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I Corinthians 2:14-3:4 “Diagnosing & Curing Your Spiritual Condition”

Intro. It is very common today to categorize people into different groups. We divide people in groups according to race, or wealth, or social standing, or education. Politically you may be Republican, Democrat, or Independent. Even those who are called Christians are divided into different groups, such as Catholics & Protestants, Moderates, or Fundamentalists, or Charismatics.

But when we read the Word of God, we discover some different categories of men. In I Corinthians Paul groups men according to their relationship to spiritual things. For example, in 1:18 he divides the world into those people who are perishing and those who are being saved. And here in my text he divides people into three groups: those who are natural men; those who are spiritual; and those who are carnal. If you are still in your natural, unregenerate state, then you have a big problem. You are perishing in sin, and perhaps you don't even realize it. And if you are a Christian, but yet you still haven't grown and matured in your faith, then that is a problem as well.

This morning I want to play the role of Dr. Felker. With the Word of God, and with the assistance of the Spirit of God, I want to help you diagnose your spiritual condition. Now a doctor does not diagnose your physical condition just to make you feel bad about yourself. The purpose of diagnosis is to offer a cure. So if you realize that you have never been born again, I pray that you will allow the Spirit of God to give you life. If you are a Christian, but are not yet truly spiritual and mature in your walk with the Lord, I pray that you follow the steps that I give you this morning and become a spiritual Christian.

So let's begin our examination. I want to ask each of you a series of diagnostic questions. First of all:

I. ARE YOU A NATURAL MAN?

Notice what Paul says in v.14, “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” He calls some types of people “natural men.” Some of you remember Lou Rawls song, “I'm a natural man.” Well, based on this Scripture, I wouldn't brag about that! And notice in the last of v.3 Paul mentions “behaving like mere men.” I believe that phrase is pointing back to v.14.

What does Paul mean when he refers to the “natural man?” The translation uses the word “natural” because there is not an English word which precisely translates the Greek word, which literally means “soulish.” The word refers to the physical and mental life that we are naturally born with. It is different from the supernatural, spiritual life that comes from the Spirit of God, who causes a believer to be born again. Jude 19 describes the natural man as one who is “sensual, not having the Spirit.” This natural life still reflects the image of God in many respects, and thus is capable of accomplishing great things. Such a person can become a great athlete, or a great artist, or even a greatly religious person. But the natural life is stained by sin, and as Paul said in Eph. 2:1, the natural life is spiritually dead. That is why Jesus said in Jn. 3:7, “You *must* be born again.”

Well, how do you know whether or not you are still just a natural man? Paul gives two characteristic of a natural person here.

A. Do You Appreciate Spiritual Things? – Again, Paul says in v.14a, “But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God....” The word translated “receive” (δεχομαι) means more than just to receive or to accept. When used of people it means “to welcome.”¹ And when used of things, it carries with it the idea of “to approve, to embrace as your own.”² Thus, the natural man does not appreciate or approve the things of the Spirit of God. He does not engage in regular, private prayer. They have little or no desire to come to a church where the Bible is taught & preached. He does not enjoy feeding on the Word of God. According to a survey a few years ago, nearly 25% of persons who call themselves born-again Christians never read the Bible. I have a tendency to believe that they are probably not born-again!

This does not mean that a natural man cannot enjoy good Christian music or beautiful architecture, or an aesthetic worship service. A natural man may enjoy hearing how being “religious” can make you more successful or prosperous. But when it comes to real spiritual truth, he will not welcome such spiritual truth into his heart, largely because of unbelief. And as Paul says, the reason is that such a person considers spiritual truth to be “foolishness.” In his pride he may call them “fables” that are fit only for children.

Back in 1989 Ted Turner made the news when he said that the 10 Commandments and other aspects of biblical religion were foolish, and outdated. In 1990 he said, “Christianity is a religion for losers.” In November of 1999, Jesse Ventura, the ex-wrestler and governor of Minnesota, said this in an interview: “Organized religion is a sham and a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers.” Such people do not see the fact that they are the ones who are truly foolish.

