"

For "The Non-Christian," they showed a circle (representing the person's life), with a chair in the center (representing the throne or control center of the person's life) and many random, various-sized dots inside the circle (representing the various interests and issues of the person's life). The letter "S" representing "Self" is on the throne, and the Cross (representing Christ) is outside the circle. This is the lost person, the non-Christian, the unregenerate individual.

For "The Spirit-filled Christian," they showed the circle (representing the person's life), the chair in the center (representing the throne of that person's life), and the circles all in a neat array, concentric around the throne, with lines going from each circle into the throne (representing the various issues and interests of the person's life all aligned with the throne). The Cross (representing Christ) is on the throne, and the S (representing Self) is dethroned, at the foot of the enthroned Christ. This represents the Christian who is leading the Spirit-filled life. All the issues of this person's life are focused on Christ and his will, on Christ and his glory.

But then, you have "The Carnal Christian" diagram... this is the third kind of person, according to this teaching. It is exactly like "The Non-Christian" diagram, except that the cross, representing Christ, is INSIDE the circle, though dethroned... at the foot of the throne. The S (representing Self) is on the throne. Everything else is exactly the same... the random, various-sized dots are all over the place – representing the various issues and interests of this person's life NO DIFFERENT AT ALL from those of the non-Christian.

Sometimes the discipler would go on to describe this Carnal Christian and his lifestyle:

“Legalistic attitude, impure thoughts, jealousy, guilt, worry, discouragement, critical spirit, frustration, aimlessness, fear, ignorance of spiritual heritage, disobedience, loss of love for God and others, poor prayer life, critical spirit, no desire for Bible study”

BUT for all of that, a CHRISTIAN, with their sins forgiven!!! Living a consistently sinful life, but forgiven the whole time. HOW DOE YOU KNOW, you may ask? On what basis?? Because they “prayed the sinner’s prayer” at some time in the past. They signed a commitment card, walked the aisle at an evangelistic meeting” or some other momentary agreement with the gospel.

Behind all this was the larger problems of BIBLE-BELT nominalism... many in certain regions of the U.S. were familiar with the language of the gospel and had done those basic things in the past – prayed the sinner’s prayer, walked the aisle, gotten baptized, became a member of a Bible-believing church... but then for years did NOTHING DIFFERENT AT ALL than their unchurched neighbors. The membership rolls of Evangelical churches throughout the Bible Belt were filled with people like this. Churches would once a year have a “Homecoming Sunday” and reach out to their wayward church members and urge them to come back to church, and a percentage of them would come back for that one Sunday, or for Easter, or for Christmas... but then resume their normal patterns the rest of the year

Yet they were ASSURED of salvation, because of a skewed understanding of justification by faith alone APART FROM WORKS, and a skewed understanding of perseverance of the saints called “ONCE SAVED, ALWAYS SAVED...”

“The Lordship Controversy” ... can you accept Jesus as Savior but not as Lord? Can Jesus’ death on the cross cover all your sins, while at the same time you reject his Lordship over your daily life? Some people believed that to link Jesus as Savior to Jesus as Lord was perverting the FREE GRACE of the gospel and adding a lifetime of works to the freedom of forgiveness. They would say “Jesus PLUS NOTHING gives you everything.”

As we turn this morning to 1 Corinthians 3:1-4, we are wading into all these things...

WHY? Because those who believe in the concept of “The Carnal Christian” usually come to THIS PASSAGE as proof... Paul says to the Corinthians that they were CARNAL, and yet he calls them BROTHERS.

It is vital for us to understand what Paul meant here, and then to broaden and try to understand the larger issue here.

I will lay my cards on the table: I do not believe there are THREE CATEGORIES of human beings: The Natural Person, the Spirit-filled Christian, and the Carnal Christian. I do think every Christian struggles mightily with sin, some more than others. I think that justification (forgiveness of sins) is by faith in Christ ALONE, but that the genuine faith that justifies ALWAYS results in a life of progressive growth in Christ, that individuals who are truly born again, though they may occasionally struggle – even bitterly – with sin, will hate that sin and fight against it by the power of the Holy Spirit.

I believe if someone is consistently walking in worldliness, not loving holiness, not thinking or acting any differently than the world, that there is every likelihood that that person is NOT A CHRISTIAN

We MUST understand properly the relationship between Jesus as Savior and Jesus as Lord, between JUSTIFICATION and SANCTIFICATION

And now, we are to understand properly what Paul really meant in 1 Corinthians 3:1-4 when he addressed the sinful Corinthians as “Carnal”

I. Paul Rebukes the “Carnal” Christians at Corinth

A. A Scathing Rebuke from a Loving Spiritual Father

1. Paul calls himself their spiritual father

1 Corinthians 4:15 ... in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel.

2. Sometimes a loving father has to rebuke his wayward children
3. Here, he rebukes them for their carnality and their immaturity

1 Corinthians 3:1-4 Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly--mere infants in Christ. ² I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. ³ You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? ⁴ For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?

