

Cynicism

The dictionary defines **cynicism** as an inclination to believe that people are motivated purely by self-interest. It's an inherent skepticism and suspicion of everyone. And while I think that definition is helpful as a starting point, I think I would also expand it a little. Because cynicism, in my experience, isn't just suspicion towards *people* and people's *motivations*: it's suspicion towards most *anything*. People, experiences, systems, organizations, churches, truth statements, belief systems...we could go on and on. Cynicism is an inherent distrust towards any and *all* of that.

It's the posture that insists everything either *is already* bad or *will turn out* bad in the end. *Nothing* is ever as good as it seems. Or if it *is*, it *won't stay* that way for long; just give it some time. I once heard someone say that a cynic smells flowers and looks around for a coffin. Cynicism is the belief that nothing in this world is truly worth pursuing or being excited about, because nothing is ever what it seems.

And if there was ever a book of the Bible written with cynics in *mind*, it would be the book of *Ecclesiastes*. Turn with me in your bibles to **Ecclesiastes 1**. Feel free to stop by the table of contents on the way there—no shame in that at all. *Ecclesiastes*, if you're unfamiliar with it, is a very *interesting* book of the bible. Because *in* the book, the main character (who is simply called "the Teacher") just lays out his very *sober* take on life. He is essentially a guy with an *unlimited* amount of *wealth* and *resources*, who decides to sets out on an *experiment*.

His experiment is to see if there is anything in life truly worth *pursuing*. Anything, in his words, "*under the sun*," that is at all worth being excited about in the world. And *in* the experiment, he pretty much tries out *everything* there is: *accomplishments, work, relationships, pleasure, wisdom, education*. Basically if you can name it, the Teacher tries to squeeze meaning and purpose and joy *out* of it. And what we are about to read is his *conclusion* after *attempting* all of that. So let's **take a look**, starting in chapter 1, v. 1:

[1] The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: [2] "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless."

He's a real "state your thesis at the beginning of your paper" kind of guy. He's also big on repetition: "meaningless, meaningless. *Utterly* meaningless. *Everything* is meaningless." We get it, my man—we get it. Now for *clarity*: that word *meaningless* there in the NIV isn't *exactly* what he says; that's somewhere between a *translation* and an *interpretation*. The

word he uses in Hebrew is the word *hebel*. And it's the word for *vapor* or *breath* or *mist*. So think about some of the colder days we've had recently where you go outside and breathe out, and you see your breath for a split second in the air before it vanishes: that's *hebel* in Hebrew.

So the Teacher is concluding that *everything* he has pursued—everything he has tried to find joy and meaning and purpose from in his life—all of it is like a *breath*. A *vapor*. It's like you can see it for a split second, that you can see for a split second and then it's *gone*. As soon as those things in your life *materialize* and you try to derive joy and life *from* them, they vanish. In other words, **none of the things in life end up being anywhere near as good as they seem**. None of it is what it looks like on the surface, and eventually, it will all just disappear. Now, he's going to go on. Look with me continuing in v. 3:

[3] What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? [4] Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. [5] The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. [6] The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. [7] All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again.

So here, the Teacher is just **observing nature** and drawing the same conclusion as verses 1 and 2. He evidently thinks even *nature* echoes his conclusion that all of life is meaningless. *Each day*, he says, *the sun rises, and then sets, and then it all happens again the next day*. Nothing to see. The wind blows *one way*, and then another, and then it does the *whole thing* again. The streams flow to the sea, but the sea is never *full*. To him, even *nature* seems like it never *accomplishes, achieves* anything. Never *arrives*. Never reaches a satisfactory endpoint. It all just happens over and over again in the exact same way. Day in, day out. Wash, rinse, and repeat. Verse 8:

[8] All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing. [9] What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. [10] Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! This is something new"? (Nope.) It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. [11] No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.

This is where I think we can **see the Teacher's cynical spirit displayed** really clearly. Because a *cynic*, when presented with something *new* and *different* and *exciting*, tends

to respond with “yeah, I’ve seen that. Yeah I’ve *heard* that. *New technology? Overrated. New idea? Nah, probably just a reiteration of an old one. New invention? Probably only a matter of time until capitalism gets a hold of it. New experience? Yeah, probably not as cool as it seems.* That’s the cynical spirit. Unimpressed, *unmoved* by any of it.