B. Do You Comprehend Spiritual Truth? – In v.14b Paul says, “nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.” Not only is the natural man not interested in the Bible, or the things of God, but even if he did pick up the Bible and read it, he is not even *able* to comprehend it. For example, the Scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day were highly trained in the OT, yet they missed its central message. They completely failed to recognize the promised Messiah when He came. V.8 says, “which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” Many other people do not “see” themselves a lost in sin and in need of a Savior. They do not “see” the terrible and fierce wrath of God against sin, but continue in a false security that everything will be OK.

Paul gives a reason for the condition he ascribes the natural men. He goes on the say, “because they are spiritually discerned.” The truths revealed by God are spiritually discerned, not just mentally discerned. A person can have a high I.Q., but miss God, and what is most important in life. When Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit, God promised them that they would surely die. Now they did not immediately die physically. In fact, Adam lived about 900 years. But I believe they died spiritually. And without spiritual life, you cannot truly comprehend, appreciate or truly believe God’s truth. Without the aid of the Spirit of God, you cannot know God’s truth.

¹ Mt .10:14 says, “And whoever will not *receive* you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet.” V.40 says, “He who *receives* you *receives* Me, and he who *receives* Me *receives* Him who sent Me.” Lk. 9:53 says, “But they did not *receive* Him, because His face was set for the journey to Jerusalem.” Jn. 4:45, “So when He came to Galilee, the Galileans *received* Him, having seen all the things He did in Jerusalem at the feast....” Gal. 4:14, “....you received me as an angel of God....” 1 Th. 2:13 says, “...when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you *welcomed* it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God.”

² Acts 8:14 says, “Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had *received* the word of God....” 17:11 says, “These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness....” Eph 6:17, “And *take* the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.”

Jesus said in Jn. 16:13, “However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth....”

Unsaved people “walk by sight” and thus do not see or comprehend spiritual truth. They are spiritually blind, as Paul says in 2 Cor. 4:4. Just as a small child cannot comprehend abstract truth, even so a natural man is incapable of comprehending with his heart the things of the Spirit of God. Just as a blind man cannot see the sun, so this man cannot see the glory of the Son of God. He doesn’t have spiritual antenna. Or in the old language of CB radio, “He doesn’t have his ears on.”

So look at your own life. Is there an appreciation for the things of God? Are you able to understand the truth of God? Do you manifest the symptoms of someone who is not yet born again? If so, look to Jesus. He died for your sins. He wants to give you new life, and a new understanding. The Holy Spirit will come into your heart. He will give you new desires. Do it today!

And Christian, this explains why people react the way they do when you invite them to come to church, or when you talk to them about salvation. That is why you must pray for them. Only God can open their eyes to the truth of the Gospel.

II. ARE YOU A SPIRITUAL CHRISTIAN?

In contrast to the natural man, Paul says in v.15, “he who is spiritual judges all things.” He mentions those who are “spiritual” again in v.1. Some Christians are quick to assume that they are spiritual Christians. But I challenge you to put yourself to the biblical test. These verses make it obvious that not only does the Holy Spirit *reside* in the life of a spiritual man; the Holy Spirit also *presides* over the life of a spiritual man.

How do you know if you are a spiritual Christian? I want to ask you two questions that will address 2 of the characteristics of a spiritual Christian:

A. Do You Have Spiritual Discernment? – In v.15a Paul says, “But he who is spiritual judges all things....” The word translated “judges” (ἀνακρίνω) is an intensive form of the word. It means, “to investigate, examine, evaluate, scrutinize; to question, interrogate.”³ The spiritual person is not gullible regarding error, but is discerning, able to sift the evidence and reach proper conclusions about all things, especially about spiritual truth from God’s Word. So one of the marks of maturity is discernment. He understands what the real problems are, and what the real solutions are. Only believers have the indwelling influence of the Holy Spirit, and the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit is essential if we are to understand the Word of God (cf. I Jn. 2:27).

Paul is making a contrast here between the good discernment of the spiritual man, and the false wisdom and conclusions of worldly wisdom (1:20-21). Our world is filled with “experts” who have all kinds of physical and mental capabilities, but few spiritual capabilities. We could assemble all the world’s experts and yet, they would utterly fail to solve our real problems.

