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1 THE CANCER OF CARNALITY

If we went back twenty-five years and did away with all of the country, pop, and rock songs that deal with someone leaving his or her lover, the list of available tunes would probably be cut in half. One that would definitely have to go is the seventies hit song by Paul Simon, “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover.”

Judging by the music our secular culture keeps churning out, one would have to conclude that we are in a love crisis and have been for quite some time. The world’s crisis is twofold. First, no one seems to know how to keep love alive, how to keep the flame lit, the fire burning. Second, everyone seems to be stepping out on his or her true love.

Well, I can testify that the church has a love crisis too. We have a hard time keeping our first love in its rightful place. The title of this book suggests that it’s possible for us Christians to leave our first love. Jesus Himself said so to a group of Christians in the church at

Ephesus (Revelation 2:4).

So we've got a problem. As I suggested in the preface, because we are very imperfect people in an imperfect world, it's easy for us to get our priorities messed up. And the place where we often mess up is in getting our eyes and hearts off Christ and on something else. It's called leaving your first love, and there's only one remedy for it. It's called returning to your first love.

Now, if you've ever been lost, made a wrong turn and left the road you were supposed to be traveling on, you know you've got to return. In fact, if you're like me, you *want* to return to the right road once you see you're going the wrong way!

But before you can get back to where you're supposed to be, you've got to see where you are, figure out how you messed up to get where you are, and retrace your steps. If it's possible to leave your first love, and Jesus said it is, we'd better identify and deal with the attitudes and actions that can get us off track. That's what I want to do in these early chapters.

The first of these love-stealers is the spiritual condition the New Testament calls carnality. Whether it's in our individual lives, our family life, our church life, or our life in society, a lot of what is wrong with us is attributable to our own carnality.

God has too many children who are not really sure whose family they want to be a part of. They're trying to step out with Christ and the world at the same time, which leads to unanswered prayer, emotional and physical weakness, loss of peace, loss of joy, lack of stability, and all manner of ills.

Now don't misunderstand me. I am not insinuating that every time a Christian has a problem, it is because he or she is carnal. But I am suggesting that far too many of us are having far too many failures because we are carnal and are half-stepping with the gospel.

What does it mean to be a carnal Christian? Simply stated, carnality is that spiritual state where a born-again Christian knowingly and persistently lives to please and serve self rather than Christ. Paul explains the concept of carnality in 1 Corinthians 3, which we will consider below.

A GENUINE CHRISTIAN

The first thing I want to note is that a carnal Christian is a genuine Christian. When I say carnal *Christian*, I mean just that. I am not talking about those who have never come to Christ. You can't leave your first love for Christ if you were never properly related to Him in the first place. So when I talk about a carnal Christian, I have in mind a born-again believer.

Did you know it's possible to be on your way to heaven and yet be of little use to God on earth? It's possible to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior and yet come to the place where you refuse to submit to His lordship. That's the picture of the carnal Christian: someone who is on his way to heaven but has compromised his life of faith on earth.

Many people think they are carnal Christians when they are not Christians at all. Some think they have backslidden when they've never *front*slidden! If you've never trusted the Lord Jesus Christ alone for salvation, then you need to be born again (John 3:1-7). You need to repent of your sins and be saved, to entrust your eternal destiny to Jesus Christ, who paid for your sins on the cross. Carnality is not your problem if you're in this category.

Sometimes we see a person who professes to have been born again but who is now living a Christian lie. It's easy to say this person was never a Christian. That's possible. But it's also possible that this person is a genuine Christian who has grown lukewarm and has become a failure in the faith.

This is so because Christians have a two fold relationship with God. Just as it is possible to be legally married without enjoying the intimate fellowship that marriage should bring, it is also possible to be truly married to Christ but not enjoying the fellowship that ought to be part of our salvation.

That a person can be a Christian and be carnal is clear from 1 Corinthians 3. Paul says in verse 1, "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ."

Please notice that Paul addressed these people as brethren, as being “in Christ.” Brethren are part of the family of God. And if you are in Christ, you are a Christian. Yet in this chapter, Paul is going to chastise his readers because even though they were brethren (part of the family) and in Christ (genuine Christians), they were failing spiritually.

