

1 Corinthians

Bible Study

Natural, Spiritual, and Carnal

1 Corinthians 2:12–3:3

Paul is comparing the wisdom of men with the wisdom of God. Man's wisdom is foolishness to God because man does not acknowledge God as the source of wisdom. Man considers the wisdom of God to be foolish because it does not make sense to him. Man is unable to comprehend anything spiritual.

Paul is specifically speaking of the cross in this section of 1 Corinthians. He begins in verse 6 to explain that the wisdom of men lead them to crucify Jesus. (Note that many people believe the apostle Paul is referring to Satan in verses 6–8. In context, Paul is speaking about the wisdom and foolishness of mankind, not of Satan. Scripture places the blame on Israel for Christ's death (Acts 2:23, 36).) The wisdom of Jesus dying on the cross was hidden from mankind until it was revealed to the apostle Paul. Before Paul, Peter used the events of the cross to shame Israel. Paul, however, understood that God's glory and wisdom were made evident through the cross.

It is in the context of the cross that Paul speaks of God's wisdom and man's foolishness. God's wisdom in having Jesus Christ die on the cross was explained to Paul in the doctrine he calls the Mystery, as it was revealed to him by Jesus Christ. It is in this context that Paul speaks of the natural and spiritual man.

The natural man

The natural man is one who lives and perceives in his natural state of sin. All men are born after Adam, and therefore are born into sin. No person after Adam has experienced life free from sin, which is why it is impossible for a natural man to comprehend spiritual matters (1 Corinthians 15:45–49).

For the longest time I thought that the phrase "they are spiritually discerned" was being applied to the person. However, the whole sentence is about the things of the Spirit. The natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God: for the things of the Spirit are foolishness to him: neither can he know the things of the Spirit because the things of the Spirit can only be discerned and understood spiritually.

The spiritual man

In contrast to the natural man, one who is unable to understand spiritual things, is the spiritual man. The spiritual man has the Holy Spirit indwelling him, and is therefore able to discern spiritual matters. The unsaved person considers spiritual things to be foolish simply because they cannot comprehend godly matters. Just as one human is able to understand another human, we who are spiritual can understand concepts that come from God.

This is why the cross makes no sense to the world. For them, it is foolish to think that God would send His Son to die, and through His death, burial, and resurrection, it is possible for a person to have eternal life through faith. Man's wisdom says that we need to work for our salvation. Humanly, it does not make sense that a person can be saved only through believing in the Person and works of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes man's wisdom leads a person to believe that eventually all people will be saved (because God is love), or that there are many paths that lead to God and eternal life (through Buddha, Hinduism, Islam, or Oprah). This is what happens when a person leaves the truths and wisdom of God's word. People often seek deeper wisdom outside of Scripture. Those who do this, including those who meditate on God waiting for Him to "speak" to them outside of Scripture, are all demonstrating utter foolishness because they are ignoring, or adding to, what God has already clearly told us through Scripture.

Paul was contending with those in the Corinthian church who wanted to leave his teaching and follow another's teaching. Even though they were following solid men of God, they were not adhering to the teaching given to them through Paul from Jesus Christ. Adding to what Paul teaches is foolish. Those who mix teaching from Peter into what Paul teaches are foolish, not because they are natural, but because they

are not adhering to Paul's doctrine. Anyone who turns away from or changes Paul's teaching is foolish. This is what Paul was fighting in the Corinthian church, and explains why Paul continuously tells Timothy to hold fast the words that he had given to him, and to teach faithful men this doctrine, who in turn will teach others. Unfortunately, this did not happen, for we see Paul's warning about wolves coming in among the flock in Ephesus and then it happening by the time he wrote his second letter to Timothy. He says in 2 Timothy 1:15, "...all they which are in Asia be turned away from me; of whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes."

Carnal Christians

Paul is unable to give the Corinthian church the deep doctrines of grace because they are carnal. Many people believe that a carnal person cannot be saved. They consider the term, *carnal Christian* to be an oxymoron since they reject that a person can be carnal and a Christian at the same time. There are those who adhere to Reformed Theology (such as R. C. Sproul) who says that, "...Scripture refers to good works as a necessary fruit of our redemption." They define a carnal person as one who is not producing the fruit of good works, and are therefore proving themselves to be unsaved.

Although they are biblical in their argument, they are not dispensational. They come to this understanding by applying Scripture that belongs to Israel to the Body of Christ. They will say Christians are justified by faith alone, apart from works (Galatians 2:16), but then mix in Israel's requirement of works as a demonstration of faith based on James saying that faith without works is dead (James 2:12—26). Therefore, they conclude that anyone saying they have faith, but not producing the fruit of works, are not truly saved.

In order to maintain this theology, it is necessary to ignore Paul's letter to the Romans (Romans 3:28 "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.") and fail to understand that even Israel was not saved by the works of the Law. They were saved only by faith, and then if they had a genuine faith, they would do the works. The works did not save them, but the works were a necessary part of their salvation. Those who did the works without faith were not saved.

Today, in this Dispensation of Grace, we, by faith, add nothing to our salvation. The Reformed Theologian looks at a person whom they think is not bearing fruit through visible works and concludes that they are not saved. The problem with this is that they are defining what the works are by applying Scripture that belongs to Israel. However, even the most religious Reformed Theologian, who preaches that we are under the Law, does not follow the Law as God demanded of Israel. Since they are preaching the works of the Law to prove their faith, a case can be made that no Reformed Theologian could be saved since they are not truly doing the works of the Law as defined by God.

Paul calls the people in the Corinthian church saints, but says that he is not able to feed them meat because they are carnal. A carnal Christian is truly saved, but is living in the flesh. One reason for studying the book of Romans is to understand our salvation. We know that our salvation is eternal, but we also have the free will to choose how we will live. Romans 6 begins with Paul asking the question, "Shall I continue to sin so that God's grace abounds?" The obvious answer is, absolutely not. We have been freed from sin so that we no longer are slaves to sin. Romans 7 shows Paul struggling with sin, but we can see from Romans 8 that he was assured of his salvation.

In summary, the unsaved are unable to understand spiritual things, while the carnal are unable to comprehend the deeper things of Christ. This shows that they were able to understand basic spiritual things, however, they needed to move on to deeper concepts (Romans 1:11, 25—26). Living in the flesh prevented them from doing this.

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