

What Kind of Person Are You?

1 Corinthians 2:10-3:4

Introduction: Several times in 1 Corinthians Paul will divide the human race into various categories for our spiritual instruction and edification. When he does so he is not making a value judgment. He is not denying the image of God that exist in all people nor their innate value and worth (Gen. 1:26-27). Rather, he does so to help us understand certain spiritual truths and realities about various groups and persons. In 1:18 he says the whole world can be divided into “those who are perishing” and those “who are being saved.” In 1:22-23 he divides those who are lost spiritually into “Jews and Gentiles” (Greeks) to help us understand why they reject the “word of the cross” (1:18). To one it is a “stumbling block” (Jews) and to the other it is “foolishness” (Greeks/Gentiles).

In 2:10-3:4 Paul will again divide the human race into various spiritual categories, but the division will be different than previous assessments. Just as he sub-divided the perishing/lost into Jews and Gentiles, he will now divide the saved into spiritual/mature and carnal/worldly. Unfortunately, this latter category of carnal/worldly/fleshly has opened the door for some terrible theology and a misunderstanding of the Christian life. These verses, especially 3:1-4, will require a most careful study and investigation.

I. The Natural Person Does What Comes Natural 2:14

In 2:14 Paul once again addresses the lost person, the “perishing” of 1:18.

These are lost people who act like lost people. They lack the Spirit of God and are captive, enslaved, to their fallen nature, their unregenerate soul. Paul says 2 things are true of the lost man or woman, “the person without the Spirit.”

1) They do not accept spiritual things

“But the person without the Spirit (*ESV*, “the natural person”, *KJV*, “the natural man”) does not receive (*ESV*, “accept”) what comes from God’s Spirit.” The natural person is spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1). There is no spiritual life within them. They lack the necessary spiritual equipment to correctly process spiritual truth. Tom Schreiner is helpful, “It is not that unbelievers cannot mentally grasp or comprehend the message of the gospel...they are unable to understand the truth and significance of the gospel because such things can be discerned only through the Spirit” (*1 Cor.*, TNTC, 84-85). They hear the message but they cannot translate it as spiritually valuable and wonderful. Only the Holy Spirit can do that for them, but they don’t have Him in them.

2) They do not appreciate spiritual things

Commenting on the natural person, “the person without the Spirit,” John Piper says that, their “basic problem is not an intellectual ability to construe

the meaning of Paul's message; the problem is the moral ability to assign the right value to it" ("How the Spirit Helps Us Understand," 5-20-84). This is helpful in understanding what Paul means in the latter part of v. 14. The gospel of "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:2) is once again deemed as "foolishness" (Gr. *moria*) to the person without the Spirit. They do understand it, on a certain level, evaluate and consider it, and determine it is "foolishness" (*MSG*, "silliness"). Again, the reason for their lack of appreciation for the gospel is clear: the natural person "is not able to understand it since it is evaluated (*ESV*, "discerned") spiritually." The natural person without the Spirit cannot "make appropriate "judgments" about what God is doing in the world" (Fee, *1 Cor.*; NICNT, 125). The natural person can read the Bible, hear the gospel and weigh its meaning. However, without the work of Spirit, they will never boast in it (1:31; Gal. 6:14). They will never see it as beautiful, precious and valuable. They are blind to its beauty, deaf to its melody and insensitive to its fragrant aroma.

II. The Spiritual Person Does What Comes Supernatural 2:10-13, 15-16

We now move to examine the second category of persons Paul discusses in these verses: the spiritual person. These are saved persons who act like saved persons. They are captive to the Spirit of God who has taken up residence in them as His temple (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19-20). These are men and women who

love the Bible, God, Jesus, the gospel, the cross, holiness, the lost, the nations and all things that glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31). Paul makes four important observations about these that he calls “spiritual persons” (v. 15).

1) The spiritual person is informed by the Spirit 2:10-11

In John 14:16 Jesus promised us that the Spirit would come as our teacher. Paul affirms this wonderful truth telling us that “God has revealed these things to us by the Spirit” (v. 10). “These things” clearly refers back to 2:1-9 and the wisdom of God revealed in the gospel of “Christ and him crucified.” Our understanding and taking hold of the gospel is a gift of the Spirit. We did not need human information we needed divine revelation. We needed the Holy Spirit of God to take the truth of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and drive its significance and value home to our hearts in the work of regeneration (Titus 3:5). And of course, the Spirit is perfectly equipped to do this “since the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God”; that is His wisdom and all it entails. Don Carson is very helpful in pinpointing what Paul means in this verse: “Even though God has now so definitively brought his all-wise plan to fruition in the gospel of the crucified Messiah, people still do not believe. They still do not see that his plan is wise. If we the “mature” have come to grasp it, it is because “God has revealed it to us by his Spirit” (2:10).