Having discernment or lacking discernment can be illustrated from the physical world in the difference between a child and a mature adult. A child is very gullible. They will believe most anything you tell them. An adult is much more discerning. Children and young people have a great tendency to follow what others are doing without considering if they are doing what is right or wrong, harmful or beneficial.

How can you acquire this characteristic of a spiritual Christian? First, you need to be

³ Acts 17:11 says, “...they received the word with all readiness, and *searched* the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so.” 1 Cor 4:3 says, “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be *judged* by you or by a human court....”

indwelt by the Spirit of God, and then rely upon the Spirit to guide you, and to give you understanding of the Word of God. And reading and studying the Word of God is the other way to gain spiritual discernment. The result is what we read about in the last of v.16, “we have the mind of Christ.” The spiritual man has discernment because he is controlled by the mind of Christ. To “have the mind of Christ” means to look at life from the Savior’s point of view, having His values and desires in mind. It means to think God’s thoughts and not think as the world thinks. The doctrine of illumination does not mean we can know and understand everything (Dt. 29:29), or that we do not need human teachers (Eph. 4:11-12). It does mean that Scripture can be understood by every Christian who is diligent and obedient.

By the way, there is a third way that people gain discernment, and that is by experience. This is learning the hard way. Even unbelievers gain some discernment that way.

B. Are You Misunderstood by Unbelievers? – Notice what Paul says beginning in the last of v.15, “yet he himself is rightly judged (ἀνακρίνω) by no one. For ‘who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?’” The unsaved person does not understand the Christian, for they live in two different worlds. It is just as impossible for the world to understand faithful Christians as it is for them to understand God Himself and His Word. He is bound to call the spiritual man a fool and never realizes that the folly is all on his side. He cannot see our wealth nor his own emptiness, while we can see both. The person in Christ will be misunderstood and often mistreated (cf. Jn. 15:20). The spiritual man who is controlled by the Spirit of God confounds (1:27) and amazes the men of this world. People couldn’t figure out John the Baptist, or Paul, or Jesus Christ Himself. They can’t understand their source of joy and peace in the midst of trouble. They can’t understand their love in the face of hostility. They just can’t understand what makes you “tick” as a Christian.

On the other hand, if you find yourself in agreement and fellowship with unbelievers, then that means that you are either not saved, or you are *not* a spiritual Christian. 2 Cor. 6:14-15 says, “... what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols?...”

Do vv.15-16 describe you? Are you a spiritual person? It is God’s will for you to become a spiritual person, a person controlled by the Spirit. I have already told you how you become one. You must be filled by the Spirit, led by the Spirit, and enlightened by the Spirit as you learn the truth of God’s Word, the Bible. There is no other way to become a spiritual Christian. There is no short-cut to spirituality. You can become religious apart from the Spirit and the Word, but you can’t become spiritual.

So in all likelihood some here today are still in your natural, fallen state. You need to be born again. On the other hand, I hope that many of you have grown in your faith and have become spiritual. But if we are a typical church, I believe we still have many who fall into this 3rd category:

III. ARE YOU A CARNAL CHRISTIAN?

Paul says in v.1, “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ.” Paul indicates here that most of the Corinthian Christians were not spiritual, but carnal. In fact, I would say that to this day a majority of Christians are carnal rather than spiritual. That does not mean that they were no longer Christians. Notice that he calls them “brethren.”

I need to explain Paul’s terminology here. The word “carnal” (σαρκικός) literally refers to one who is fleshly. In other words, he is dominated by the appetites and desires of the flesh, *and* of the sin nature. In fact, the apostle Peter said, “Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims,

abstain from fleshly (σαρκικός) lusts which war against the soul” (1 Pet. 2:11). As here and elsewhere,⁴ the word is contrasted with “spiritual.” You see, the sin nature is not removed when you become a believer. When we were born spiritually, God broke the back of sin, crippled its ability to totally control us, and paid its penalty. But the tendency to evil remains. We still have a problem with “I” trouble! The immature Christian lives for the things of the flesh and has little interest in the things of the Spirit.