4. A rebuke is like a verbal spanking

B. Brothers, I Could Not Address You as Spiritual...

1. Even as he rebukes them, he takes a loving stance toward them
2. They are his brothers and sisters in Christ... they are equally part of the Body of Christ
3. He wanted to teach them the fullness of God's Word, but he was evaluating their ability to accept his teachings

1 Corinthians 3:1 Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly—mere infants in Christ.

4. It is VITAL for a teacher of the Word of God to evaluate the spiritual state of his audience

John 16:12 "I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear.

5. If people are not ready to hear things, it is a waste of time, and actually harmful to them to pour out those teachings on them

C. Not as Spiritual, but as Worldly

1. Paul says he could not address the Corinthians as spiritual people, but as “worldly” or “carnal” (KJV) or more literally “people of the flesh”... as though they were NON-CHRISTIANS
2. “Spiritual” goes back to the last chapter’s discussion of the working of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of the converted

1 Corinthians 2:12 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us.

1 Corinthians 2:16 we have the mind of Christ.

3. But now, Paul is saying to these Corinthians, effectively “I could not address you as though you were converted people with the mind of Christ, but as if you are still worldly, unconverted people”
4. So... are they actually unconverted? Well... no, for he has called them BROTHERS

D. ALSO: He calls them “Infants in Christ”

1. A newborn baby is still human... and a full member of the family
2. You cannot be a Christian without the indwelling Holy Spirit

Romans 8:9 if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.

3. BUT... they were THINKING and ACTING like unconverted people... as if they were still of the flesh

E. As Babies in Christ... they needed spiritual BABY FOOD

1 Corinthians 3:2 I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.

1. Babies have no teeth, and they nurse from their mother's milk
 - a. We expect that from infants, but there is a sense of appropriate growth... a child becomes more and more able to eat meat
2. When it comes to Christian teaching, what is the "milk" and what is "meat"?
 - a. The basics of the Christian gospel—the things you explain to unbelievers when you are trying to lead them to Christ—this is the MILK of Christian theology
 - b. However, the cross of Christ is the lasting power of our whole Christian lives... ironically, the lessons of the cross is BOTH milk and meat
 - c. Learning how to deny yourself daily and walk in humility and suffering under the weight of the cross, under holiness in every temptation, in patience while facing every kind of hostility and opposition both from people and from Satan... this is how the cross becomes MEAT for us
 - d. Furthermore, the author to Hebrews says the teaching about Melchizedek as a type of Christ is meat... so that means deeper theologically rich topics that help Christians to understand the mysteries of Christ and of our salvation is meat
 - e. Topics that many people initially recoil against—like sovereign election, predestination, the hardening of hearts by God, the doctrine of providence which teaches that in some mysterious way every single event on planet earth is under God's control—the doctrine of the problem of evil in a world so controlled by God... these things are all examples of MEAT
3. It takes spiritual TEETH to take them in... it takes a while to grow up in our faith so that we can delight in the meat of the Word
4. Paul is saying the Corinthians weren't able BEFORE to chew on spiritual meat, and they STILL weren't able

F. Paul is Rebuking the Corinthians for their UNSPIRITUALITY and IMMATURITY

1 Corinthians 3:3 You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?

1. Paul says they are **WORLDLY**... other translations say “of the flesh”, “carnal”, “fleshly,”
2. Not saying they are **NOT CONVERTED**, but that they are **ACTING** like it
 - a. In verse 1, the adjective is “fleshy”... that is, of the flesh
 - b. In verse 3, the adjective is “fleshly” or **LIKE** the flesh

Like the difference between a blouse being **SILK** or **SILKY**

A “silk blouse” **IS** silk... A “silky blouse” **FEELS** like silk

The Corinthians were **ACTING** as if they were unconverted, despite the fact that they were new creations in Christ

3. Proof: Jealousy and quarrelling among them
 - a. The fact that they were pridefully bickering and having these kinds of arguments
 - b. In this way they were just like the pagans... arguing and fighting and jockeying for power

1 Corinthians 3:4 For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?

- c. You are acting like **NATURAL HUMANS**... and you need to be acting **SUPERNATURALLY**... Christianity should produce a supernatural kind of life

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples to **LOVE THEIR ENEMIES**... listen to the persuasion he uses:

Matthew 5:46-47 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

Unconverted pagans know how to be nice to people who are nice to them; they know how to greet family members and welcome friends... but the Christian life is a supernatural life in which we do supernatural things, like loving our enemies:

Matthew 5:48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect

So, I have walked through these verses carefully and explained them

Now, we have to refute the idea of the “Carnal Christian”

II. The Carnal Christian Teaching Refuted

A. Nominalism is a Problem All Over the World

1. In my home state (Massachusetts), a huge percentage of the population are nominal Roman Catholics... they claim to be Catholics (i.e. Christians), but hardly do anything about it at all—there is no vital piety, no church involvement, worldly attitudes and sinful patterns—both in secret and in public; actually, this is true all over the Roman Catholic world—in Latin America, in Italy, in Poland, in Spain, and in many other nations dominated by the Roman Catholic church, the main religion is NOMINALISM... being Christian in NAME ONLY
2. It seems to me that it is VITAL to understand properly the link between JUSTIFICATION (how a person’s sins are forgiven and they are put into a right relationship with God) and SANCTIFICATION (how they live out their Christian faith day after day, especially in the issue of dealing with sins and being fruitful for Christ)

B. The Carnal Christian Teaching is DANGEROUS... It MUST be refuted!

C. John Reisinger: What’s wrong with the Carnal Christian teaching?

1. It misinterprets 1 Corinthians 3:1-4... Paul is not establishing three kinds of people, but rebuking the Corinthians from ACTING like pagans
2. It separates the blessings of the New Covenant... forgiveness of sins and a changed heart

Hebrews 8:10-12 This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts.... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."

3. It makes no distinction between true saving faith and spurious or FAKE faith
4. It omits repentance... the CARNAL CHRISTIAN never really repented from all his sins
5. It teaches wrongly on assurance

Reisinger: “When a person professes to belong to Christ and yet lives like the world, how do we know that his profession is genuine? How do we know it is not genuine? We don't! There are always two possibilities: he may be

a true Christian in a condition of back-sliding, or it is quite possible he was never savingly united to Christ. Only God knows. Therefore when we speak of a back-slider two errors must be avoided: (1) Saying unequivocally that he is not a Christian; (2) Saying unequivocally that he is a Christian. The fact is that we do not know, we cannot know"

THIS IS VERY DANGEROUS for churches and their members

Hiding behind this teaching, many can think that they are fine because of their "sinner's prayer" and baptism and church membership, when actually they are UNCONVERTED... they are in a WORSE POSITION because of it

6. A low view of sin and its dangers

7. A low view of Christ and his offices... separating Jesus as Savior from Jesus as Lord

Matthew 11:28-30 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

III. A Healthy Understanding of Christian Growth

A. John Piper Illustration

Uses the "throne" analogy, with the person's life being like a realm or a kingdom

At conversion, a new King takes over the Kingdom... he pictures it like a secret assault by a skilled special op team... the Holy Spirit penetrates our defenses and assassinates the OLD KING... the person we were in Adam, and SLAYS that old king, putting the TRUE KING, Jesus on the throne

But like all coups, the news of the new king has not spread... the rebel forces in the palace have to be subdued, one by one

Even once that is done, the capital city has to be pacified and brought under the new regime little by little

And even once that is done, the messengers of the new king have to go out with force to subdue all the outlying districts that are still in allegiance to the former king... that could take years

So it is with regeneration, justification, and sanctification...

The new king is established in an instant, but the battle for his reign over every area of our hearts and lives will take the rest of our years on earth

B. Understanding the Nature of Saving Faith

1. All our sins are forgiven by faith alone... not by works
2. BUT the faith that saves is NEVER ALONE... it always produces works of obedience and holiness

C. Understanding the Power of Indwelling Sin

Romans 7:15-17 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me.

D. Fighting the Carnal Mind by the Spirit

Galatians 5:16-21 So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. ¹⁷ For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under law. ¹⁹ The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Galatians 5:22-23 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control.

Romans 8:13-14 if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, ¹⁴ because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

E. Understanding the Necessity of Holiness in order to Go to Heaven

Hebrews 12:14 ... without holiness no one will see the Lord.

F. Understanding “Marks of Regeneration”: How can I know I am born again?

Perseverance in private holiness... deep love for Christ and hatred of sin... love for other Christians... general obedience to the moral Law of God

IV. Applications

A. Evaluate Yourself to See If You Are in the Faith

2 Corinthians 13:5 Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you-- unless, of course, you fail the test?

B. If You are Lost, Come to Christ!

C. A Word to Sinning Christians

1. All Christians sin...

2. The question is: do you GRIEVE over your sins? Do you HATE your sins? Do you FIGHT your sins?

1 John 1:8-9 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

D. A Word About Church Involvement

Hebrews 3:12-13 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.