In other words, there has not only been an objective, public act of divine self-disclosure in the crucifixion of God's own Son, but there must also be a private work of God, by his Spirit, in the mind and heart of the individual. That is what distinguishes the believer from the unbeliever, the "mature" from the people of this age and the rulers of this age. If we "see" the truth of the gospel, therefore, it has nothing to do with our brilliance or insight; it has to do with the Spirit of God. If we should express unqualified gratitude to God for the gift of his Son, we should express no less gratitude to God for the gift of the Spirit who enables us to grasp the gospel of his Son." (*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 52).

Paul provides an illustration in v. 11 to make his point. He asks, "For who knows a person's thoughts except his spirit within him?" Of course the answer is no one unless we tell them. Well, that is also true of God. "In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God," who of course is God! And, as an act of amazing grace, God has informed us, "revealed these things to us by the Spirit." But, there is more.

2) The spiritual person is instructed by the Spirit 2:12-13

The spiritual person stands in striking contrast to the natural person of v. 14. We have a different Spirit within us as our guide and instructor. Paul boldly declares, "Now we have not received the spirit of the world (v. 20; cf. Rom.

12:2), but the Spirit who comes from God” (see Rom. 8:9; 15; Gal. 3:2, 14, 4:6). And why, at least in part, did God give us His Spirit? “So that we may understand what has been freely given to us by God.” In other words God does not play hide and go seek with His sons and daughters. He has put Himself in us so that we might know Him truly and genuinely. How this is accomplished is further explained in verse 13. Having the Spirit of God within us, we are equipped to “speak these things,” the things (teachings) of God. We do so, “not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people.” The *CSB* has a marginal reading, “spiritual things with spiritual words.” We prefer this marginal reading. Believers explain and interpret spiritual matters with words that are given by the Spirit of God. My friend Andy Davis puts these verses in helpful and practical terms, “The spirit of the world teaches lost people the language of this world...the language of wealth, power, pleasure and selfishness. The Spirit from God teaches us the language of spiritual riches, the treasures of grace that God is freely giving us” (“Wisdom Through the Spirit,” Twojourneys.org). The Spirit instructs us with His spiritual words. Today we have this wonderful gift of “spiritual words” in the Bible. We have an obligation to pass on the wonderful, spiritual words

of Holy Scripture to others. A good teacher will gladly honor the teachings of his Master.

3) The spiritual person is given insight by the Spirit 2:15

Because the spiritual person is indwelt and instructed by the Spirit of God, they are given insight that the lost person does not have. Further, the lost person cannot understand or “evaluate” (*ESV*, “judged”) the saved person.

This is the gist of v. 15 which reads, “The spiritual person, however, can evaluate everything, and yet he himself cannot be evaluated by anyone.”

Warren Wiersbe puts it well, “The unsaved person does not understand the Christian; they live in two different worlds. But, the Christian does understand the unsaved person” (*Be Wise*, 43). Conversion opens our eyes to see life in a new way, a more accurate way. The glasses provided by the Spirit change our perspective, our values, how we see the world. Leon Morris helpfully adds, “When the Spirit enters the life everything is changed and one new thing that appears is the ability to make a right judgment. This does not mean that the man has acquired greatness; it means that the Spirit of God is guiding him. He has the point of reference within himself and is thus able to make judgments *about all things*. The force of *all* should not be overlooked. The spiritual principle is the basis of judgment on what we call the secular as well as the sacred” (*1 Cor.*, TNTC, 59-60).

4) The spiritual person is made incomprehensible by the Spirit 2:15-16

Paul tells us the spiritual person “cannot be evaluated by anyone.” *The Message* says they “can’t be judged by unspiritual critics.” Leon Morris is again helpful and provides necessary balance to what Paul is saying and not saying. He writes, “It is clear from the whole tenor of Paul’s writings that he did not hold that men in whom was the Spirit of God could not be called upon to account for their actions (cf. 14:29). Much of this epistle is a criticism, if a loving and spiritual criticism, of *spiritual* men. His point is that the *spiritual* man cannot be judged by the natural man for precisely the same reason that he himself can judge all things. He has the Spirit of God within him and the natural man has not. This makes him an enigma to the natural man. What does the natural man know of spiritual things? Because he cannot know spiritual things (v. 14), he cannot judge spiritual people.” (p. 60).

Paul seals his argument in v. 16 with a question, a quote from Isa. 40:13, and another not so subtle affirmation of the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul asks, quoting Isa. 40:13, “For who has known the Lord’s mind, that he may instruct him?” Of course the answer is no one. As Carson puts it, “no one can successfully probe the depths of God’s thoughts, let alone match wits with God” (60). However, what the natural or worldly man cannot do we

can (!), for “we have the mind of Christ.” By means of the indwelling Holy Spirit, the mind of the Lord Jesus is ours. His perspective is ours. After all, the mind of the Spirit and the mind of Christ are always one. This wonderful truth does not mean there is no need for growth and maturing in our understanding of the things of God. Some of us still have a long ways to go as 3:1-4 now makes abundantly clear.

