1 Corinthians Lesson 17

1 Corinthians 3:1-4 (Part 1)

Introduction and Contextual Review

The close of Chapter 2 set two men before the same words. The natural man, the man without the Spirit, does not welcome the things of the Spirit of God; he examines them by the wisdom of men and rules them foolishness. The spiritual one examines all things by what the Spirit revealed, and we have that in the mind of Christ, held in what is written. We also noted that the very next paragraph, the Corinthian believers also have an inability. That paragraph is now before us.

The letter has made this move before. After 1:18-25 set the wisdom of the world against the wisdom of God, 1:26 turned to the church: "For consider your calling, brethren." Chapter 3 does the same with Chapter 2. The doctrine of the natural and the spiritual is now applied to the Corinthian believers themselves.

> And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men? (1 Corinthians 3:1-4)

The passage has long been read as setting out three classes of men: natural, spiritual, and carnal. An evaluation of the text will address this claim directly. This lesson takes up the diagnosis: why the Apostle Paul could not speak to them as spiritual, what the three descriptions of verse 1 mean, and the evidence given in verses 3 and 4. The remedy, milk and solid food, is taken up next lesson.

Exposition

Verse 1: “And I Brethren”

The verse opens as 2:1 did: "And when I came to you, brethren." Both return to the Apostle's own ministry in Corinth, and both address the church as brethren. Before a word of rebuke is spoken, the hearers are named as family. It is the first of two markers in this verse that settle who these people are.

"Could Not Speak to You"

The verb is δύναμαι dunamai, the verb of ability used of the natural man in 2:14, here in the aorist tense. Paul is reflecting on the content of his message. On the surface, the inability appears to be of himself; but in actuality, the inability is found in the recipients. The reason Paul could not speak to them as spiritual is "you were not yet able to receive it." Verse 3 states its cause: "you are still fleshly." The limit is in what they were able to receive, not in whether God's word could reach them. That distinction governs the whole paragraph.

"As to Spiritual Men"

The word is πνευματικός pneumatikos, defined by 2:13-15: the one who examines the things of God on the Spirit's terms, by what the Spirit revealed in the words the Spirit taught. We have previously established that the word describes the believer as he examines by those things, as τέλειος teleios (mature) in 2:6 named a manner of thinking and not a rank.

The Corinthians had the Spirit. The same chapter says so plainly: "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (3:16). What they lacked was not the Spirit. They were not examining by what the Spirit had given; their method of evaluation was of the world, the wisdom of men.

"As To"

The particle ὡς hōs stands before each of the three descriptions: as to spiritual men, as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. It is a word of comparison. It describes the level at which the Apostle had to address them. It does not assign them to a class of person. The verse does not say, "you are carnal men." It says he spoke to them as to men of flesh, because that was the level at which they could receive.

"Men of Flesh"

The word is σάρκινος sarkinos. The ending marks the material a thing is made of. 2 Corinthians 3:3 sets the same word against stone: the letter of Christ is written "not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts," literally tablets that are hearts of flesh. The word names flesh as substance. Joined to "infants" in the next phrase, it describes the newly made, still soft and unformed.

> Translations and Greek copies of the New Testament do not all read the same word here. The copies behind the King James Version (the Byzantine text, printed as the Textus Receptus) read σαρκικός sarkikos, the same word found in verse 3, so the King James Version reads "carnal" in both verses. The critical text, which most modern translations follow, including the NASB, reads σάρκινος sarkinos. The two traditions differ in two other places in this paragraph: in verse 3 the Textus Receptus adds "and divisions," and in verse 4 it reads "carnal" where the critical text reads "men."
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> None of these differences changes the meaning of the passage, for two reasons. First, every tradition reads σαρκικός sarkikos in verse 3, so the rebuke "you are still fleshly" stands no matter which text is used. Second, whether this passage teaches a third class of believer turns on the words "as to" and "in Christ," and those words are the same in every copy. The reading σάρκινος sarkinos adds only a shade of meaning: in verse 1 the Corinthians are described as soft and newly made, like infants, before the sharper charge of verse 3. The distinction that we are focused on depend upon the words of simile.

"As to Infants in Christ"

The word is νήπιος nēpios, an infant, a child not yet able to speak. It stands against the τέλειος teleios of 2:6, the mature among whom wisdom is spoken. The pair names two stages, not two kinds of believer. An infant and a grown man are the same kind of person at different points of growth.

Ephesians 4:14 shows what marks the infant: "we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming." The word for children is νήπιος nēpios. The infant is identified by how he handles teaching. He is carried by whatever is set before him, because he has no settled standard by which to test it.

"In Christ" closes the verse. It is the standing of 1:30, "by His doing you are in Christ Jesus," and of 1:2, "those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus." The rebuke in this passage does not negate their position in Christ. "Brethren" opens the verse and "in Christ" closes it, and between them stands a description of how these believers had to be taught. Their standing is settled; their thinking is not mature.