Notice the problem here. Paul says in the last of v.2, “for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able.” Furthermore, notice that Paul said in v.3, “For you are still carnal.” Even after about 5 years they hadn’t grown spiritually. When we are first saved, we are “babes in Christ.” There is nothing wrong with being a spiritual baby. Spiritual immaturity is natural and acceptable for a *new* Christian. It’s important, however, for spiritual babies to grow. Nothing is more precious or wonderful than a little baby. But when a child never develops, it is heartbreaking. Most of the Corinthians were not babes because they were newly redeemed, but because they were inexcusably immature. It should only take a few years to grow out of spiritual infancy. So if you have been saved for a good while, and if you still haven’t become very Christlike in your actions and attitudes, you are spiritually stunted!

Now in this text of Scripture Paul gives 3 symptoms of a carnal Christian. I hope you will be very honest with God this morning, and examine your life, and see if the following symptoms are evident in your life:

A. Are You Self-Centered? Noticed in v.1 that Paul likened the carnal Corinthians to “babes in Christ.” One aspect of the sin nature is self-centeredness. That is the most basic characteristic of a baby. When they are hungry or uncomfortable, they will scream and cry until they get what they want! It doesn’t matter how tired mom and dad are. The carnal Christian is just like a baby; he loves to display himself. He’ll give money if folks *know* that he gives it. He’ll work on a church committee if he gets appropriate praise. He loves to be the center of attention, and the moment someone steals the stage from him, he will show his discontentment by getting upset

Do you remember the TV comedy called “Amen”? There was one episode when Deacon Fry quit when he was not elected chairman of the Board.

B. How Is Your Diet? When you are sick, it is very common for your diet to be affected. You either do not feel like eating, or you are not able to eat certain foods. And a person’s diet also is indicative of their growth and development. It is not difficult to determine a believer’s spiritual maturity, or immaturity, if you discover what kind of “diet” he enjoys, or is able to receive. In v.2 Paul says, “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.” Just as the physical man needs a balanced diet if his body is to be healthy, so the inner man needs a balanced diet of spiritual food.

The baby begins with milk, but as he grows and his teeth develop, he needs solid food. As Paul says here, when they first became Christians, Paul could only give them the milk of the Word. He gave them simple nourishing truths to help them grow and mature in the Lord. The natural man does not accept God’s Word. The carnal man comprehends only some of God’s Word.

Based on Hebrews 5:10-14, Wiersbe says that “milk” represents what Jesus Christ did on earth, while “meat” concerns what He is doing now in heaven. The gospels and stories of the Old Testament represent the milk of the Word, and the epistles represent the meat of the Word. A new Christian might explain the atonement as “Christ died for my sins.” But the meat of the Word

⁴ Rom. 7:14, “For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin.”

would explain it in terms of regeneration, justification, substitution, and propitiation. Immature Christians get lost in the epistles of Paul. In fact, many Christians do not want anything but evangelistic preaching, or simple moral lessons, because such preaching doesn't threaten their spiritual immaturity. They want a spiritual diet of little sweet tidbits and simple truths. They want to come to church and be like a cheerleader, "Tell 'em, preacher. That's right, preacher. Tell those sinners how to get right." They want preaching addressed to other people, and not themselves. I believe in evangelistic preaching, but no Christian is going to grow on evangelistic preaching. Immature Christians want preaching that is entertaining, while mature Christians are interested in doctrine that will enlighten and edify. The kind of spiritual diet you enjoy and are able to accept is a good sign of your spiritual condition. Paul preached "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) and "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph. 3:8). That includes both the milk and the meat of God's Word.

Notice the rebuke here. At the end of v.2 he says that they are still not able to accept the meat of the Word, but only milk. Many Christians today are the same way. They have never learned how God expects them to live as Christians. They have never learned to discern and apply God's word to their lives.