III. The Carnal Person Does What Comes Unnatural 3:1-4

Paul now introduces us to a third and new category of persons, those he refers to as “carnal” (*KJV*), “fleshly” (*ESV*), “worldly” (*CSB*). These are persons who are saved but too often act like lost persons. Paul says they are captive to the flesh. Now, few verses have been more misunderstood and abused than these. Therefore, it is imperative that we understand what they mean and what they don’t mean. Let’s start with what they don’t mean. Let me provide a simple list:

- 1) They don’t mean you can accept Jesus as Savior but reject Him as Lord.
- 2) They don’t mean you will never bear tangible fruit as a Christian.
- 3) They don’t mean you can become an unbelieving believer.
- 4) They don’t mean you can live your Christian life no different than a non-Christian.

- 5) They don't mean you can sit on the throne of your heart with Christ at your feet.
- 6) They don't mean that though we are saved without works we may have a faith without works.

Now, what do they mean. Again, a simple list before our exposition:

- 1) Christians can be slow to mature in their faith without proper nourishment.
- 2) Christians can sometimes act like spiritual babies when they should act like spiritual adults.
- 3) Christians need to be reminded of the basics of the gospel even as they grow in their depth of understanding the gospel. The gospel is both milk and meat!
- 4) Nominal Christianity is inauthentic Christianity.
- 5) Spiritual backsliding is possible but it should not be permanent (see 1 Cor. 6:9-11; Gal. 5:16-21).

With these preliminary observations, let's see two points Paul makes with respect to the carnal person.

- 1) They are weak spiritually 3:1-2

Paul begins with a gentle touch calling his readers "brothers and sisters." He believes they are spiritual family. He then tells them because of their status

as “babies in Christ” (v. 1), he had to once again acquaint them with the basics of the gospel in chapters 1-2 just like he did when he first evangelized them in Acts 18:1-17. He was “not able to speak to them as spiritual people but as people of the flesh,” as “spiritual babies.” He adds in v. 2, “I gave you milk to drink, not solid food, since you were not yet ready for it. In fact, “you are still not ready.” It is not difficult to sense the intensity and passion in Paul’s words. Paul’s point is this. There was nothing wrong with me giving you milk (cf. Heb. 5:12; 1 Pet. 2:2) when you were first converted. You were spiritually weak, newborns. All you could digest and handle was milk. Morris is exactly correct, “he did not push the infant believers beyond their capacity, but gave them the teaching that was suited to their state. There was nothing blameworthy in their being ‘not yet ready for it.’ But it is otherwise when he says *you are still not ready*.... It was all well for the Corinthians to have been in the position of ‘infants’ when they actually were ‘infants.’ But they should have outgrown that state long since” (p. 61). Babies are cute when they are little, but not when they are grown. The Corinthians were still weak when they should have been strong.

2) They are willful in their sin 3:3-4

Babies are not accountable for their actions, but adults are. Paul hits the Corinthians between the eyes and calls them out in v. 3, “you are still

worldly (*ESV*, “of the flesh”; *NLT*, “still controlled by your sinful nature”).

The evidence: “there is envy (*ESV*, “jealousy”) and strife among you.”

Conclusion: “are you not worldly (*KJV*, “carnal”; *ESV*, “of the flesh”) and behaving like mere humans?” To provide a precise example, Paul draws on what he previously wrote in 1:10-12, “For whenever someone says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not acting like mere humans?” Bottomline: you are acting like lost people, pagans, persons without the Spirit. Division and factionalism is the way of the world, not the way of Christ. Having my way and demanding my rights is the way of the flesh. Carnality gets us lost in the weeds, caring more about little things than big things. Just like small children, overgrown babies. Always arguing but never content. Always fighting but never satisfied. Carnal Christians never build up the church, they always tear it down. And carnal Christians never exalt Christ, they ignore Christ.

“I live for myself, for myself alone,

For myself and none besides.

Just as if Jesus had never lived,

And just as if Jesus had never died.”

Conclusion: What kind of person are you? It really is important for all of us to answer that question. Salvation gets the Christian out of the world. Sanctification

gets the world out of the Christian. What kind of person are you? If you are a person of natural depravity I urge you today, come to Christ and be saved. If you are a person of carnal immaturity, I urge you to repent of your sins and flee to Christ as the rightful Lord of your life. And if you are a person of spiritual maturity, keep on growing and going for the glory of God that you might win the natural person to Jesus and that you might influence the carnal person for Jesus.