Back in 1 Corinthians 1:2, Paul opened his letter to this church made up largely of carnal Christians by writing, “to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling.” The Corinthians were people set apart for God’s purposes. They were saved, sanctified brethren, members of the family. Yet they were carnal, living as if Christ were not the object of their love at all, let alone their first love.

There are many illustrations in the Bible of people who committed themselves to God and then became abysmal failures. I think of Saul, the first king of Israel. He was the Lord’s anointed ruler, chosen to lead Israel (1 Samuel 10:1). Yet here is a man who because of rebellion against God wound up using witchcraft and ultimately committing suicide. Saul became suicidal because of his rebellion against God.

Saul’s successor, David, lived in a state of carnality when he not only committed adultery with Bathsheba, but committed murder and then tried to cover it up until Nathan the prophet confronted him (2 Samuel 11–12).

David’s son Solomon was a great king. The first ten chapters of 1 Kings tell us how wonderfully committed he was. When he had a chance to ask for anything his heart desired, Solomon prayed, “Don’t give me riches, give me wisdom” (1 Kings 3:2–15). And there are few prayers in the Bible as great as the prayer of Solomon when he dedicated the temple (1 Kings 8:22–53). He was a man committed.

But the Bible says in 1 Kings 11:1, “Solomon loved many foreign women.” What an understatement for someone who wound up with 700 wives and 300 girlfriends on the side! These women “turned [Solomon’s] heart away after other gods; and his heart was not

wholly devoted to the Lord his God” (v. 4). If that isn’t a description of leaving your first love, I don’t know what is.

No wonder that by the time Solomon wrote Ecclesiastes, his theme was the emptiness of life. When he left his first love and entered into a life of carnality, all Solomon could talk about was the meaninglessness of life apart from a dynamic relationship with God because he had become a carnal saint.

The list could go on and on. Later in 1 Corinthians, we read about a man who was living with his stepmother in an incestuous relationship. Although Paul pronounced severe judgment on this man in expelling him from the church, the man may well have been a believer who needed severe discipline to bring him to repentance and restore him (5:1–5).

My point is that getting saved ten years ago doesn’t fix you spiritually today. God gave you new life, but you must live the new life He gave you in order for it to be meaningful. It is possible to be a spiritual victor yesterday and a spiritual disaster today. Unless we keep short accounts with God, unless we live this Christian life day by day in a dynamic walk with Him, it is possible for us to be spiritual failures.

A STAGNANT CHRISTIAN

Second, the carnal Christian is a stagnant Christian. Look at 1 Corinthians 3:2–3a: “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.”

A carnal Christian is one who has been saved for a period of time, yet is demonstrating little or no spiritual development. One of the things that dismays me is the number of Christians who come to church week after week, month after month, and year after year, but who are making no progress even though they are still performing.

They still commit the same old sins in the same old way. They still refuse to think biblically, to relate to God as He demands. But they are in the same seat (you can predict it) every Sunday morning.

In fact, no one else had better sit in their seat. They're still performing, but they're wrestling with stuff they should have been able to overcome long ago.

ABC Saints

Paul says the thing that marks carnal believers is their inability to eat solid spiritual food. In other words, they are not able to get into the deeper things of God. They're what I call ABC Christians.

Most of us would be insulted if someone gave us a book that started out, "A is for Apple. Apple is a fruit that grows on trees. A is for Apple." We would be offended if we turned to the next page and read, "B is for Boy. Boy runs after ball. B is for Boy." Then, "C is for Cup." You get the idea.

You would say, "Hey, I've already been to kindergarten. I'm way beyond this stuff." You learned your ABCs when you were four or five. Now you are able to understand sentences and clauses and prepositions and adverbial phrases and various other grammatical constructs. You have graduated way beyond kindergarten subjects. You put in the time necessary to learn and grow.

But we all know people who have not used their time to learn. They dropped out along the way. They stopped educating themselves and so today, even though they are adults, the best they can give you is "A is for Apple."

The way to develop your ability to read is by reading, not by wishing you could read, hoping you can read, or even praying for the ability to read. If you want to learn to read, you've got to practice reading. And if you want to become a spiritual Christian, one whose first love is in its rightful place, you have to do the things necessary to spiritual growth. You cannot remain stagnant.