Verse 2: "I Gave You Milk to Drink, Not Solid Food"

The Apostle did speak. He gave them milk. What milk and solid food are, and how one leads to the other, is the subject of the next lesson. Here, one point is enough: the milk was not a second message. Among them he "determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (2:2). Milk and solid food are the one unified message of God that are different depths.

"You Were Not Yet Able to Receive It. Indeed, Even Now You Are Not Yet Able"

The verb of ability now moves from the speaker to the hearers. When Paul first came, they were not yet able. The word οὔπω oupō, "not yet," expects that the ability will come. Infancy at the beginning is no fault. Every believer begins there.

The second statement is the rebuke: "even now you are not yet able." Time had passed. Paul had planted and Apollos had watered (3:6), and they were still where they began. An infant on milk is healthy. A grown man who still cannot take solid food has a problem, and the text names it in the next clause.

Previously, we found that the natural man's "cannot" in 2:14 was grounded in the standard by which he examined the things of God. Here, the same verb is used of men who have the Spirit, and again the text gives the reason.

Verse 3: "For You Are Still Fleshly"

The γάρ gar gives the cause of the inability. The adverb ἔτι eti, "still," carries the same rebuke as "even now": they remain what they were.

The word changes. Verse 1 had σάρκινος sarkinos, made of flesh. Verse 3 has σαρκικός sarkikos. This ending marks what characterizes or governs a thing, as in πνευματικός pneumatikos, the one governed by what the Spirit gave. The fleshly is governed by the flesh, ordered by the measure of man, the wisdom of the world.

2 Corinthians 1:12 attaches the word to a way of operating: "in holiness and godly sincerity, not in fleshly wisdom but in the grace of God, we have conducted ourselves in the world." Fleshly wisdom is a method, a standard of conduct set against the grace of God. That is the sense the context of 1 Corinthians requires. Chapters 1 and 2 have set the wisdom of this age against the wisdom of God at length. The fleshly believer is the believer who has taken up the natural things to examine the things of the Spirit of God.

The charge, then, is not a status. The fleshly believer is not a different kind of believer. He is a believer using the wrong standard.

"For Since There Is Jealousy and Strife Among You"

A second γάρ gar gives the evidence, in two words.

ζῆλος zēlos is zeal, an intense eagerness for something. It can be good (2 Corinthians 7:11). Here, paired with strife, it is the zeal of rivalry: jealousy. James 3:14-16 has already shown that jealousy marks the wisdom that is "earthly, natural, demonic," the same word for "natural" used of the natural man in 2:14.

ἔρις eris is strife, contention. It is the word behind "quarrels" in 1:11: "there are quarrels among you." The evidence of verse 3 is the very report from Chloe's people that opened the letter.

Galatians 5:20 lists both among "the deeds of the flesh": "enmities, strife, jealousy." These are not sins of appetite. They come from comparison, from ranking one thing above another and contending for one's choice. They arise from using the wisdom of the world.

"Are You Not Fleshly, and Are You Not Walking Like Mere Men?"

The question expects the answer yes. "Walking" is περιπατέω peripateō, the ordinary word for the conduct of life. "Like mere men" is κατά kata, "according to," with ἄνθρωπος anthrōpos, "man": they are walking according to man. The measure is the viewpoint of the natural man.

The Gospels record the same rebuke given to Peter during the Lord's earthly ministry. Peter had just confessed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). When Jesus then

spoke of His suffering, death, and resurrection, Peter rebuked Him: "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You" (16:22). The answer came:

> Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's. (Matthew 16:23)

The phrase is literally "the things of men." Peter was not drunk, angry, or unclean. He weighed the Messiah by a human measure, and by that measure a crucified Christ made no sense. It is the stumbling block of 1:23 in the mouth of a disciple.

Verse 4: "I Am of Paul ... I Am of Apollos"

A third γάρ gar gives the specific proof. The jealousy and strife have a shape: loyalty to one teacher against another. This is how Corinth judged its orators, by eloquence, standing, and the honor of belonging to the right man. The church had brought that measure inside and applied it to the servants of God.

Chapter 1 named four parties (1:12). Here only two names appear, and 4:6 gives the reason: "Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written." Paul uses himself and Apollos as the example, and the next verse takes it up: "What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed" (3:5).

"Are you not mere men?" The word is simply "men." The word “mere” is not in the text. The Corinthians, indwelt by the Spirit, were evaluating exactly as men without the Spirit evaluate. Their standing was in Christ. Their method was the natural man's.

Two Kinds of Men, Not Three

The three descriptions now sit side by side: the natural man of 2:14, the spiritual one of 2:15, and the fleshly of 3:1-3. Two well-known readings of these verses need to be answered from them.