C. How Are Your Relationship? - In v.3 we read, "for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?" Paul confronts them with some evidence of their carnality in v.3. What he says here are all characteristics of children. Discontentment is the first mark of the carnal Christian. A carnal Christian is always unhappy. They are like the children of Israel in the wilderness, always complaining.

Discontentment is often related to envying. Envy, or jealousy, is a severe form of selfishness, begrudging someone else what we wish were ours. It is the vice of the heart which loves to lower another and to exalt self. Jealousy and strife are far from being petty sins. They are among the surest marks of fallen humanness. I just read the other day in Readers' Digest that 32% of people polled admitted they'd be jealous if their best friend lost weight.⁵

The results of envy are often visible in a church. If a new church member is elected to be a deacon, a long-time member who is carnal may become upset.

Now where there is envy in the heart there is sure to be the other problem mentioned here: strife. This word (ερις) means to squabble and be in discord.

Next, strife usually leads to division. Wherever a carnal Christian goes he is a source of strife, discord, and division. He gives an example in v.4, "For when one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not carnal?" Carnal Christians will choose up sides in a church. Children like to identify with heroes, whether sports heroes or Hollywood heroes. The "babes" in Corinth were fighting over which preacher was the greatest—Paul, Apollos, or Peter. It sounded like children on the playground: "My father can fight better than your father!"

Conclusion: Don't you want to be a mature Christian, with all the blessings and benefits that brings? Don't you want to have the discernment to avoid the foolish mistakes so many people make? Don't you want to have good, loving relationships with people, rather than experiencing envy, strife, and division? Well I want to challenge you to take the steps necessary to reach that goal.

First, you need to make sure you are born again. God has provided His Son as an atonement for your sin. He died in your place. Repent of your sin and believe in Him. Next, if you are already

⁵ Sparkpeople.com in *Reader's Digest*, Feb. 05, page 196.

a Christian, perhaps you need to go back to the place of repentance, and die to self all over again as a first step. Then God wants to help you grow spiritually. And indeed, becoming a spiritual Christian is a process of growth. 2 Pet. 3:18 says, “but grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” In Ephesians 4:12-14, Paul writes that we are no longer to be children, but are to grow up in Christ.

You can become a Christian in a moment, but not a mature Christian. Christ can enter, cleanse, and forgive you in a matter of seconds, but it will take much longer for your character to be transformed and molded to his will. It takes only a few minutes for a bride and bridegroom to be married, but in the rough-and-tumble of their home, it may take many years for two strong wills to be dovetailed into one.⁶

So I want to share with you 3 steps toward growing into the spiritual, mature Christian God wants you to be: 1) Be filled with the Holy Spirit. That what Eph. 5:18 commands. You must be empty of self before you can be filled with the Holy Spirit. Jesus said in Mt. 16:24, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” Then ask to be filled by the Spirit, and you shall receive.

2) Nourish yourself upon the Word of God. As I Pet. 2:2 indicates, one of the most important parts of spiritual growth is learning and applying the Word of God. There is no other way to become a spiritual Christian than through Bible reading and Bible study.

One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, “My son, the battle is between 2 wolves. One is Evil. It is envy, selfishness, strife, greed, arrogance, resentment, and lies. The other is Good. It is love, joy, peace, humility, kindness, generosity, truth, compassion and faith.” The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather, “Which wolf wins?” The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed”

3) Obey the Word of God, letting your life be transformed by the Spirit and the Word (Rom. 12:2). And as you study the Scriptures, you must believe it, and act upon it. James says we must be doers of the word, and not just hearers. As vv.15-16 indicate, we can learn spiritual truth if we are Christians. But we must do more than learn truth. We must live it. In every area of life, you loose what you do not use. I learned some French in High School, but I have forgotten most of what I learned because I didn’t use it in my daily life. We can experience revival if God’s people will put away sin and crucify the old nature, and begin to daily feed on the Word of God, just like I Pet. 2:1-2 says!

Sources: Steve Felker (sermon tapes of 11/26/89); R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937); John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Jerry Vines, *God Speaks Today: A Study of 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Wise: 1 Corinthians* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

⁶ John Stott, *Basic Christianity*, in *Christianity Today*, June 2004, p. 54.