Stalled Saints

When I was in Lagos, Nigeria, recently, a group of us were in a taxi cab when it stalled. We couldn't move. My first night in Nige-

ria, and I have to get out and help push a car.

Well, we discovered the driver’s gauge wasn’t working and he had no gas. He was trying to take us somewhere with no tiger in his tank. We got some gas and poured it in the tank and finally got the car to go because the engine had been fed.

In other words, air alone wouldn’t do. That car had two holy men and two holy women in it, but it wasn’t going anywhere because what was required was gas and anything less wouldn’t do.

Many of us want to give God everything but what God requires. We want to offer Him a little of this and a little of that, but our spiritual engines don’t roar because we are not giving what God is requiring: a committed life, using the time we have for spiritual development.

Unfortunately, there’s another chapter to my Nigerian taxi experience. Just as we were about to enter a highway, the cab stalled again. I got out, and we pushed the car into a gas station, where it stalled permanently. So on my first night in Nigeria, I was on the street having to thumb a ride with my hosts.

Because that taxi stalled, we were not able to progress toward our intended destination in a timely fashion. We were held back.

Many times Christians are carnal because they are stalled. They can’t move forward, no matter how hard they spin their wheels, because they are stuck in a rut. They have by their own choice failed to move from milk to solid food.

They still measure the success of their spiritual life by how well they were entertained, not by how much truth they were exposed to. They want to feel good even when they aren’t learning anything. They want someone else to give them the Word. They never learn to pick up a knife and fork for themselves.

You can excuse a baby who does not have the capacity to eat on her own yet. But once you’re grown up, you are supposed to be able to feed yourself. These Christians in Corinth had not done so. Like the people described in Hebrews 5:11, they had become “dull of hearing.”

This word *dull* was used of a mule. Carnal Christians have become mule-headed, stubborn, refusing to learn and apply the truth of God,

which stalls their spiritual development. This suggests a third characteristic of carnality.

A FLESHLY MINDED CHRISTIAN

The carnal Christian is a fleshly minded Christian. Let's look back at 1 Corinthians 3:3, where Paul says: "You are still fleshly [carnal]. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?"

Now Paul gets to the heart of the matter. Carnal Christians have developed a mind-set of disobedience. That is, they are willfully living in sin, being controlled by the old person they used to be rather than by the new person they have become.

No Christian has to be carnal. We are talking about a decision of the will here, not an occasional lapse into sin. Everyone sins. No one is perfect. A person who falls into sin is not necessarily a carnal Christian.

Rather, carnal Christians have a spiritual mind-set, a way of thinking, that seeks to gratify themselves rather than please Christ. Paul uses the idea of flesh here to mean that capacity all of us have to serve and please ourselves. The thing that makes the flesh the flesh is that it pleases us.

Think of the sins that are most tempting to you. The thing that makes them appealing is that they gratify you. They make you feel good. They appeal to your senses. That's the flesh.

But when God saved us, He saved us to serve Christ. We can never rise above our carnality until we change our focus from being fleshly minded to being spiritually minded. To fully understand this, we need to look at the four types of people Paul mentions in this section so we can see how the carnal Christian fits into the equation.

The Natural Person

The first type of person is described back in 1 Corinthians 2:14: "A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for

they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.”

I was talking to a brother one day and he said, “Yeah, I’m a natural man.”

That may be a compliment to him, but according to the Bible that’s really not something to be proud of. A natural man is another way of saying a non-Christian, an unbeliever. A Christian is supposed to be supernatural. A non-Christian does things naturally. A non-Christian’s mind-set is that it’s OK to do something if everyone is doing it, because it’s only natural.

Notice the two main traits of natural men and women. First, they don’t welcome spiritual things. Unbelievers will go along with spiritual things only so far. They don’t want God’s truth to control their lives.

A second trait of natural men and women is that spiritual things seem like foolishness to them. They can’t grasp the truth of God. That is, they do not have the capacity to interact with spiritual things. Unsaved people don’t welcome the things of God because they don’t know what to do with them. They don’t know how to take the things of the Spirit and make sense of them.

Therefore, issues like spiritual death and spiritual truth are not very important to natural folk. They want to talk about everything but spiritual things. The natural man can understand science and mathematics and other disciplines, but he can’t understand and he doesn’t appreciate spiritual reality.