Lewis Sperry Chafer, in *He That Is Spiritual*, taught that this passage divides all men into three classes: the natural man, the carnal man, and the spiritual man. In his teaching the carnal man is a saved man living on a lower plane, a distinct kind of Christian. R. B. Thieme Jr., building on that foundation, taught what he called rebound. When a believer sins, he passes out of fellowship and loses the filling of the Spirit; while out of fellowship he cannot learn doctrine; and he is restored by naming his sins to God under 1 John 1:9. Both men and ministries held grace clearly and took the believer's walk seriously, and many of us have learned much from them. On this point the question is whether 3:1-4 teaches a third class of Christian, or a believer whose ability to receive the word is shut off until a confession restores it.

From the opposite side, some read verses 1-3 as proof that anyone who walks this way was never saved at all.

The text answers both.

First, "as to." The verse describes the level of the Paul's speaking, not a classification of persons. It does not establish a category.

Second, "brethren" and "in Christ." The Corinthians are addressed as family and placed in Christ in the same sentence as the rebuke. That answers those who would make fleshly conduct proof of an unsaved state. It also answers the idea of a lower class of Christian: there is one standing, in Christ, and these believers hold it.

Third, the speaking continued. He gave them milk. He wrote to them while saying "even now you are not yet able," and the letter goes on for thirteen more chapters, teaching these same people about the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts, the resurrection, and much else. If fleshliness closed the channel, the letter itself could not have been received. The inability is one of capacity: how much they could take in, to what depth, not whether God's word could reach them.

Fourth, the cause named is method, not unconfessed sin. The text gives the evidence of their condition as jealousy and strife expressed in the ranking of teachers, evaluation by the measure of man. A believer who stubs his toe and says a word he should not, or struggles with anger, or has an overt rebellious act has sinned, but he has not lost the ability to understand Scripture, and nothing in this passage says he has. The passage describes believers who handled the things of God by the world's standard and so could not take in more than milk.

Fifth, the remedy is not confession. 1 John 1:9 has its own context, and it is not the subject of this passage. What this passage sets out is milk and solid food, infancy and maturity. The cure for arrested growth is growth, and that is where the text goes next.

Scripture gives two kinds of men: those without the Spirit and those with Him. A believer can examine the things of God by the natural man's standard, and when he does, he is fleshly. That is not a third kind of man. It is a believer walking according to man.

Fleshly Thinking Today

The Corinthian pattern is not hard to find. A writer who has spent years answering Bible questions online observed that most people who reject eternal security do not do so on the basis of the texts. The objection nearly always comes back to a practical concern: if a believer cannot lose his salvation, people will live however they please, and then no one can be taught to stop sinning. The doctrine is weighed by whether it seems to work. That is the measure of man. The objection is as old as Romans 6:1: "Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?" The answer given there is drawn from what is true of the believer, not from what seems effective.

In an online discussion of the same doctrine, the conversation ran on tracks that never met. One participant asked what the term means and when a person is saved, a question that sends a man to

the text. Another concluded that much of the debate comes down to how people feel about it. One defended security by analogy: he will always love his adopted children, whatever they do. Another answered that Hebrews 6 makes it clear a person can walk away. Each argued from his own ground, and no one engaged the other's.

The analogy deserves attention because it defends the right conclusion by the wrong measure. A human father's love is not the basis of the believer's security, and a conclusion resting on a human analogy stands only as long as the analogy seems persuasive. The fleshly method is not limited to people who reach wrong conclusions. It is a way of examining, and a believer can hold the truth while examining it the way the natural man does. When he does, he will find much of Scripture hard to receive, because he is measuring God's word with man's ruler.

Summary / Application

The Corinthians were brethren, in Christ, and indwelt by the Spirit. Paul could not speak to them as to spiritual men, because they were not able to receive more than milk, and the text gives the reason: they were still fleshly. Fleshly is not a third class of man. It describes believers walking according to man, examining the things of God by the measure of the age, the wisdom of the world. The evidence was jealousy and strife, and the specific proof was the ranking of God's servants by the world's standard of judgment. Their standing was settled. Their method was not.

Examine your measure. The question this passage presses is not whether every sin has been named, but what standard is being used to judge what Scripture says. Whether a doctrine seems fair, seems practical, or feels right is the measure of man. The measure of the spiritual one is what is written.

Grow by building. The remedy is the subject of the next lesson, but its direction is already in the text: from milk to solid food. If what you have taken in is mostly the gospel and the basics about God, begin to reach for more, and take it in small increments. Doctrine builds on doctrine. A person who does not yet understand that eternal life is a free gift cannot understand rewards, because he will hear rewards as wages for getting in. A believer who does not understand living by grace will find it difficult to understand that believers are never subject to the wrath of God. The basic concept for maturity is to take in a little more than you are used to, work it through, let it settle, and come back for more. The capacity for solid food is built by eating, a little at a time.