Now, I want us to **zero in on this next part** because I think this gives us some incredible *insight* into cynicism that we’ll unpack in a moment. Skip down with me to **v. 16**:

[16] *I said to myself, “Look, I have increased in wisdom more than **anyone** who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced **much of wisdom and knowledge.**”* **[17]** *Then I applied myself to the **understanding** of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that **this, too**, is a chasing after the wind.* **[18]** *For (and I want to make sure you hear this part...) **with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.***

Notice **that last line**: “with much *wisdom*, comes much *sorrow*. The more *knowledge*, the more *grief*.” Here’s the idea that I think the Teacher is getting at, and I think it’s the framework behind an awful lot of cynicism out there:

**The more you know,
the more cynical you become.**

Often, that is how it *seems* to work. ~~The more you know, the more cynicism settles into your heart.~~ Now, when I say “the more you know,” I’m thinking of **both “book smarts” and “street smarts.”** *Information intake and life experience.* I think often, what happens is that the more you learn about *life*, the more *likely* you are to respond to *all* of it with cynicism. **Cynicism is often a response to some combination of knowledge and experience. You become cynical when you have heard and experienced enough to think that cynicism is the only rational response to it all.**

~~When you’ve been hurt one too many times, you begin assuming that every person is eventually going to hurt you. When you’ve seen one too many corrupt leaders, you assume that every leader is actually corrupt. When you have been let down by one too many experiences, you assume that every experience is just a letdown waiting to happen. Cynicism, often, is a response to knowledge and experience.~~

And in many ways, it is a **natural, understandable response.** **We think we know what is going to happen, so we begin expecting the worst.** But here’s the problem with that: **we as human beings are notorious for overestimating what we know.** *We listen to a podcast about something, and assume that we’re basically experts afterwards. We meet*

a few people, and we assume we now know what *all* people are like. ~~We have a few experiences and we assume we know how all experiences will turn out.~~ **We overestimate what we know, often.**

So we might want to **add a couple words** to that statement from a moment ago, in order to make it a tad more accurate. Here's how I *actually* think it works:

**The more you think you know,
the more cynical you become.**

I think *that's* a lot closer to the truth. See, part of the problem is that **cynicism often gets mistaken for wisdom.** Or at least closely *associated with* it. **We often assume that if someone is smart, they should be cynical. And if they're cynical, that must mean they're smart.** 'The mature people,' many of us think, 'are the ones who are unimpressed and unamused by everything.' It's those who have grown *jaded*. Those people, to us, seem like they're above the fray. And you may disagree, but here's how I know that's true: because the inverse is *also* true. Often, if we see someone who demonstrates genuine *excitement* about something, the cynic in us almost *pities* them. We assume they're only excited because of how *naive* they are about the world. "Aw, poor thing," we think, "they don't know how it all works yet. They haven't been hurt yet. Bless their hearts."

So I want to **teach you** what might be a **new word** this morning: it's the word **scoffer**. It's a word the bible uses quite a bit, especially in the Wisdom books like Psalms and Proverbs. A *scoffer*, in the bible's vocabulary, is **someone who enjoys mocking things, or looking at most everything with disdain or suspicion.** *If you constantly feel the need to pick things apart, tear things down, or sarcastically mock things that other people like, the Scriptures call what you're doing scoffing.* So while a *scoffer* isn't the exact *same thing* as a cynic, there's obviously a lot of overlap between the two ideas.

Now, **with that in mind, take a look** on the screen at a couple things that the *Scriptures* say about *scoffers*:

A scoffer seeks wisdom in vain, but knowledge is easy for a man of understanding.¹

¹ Proverbs 14:6

So a scoffer actually **can't actually acquire wisdom**, because they think they already know and understand everything. They have no ability to *grow* in their *understanding*. Next one...