It’s like the man who is at a friend’s house watching television when a great movie comes on. The friend has a small television, so this man says to himself, *Hey, I want to see this movie on the new big-screen television I just bought.*

So he races home and turns on his new big-screen television. But he can’t find the movie he wants to see. He starts channel-surfing. The picture is sharp. The sound is great. But there’s no movie.

You can probably guess what was wrong. This guy didn’t know that his friend had cable television, which gave him the ability to pull in a signal from the outside. The second man had a bigger and

better television, but he couldn't receive what his friend received because he didn't have cable.

The unbeliever can't link into the divine frame of reference no matter how expensive his equipment is or how much power or prestige he has. He has no access to God. Many non-Christians have a lot to show of this world's stuff, but they can't get the spiritual picture because they don't have the connection.

The Spiritual Person

The second type of person Paul describes is found in verses 15–16 of 1 Corinthians 2: “But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.”

Notice the reference to the mind. The spiritual person is the mature Christian who has learned to think like Christ thinks. The mind is key here because it is the channel through which you collect the data by which you operate.

Everything you do in your life, you do because your brain tells you to do it. Without your brain, nothing else works. It is the channel that controls your motor functions, your speech, and all the other functions. When your brain dies, nothing else can work.

What the brain is to the body, the mind is to the soul. So Paul is saying that a spiritual person has learned to think God's thoughts. He has reached the point where he consistently—yet not perfectly—appraises, evaluates, or examines life from God's perspective.

Now let me ask you a question. In your decision making, your planning, your whole orientation to life, do you regularly raise the question, What does God think about this? If you do not, it is because you are not a spiritual person yet. A spiritual person thinks like Christ.

One of the things that marks a spiritual person is spiritual perception. Spiritual people are able to connect present decisions with future consequences because they are mature. Immature people don't make that connection. They just live for the moment.

My children, especially my younger ones, don't talk about saving. They don't even bring it up. But they talk a lot about spending. I give them some money and it's gone. That's because their maturity level doesn't allow them to see long-term, only short-term.

Maturity, though, says I've got to look at the future instead of only at the moment. The spiritual person perceives things from the divine vantage point, not just from the immediate circumstance. He has the ability to discern. She has divine insight.

Babes in Christ

Paul's third type of person is described for us at the beginning of chapter 3 in 1 Corinthians:

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. (vv. 1–2a)

Now we are talking about infant Christians, people who are brand-new to the faith. They simply have not been saved long enough to become spiritual.

That may sound confusing, because some new Christians take off and soar spiritually from the day of their conversion. They appear to be more spiritual than some of the old hands. When I say a baby Christian cannot be spiritual, I mean he cannot be mature. A baby Christian can be a Spirit-controlled Christian, to be sure. But he cannot be mature, because maturity requires time.

Notice that Paul attaches no blame to these people for their immaturity. You don't condemn babies for being babies. That's all you can expect them to be. So when he talks about "babes in Christ," he's talking about Christians who are in kindergarten because they haven't had time to get to college. They haven't had time to develop simply because they are young.

When I was in Nigeria, I needed help because the people would be speaking another language and I wouldn't know what was going

on. So I often had to say to my host, “What is he saying?”

I was new to that environment. I could not be expected to speak or understand the Nigerian language. There was nothing wrong with me. That’s the way it is with infant Christians. They are new to the environment, so they don’t know the walk and they don’t know the talk. If you are a brand-new Christian, don’t get frustrated because you are not mature. Just let the Holy Spirit control what you have and He will make it into more.

The Carnal Person

Now we are back to where we started. We’ve come full circle, because the fourth type of person is the carnal Christian, described at the beginning of verse 3: “You are still fleshly.”

That word *still* is the key. There has been ample time for spiritual growth. But carnal Christians are still living in light of their old patterns of behavior. They have slipped back into their old fleshly ways of doing things. They aren’t that different anymore.

You probably made some great changes when you first got saved. But after the initial burst, it’s easy to stagnate and then start to back-track. If you’re not careful, you start doing some of the things you gave up when you first got saved.

When that happens, you put up a spiritual facade so that when people look at you, they think you are something. But if they were living with you, they would know you are something else! You dress holy. You wear holy cologne. You’ve got a holy smile. But none of that can hide the fact of arrested spiritual development.

