

“Seeing Through Cynicism”

September 23, 2012

I. Introducing Cynicism

II. The Gospel is for Cynics

* Nathanael, when he first hears about Jesus, is cynical (John 1:43-45)

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found him of whom Moses in the Law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael said to him, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.”

* Jesus saw through Nathanael’s cynicism and speaks to the deepest issues of his heart (vs. 50-51)

Jesus answered him, “Because I said to you, ‘I saw you under the fig tree,’ do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” And he said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

* **Main Point: Jesus leads us out of cynicism by speaking into the ultimate concerns of our lives**

III. Defining Cynicism

“To be cynical is to be “contemptuously distrustful of human nature and motives” - Merriam Webster Dictionary (online)¹

Cynicism has to do with seeing through and unmasking positive appearances to reveal the the more basic, underlying motives of greed, power, selfishness, lust. It says that behind every respectable public agenda there is a hidden, private agenda that is less noble, flattering, and moral - Dick Keyes²

An embittered disposition of distrust born of painful disillusionment - Andrew Byers³

IV. A Common Temptation, but Not A Comfortable One

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it - 1 Corinthians 10:13

Many Christians stand at the edge of cynicism, struggling with a defeated weariness. Personally, it is my biggest struggle in prayer. When I say that cynicism is the spirit of the age, I mean it is an influence, a tone that permeates our culture, one of the master

¹ Quoted by Andrew Byers, *Faith Without Illusions: Following Jesus as a Cynic-Saint* (Kindle Location 78). Kindle Edition.

² Keyes, Dick, *Seeing Through Cynicism: A Reconsideration of the Power of Suspicion* (IVP Books)

³ Byers, Ibid

temptations of our age. It is so pervasive that, at times, it feels like a presence. Behind the Spirit of the age lies an unseen, personal evil presence, a spirit. If Satan can't stop you from praying, they he will try and rob the fruit of praying by dulling your soul. Satan cannot create, but he can corrupt" - Paul Miller⁴

V. Should I Be Concerned ?

On various accounts, it is a commendable aim. But cynicism is slippery and elusive. It is not, after all, a fixed set of doctrines, or a philosophical system or a set of rules. It is ... a voice of doubt in your ear, a predisposition for seeing through people or things, a negative idea about human nature, a mood or attitude of suspicion, or friends with a particular sense of humor - Dick Keyes⁵

Cynicism and defeated weariness have this in common: They both question the active goodness of God on our behalf.... Because cynicism sees what is 'really going on,' it feels real, authentic. That gives cynicism as elite status since authenticity is one of the last remaining public virtues in our culture....Cynicism begins with the wry assurance that everyone has an angle. Behind every silver lining is a cloud. The cynic is always observing, critiquing, but never engaged, loving, and hoping.... To be cynical is to be distant. While offering a false intimacy of being 'in the know,' cynicism actually destroys intimacy. It leads to a creeping bitterness that can deaden and even destroy the spirit.

- Paul Miller⁶

VI. How Can I Discern If I Am Becoming Cynical?

Are My Hopes Dashed?: This where it begins. The discovery of evil for most of us is highly personal. Dashed hopes, jaded dreams, disappointments, a sense of “defeated weariness’ begins creep into our lives. We go from seeing the bright side of everything to seeking the dark side of everything. We feel betrayed by life (Miller⁷)

Is There a Growing Distrust of others?

The cynic is unwilling to trust anyone else. Maybe their trust was abused in the past. Maybe they were hurt. Regardless, they find it difficult to trust anyone. Instead, the cynic is always suspicious. She always looks behind the apparent good for a negative cause. Consequently, he questions other people’s motives, competence, or experience—sometimes all three. (Keyes)

Moral indifference: Cynicism releases you to do nothing but feel morally superior to those who are do something good but imperfect in an imperfect world. Self-interest moves to the center of most decisions, even if it means breaking some of the rules. After all, if there is no higher authority than self-interest, and I can gain by breaking the rules, why shouldn't I? (Keyes)

Am I Growing Pessimistic about the Future?

The cynic can never be positive about the future. That would involve trust or faith. Fear begins to take over. The cynic thinks, *why risk belief? I might be wrong.*

VII. How the Gospel Sees Through Our Cynicism and Speaks to Our Deepest Longings

⁴ Miller, pg. 77

⁵ Keyes, pg. 22

⁶ Miller, pg.

⁷ Miller, pages 80-81

- * Jesus does not demand our perfect performance to obtain his love, acceptance
- * Jesus performs perfectly for us in his life, death and resurrection
- * Jesus offers us true, ultimate joy and satisfaction through centering our lives on him
- * Jesus call and grace enables us to let go of our ultimate things and find our joy in him

VIII. QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION

1. Do you tend to lean towards cynicism and skepticism? Which of the four areas listed above should concern me?
2. Read Romans 15:13 and pray to the Holy Spirit for three things:
 1. Insight into God's promises
 2. Experience of your need
 3. Creation of desire

Whenever you are reading the Bible and feel like you aren't getting anything out of it, pause to ask the Spirit for insight into God's promises. What if you paused and asked him: "Lord, you have been given to us so that we can understand all the things freely given to us by God. Will you give me insight into God's Word right now?" Now, insight isn't enough. Unregenerate scholars have lots of insight into God's Word. I'm willing to bet that you have gained an insight in Scripture but not known how to respond? What if, instead of trying to "figure out application" on our own, we asked the Spirit to give us an experience of our need? What if you paused to ask him: "Lord, who knows the heart of man like the Spirit of God, will you help me to experience my specific need for right now?" Perhaps the Spirit will lead you to respond by rejoicing, repenting, interceding, or obeying.

Finally, have you ever read with insight, known your need, but felt no desire to respond to God? You know what to do but you're flat. Hollow. Cold. Don't move on or assume you will have the proper response. Pause and plead with the Spirit: "Lord, forgive me for my lack of desire, and create fresh, new desire in me to respond to you." Then, wait and respond. In order to cultivate fresh faith in the gospel, I first recommend Spirit-led Bible reading. Make a habit of asking the Spirit to give you: Insight into his promises, an experience of your need, and to create desire to respond to God. Approach God's Word with God's Spirit. Plead for the lightening of the Spirit while carrying the rod of his Word. Ask the Spirit for these three things to revive an indifferent heart - Jonathan Dodson⁸

3. How would our lives be different today if we were to take Nathanael's perspective of being realistic about contemporary evil and brokenness, yet putting our faith in Christ, and his promise of a new creation?
 - * How might that perspective change our worship of Christ in daily life?
 - * How would that perspective free us to share more of Christ's love, grace with others?

⁸ Dodson, Jonathan, *How to Cultivate Fresh Faith in the Gospel*, <http://www.gospelcenterreddiscipleship.com/how-to-cultivate-fresh-faith/>