In the case of the Corinthians, Paul had known them for about five years. Now he was writing to say, “You folks are five years old and not walking. You’re still on pabulum. You’re five years old and making no progress. You are going through the spiritual exercises but you are half-stepping.”

One of the ministers at the church I pastor in Dallas is Dr. Sonny Acho, who’s from Nigeria. In conversation he will often switch back and forth between English and his native dialect. I don’t know what

he's saying to me. I get worried. He could be fomenting a revolution and I would never know it!

Dr. Acho gives me enough English to let me know he can speak it, but then he gives me enough Nigerian to let me know he's not about to let me in on everything he knows. So I often say when he does that, "You've got to speak English around me."

Well, that's what a carnal Christian is like. He speaks Christian, but then he lives another dialect. He says, "Praise God! Hallelujah! Amen!" with his lips, but he speaks a different language with his life.

So of the four types of people Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 2–3, the carnal Christian is the only one who isn't acting the way he's supposed to act. You can't expect a natural person to act any way but natural, you can't blame a baby for being immature, and you can't fault a spiritual Christian who's growing like he should. But the carnal man is disappointing because he's had time to grow and yet has become stunted in his growth.

A REBELLIOUS CHRISTIAN

This brings us to our final point: The carnal Christian is a rebellious Christian. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:3b–4, "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?"

Have you ever said, "I'm only human"? That's non-Christian talk. That's "mere men" talk. Have you ever said, "Everyone does it"? More "mere men" talk.

Paul says to the Corinthians, "You are acting just like everyone else, like the unbelievers around you. You are not acting like the new men and new women you were created to be. You are doing the things non-Christians do."

Refusing to Submit

What were these carnal Christians doing? In this chapter Paul cites their jealousy and strife concerning various human leaders.

They were taking sides, pitting one leader against the other. And in chapter 5 we discover that they not only tolerated a shameful case of incest; they even took perverse pride in it.

In Galatians 5, Paul talks about immoral living, impure activity, envy, strife, and idolatry. He calls these things the works of the flesh. He is saying that when Christians adopt these patterns of behavior, it is because they are rebellious. They are refusing to submit.

We have all seen children who get rebellious when they go through their teenage years. It's not that your teenage son doesn't understand your statement, "Clean up your room." It's that he now thinks he is grown. He thinks he pays the bills. So he says, "I'm not going to clean up my room!"

Now you've got a rebellion problem. So you tell him once again to clean up his room, and he still doesn't do it. That's rebellion. Your son is acting unlike you have trained him to be, so you have to deal with his rebellion.

So it is with a Christian who has been saved for some time but is living after the pattern of the flesh. It's not because he can't help himself. Let's get that straight. It's because he refuses to help himself, because the carnal life is a decision of the will.

Now I realize people have problems that need to be worked on. I know people can get themselves trapped in all sorts of problems and bondage. But what I am saying is that these sinful patterns are either precipitated or perpetuated by willful decisions a person makes. A Christian is never a helpless pawn in Satan's hands.

Playing in the Dirt

If you see a little kid playing in the dirt, you don't give it a second thought because kids play in dirt. They try to eat dirt. They scrub themselves in dirt. Dirt is a toy to a kid.

When you see a twenty-one-year-old man playing in the dirt, rubbing himself with it and trying to eat it, you have a serious problem on your hands. But the only difference between the child and

the man is time. By the age of twenty-one, a person ought to know that dirt is not a toy.

Well, we have too many Christians who have been saved too long still playing in the dirt spiritually and having fun with it. We could understand if they were brand-new baby Christians who didn't yet know that dirt was something you don't play in.

But Christians can't be exposed to the truth of God week after week and month after month and not know mud when they see it. God isn't just trying to keep us out of the dirt pile. He wants to show us something so much better that we'll never want to play in the dirt again.

The dirt this world offers can only look good to a Christian who has left his first love and needs to return. My challenge to you right up front is to evaluate your life and determine whether you are natural, not saved; spiritual, seeing things from God's viewpoint; brand-new, a baby Christian; or carnal, not living like the new person you are in Christ.

If you discover that carnality best describes you, I urge you to return to your first love, Jesus Christ, today.