A scoffer does not like to be reproved; he will not go to the wise.²

So similarly, a **scoffer has a real issue receiving** any type of *correction* or *confrontation* from other people. They don't *like* it, because they think they already understand everything there is to understand. They're too "smart," too "knowledgeable" already to *need* any help from *others* seeing themselves more accurately. And if you just heard that and went "no way. I mean I'm *cynical* but I'm not like *that*—I know how to receive *correction*," hear me out: you may have just proven that Proverb right. ~~Some of you will get that later.~~

But if I could just **do a mash-up** of those two verses into one *idea*, it would be this: **while the cynic seems to possess wisdom, their posture actually prevents it.** Cynics might have the *appearance* of wisdom, but don't possess *actual* wisdom. ~~A cynic gives off the vibe that there's nothing you can tell them that they'll be interested in or convinced by. But ironically, it is that very posture that prevents them from being able to grow in wisdom. If you already think you know and have heard it all, there's no motivation to seek out new information or experiences. Cynicism is fake wisdom.~~

But the problem goes even deeper than *that*: **cynicism also robs you of most substantial joy.** You see, most joy in life depends on your ability to *en-joy* things. But the cynic has decided there's not really anything *worth* enjoying. Everything's *overrated*; *nothing* is what it seems—so you just gotta grin and bear your way through life. **C.S. Lewis**, back in the day, talked about all of this using the language of "seeing through" things. Have you ever known somebody who "sees through" things? *Yeah I don't know about that. Yeah I'm not convinced by that. Yeah I'm skeptical of that.* On some level, it's just the ability to think critically. And C.S. Lewis *acknowledges* that *sometimes*, it can be good to "see through" things. Some things in the world really *aren't* what they seem, and the ability to *realize* that, sometimes, is just having *discernment*.

But at the same time, he **cautions against** the practice of "seeing through" *everything*. So he uses the example of looking through a window. He says it's good that we can "see through" the window in our house, because that enables us to see what's on the other side: grass, trees, nature. *But*, he says, what if you "saw through" that stuff too? What if the grass, trees, and nature on the other side was *also* transparent? He makes the point

² Proverbs 15:12

that you can't "go on *seeing through* things forever." Because to "see through" *everything*, is actually the same thing as seeing *nothing*. ~~The metaphor is a bit philosophical,~~ but here's what I think he's saying: **if you're always *jaded* about *everything*, you'll eventually be *joyful* about *nothing*.**

So let me **posit a question** for us: **what** actually **causes cynicism**? If we're going to be able to do anything about its *presence* in our lives, we need to find the *root* of it. Because here's what I've realized: **pretty much *nobody* just wakes up one day and decides to be cynical**. That's just not how it works. Nobody goes, "you know what, I'm just gonna start being jaded towards *everything all of the time*, and see how that works out for me. That sounds like it would be fun. **Cynicism usually isn't a conscious decision, as much as it's a reaction.**

And as **best I can tell, here's what** it's usually a reaction to: **disappointment**. Most of us that grow cynical, *do so* out of a place of deep, profound, and usually *repeated hurt* and disappointment in our lives. Now, that *disappointment* can take a lot of different forms. Sometimes, it's disappointment in *people or organizations* we trusted that then let us down. Other times, it's a disappointment in a situation or an experience that we went through. *Other times still*, it's that we tried to find life and joy and purpose in other *places*, and every single thing we *tried* came up short. Honestly, I think that's close to what happened to the *Teacher* in Ecclesiastes. **One writer** put it like this:

...cynicism is the god of the thinking person. In Ecclesiastes, [the Teacher] battled the gods of money, sex, and power, but the one that came the nearest to owning his soul was cynicism...Cynicism is the temple to which we finally come after stopovers at the houses of all the other gods. It is the temple at the end of 'temple row.'"³

Okay that's deep right there. If that was confusing to you, **here's what he means**. **Cynicism is often where we end up after everything else we *try*, *fails* to satisfy**. We try to find life in **relationships**—so we try one relationship after another, and they all end horribly. Or bare minimum, they don't provide the joy and life they thought they would. So we grow cynical. We try to find life in our **work or career path**—so we try to squeeze all the life we can out of *that*. But that disappoints too. So we grow *cynical*. We try to find life in **accomplishments**, or friendships, or notoriety, or romance, or sexual experiences...you name it.

³ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/truth-in-the-age-of-cynicism>

Or **maybe you're like the Teacher** and you've tried a *variety* of different things at different times in your life. You've gone from *one* thing to the *next* trying to find something out there that will satisfy—that will make your life make sense. And *then*, when enough of them disappointed you, you just grew *cynical* about it all. You ended up in the place of the Teacher in Ecclesiastes 1: *nothing* is satisfying, *nothing* is lasting, *nothing* is worth it. It's all a *vapor*. But **whether it's that kind** of disappointment, **or another kind**, it seems like cynicism is almost always the soul's *response* to disappointment. Or at least the attempt to *avoid* disappointment.

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And **that**, to me, is **what makes cynicism such a tempting lie** to believe. Because as most of us know, **the most powerful lies are usually partial truths. And the truth is that to be sure, an awful lot of the human experience can be profoundly disappointing.** The *truth* is that a *lot* of organizations and systems and beliefs *are* indeed untrustworthy. The truth is that *everything* (whether it's accomplishments or career or romance or friendships)—*all of those things, on their own, are ultimately unfulfilling.* And the truth is that a lot of people really *are* corrupt to their core. In fact, the bible would go a step *further* than that: *it* would say that *all* of us are bent towards *evil* apart from God's redemptive work in our lives.

~~So is it true that the world is a broken place? Yes. Is it true that people are sinful? Yes. Is it true that many experiences, ultimately, disappoint? Yes.~~ Those conclusions about the world are not all wrong. **Cynicism is a powerful lie because its foundation isn't entirely untrue. // The problem is that it is a partial truth. The problem is that it only tells exactly half of the story. If you currently feel disappointed and let down by the human experience, (I've actually got good news for you:) you are exactly halfway to understanding the one true story of the world.** For the other half, you'll need the *gospel*.

You see, the gospel—the one true story of the world—**doesn't try to hide the fact** that life is filled with disappointment. Not in the *least*. In fact, this book right here is very, *very honest* about that reality. This book is filled with story after story *detailing* it for us in gory detail. In fact, it starts in the third chapter of the whole book. God puts a man and a woman in a garden, gives them everything they could ever need or want, *entrusts* them with it...and then all hell breaks loose. Disappointment *everywhere*. Sin and corruption *everywhere*. Broken *trust*, broken *relationships everywhere*. Things get pretty incredibly bad.

But it was also in that very same moment that God set into motion a plan to *do something* about every single *bit* of the disappointment. A plan that began with a promise

to Eve in the garden, and would be *fulfilled* by a man hanging on a cross, and then an empty tomb. A *moment* that no doubt Jesus was *referring to* when he said this:

*“In this world you **will** have trouble. But **take heart** (or if we wanted, we could *translate* that, ‘do not grow cynical, discouraged, *jaded*, *because...*’)! I (Jesus) **have overcome the world.**”⁴*

Now, notice with me: it **doesn't say** “in this world you *won't* have trouble.” Some of us *wish it did*. It also doesn't say “I've overcome the world so *that* you *won't* have trouble.” That first part of the verse, actually, is written in the language of a *promise*: “in this world *you will* have trouble.” *Guaranteed*. But the second part of the verse is a promise *too*: “I have overcome the world.” *Cynicism* is a view of the world that starts and stops with Genesis 3: *everything in the world is a profound disappointment, the end*. The *gospel* gives us the fuller story: *everything in the world is a profound disappointment...which is why Jesus is making all things new*. “In this world you will have trouble, but *take heart*, for *he has overcome* the world.”

And if Jesus has indeed overcome the world, **that changes things**. It completely *reframes* everything. It means that all of a sudden, life *isn't* purposeless. It means that life *isn't* joyless. It means that life *isn't only ever disappointing*. It means that there *are* things worth pursuing, there *are* things worth giving your life to. You see, the Teacher in Ecclesiastes, really, only gives us *one* side of the story. Because remember: his goal was to see if he could derive any life, joy, and purpose *outside* of God. He uses the phrase “under the sun” over and over again in the book: he concludes there is little to be excited about...*under the sun*. *Outside* of life with God, everything is pretty much in vain.

But **followers of Jesus live their lives** *with* God. We don't live our life only “*under the sun*.” We live our lives in *response to* the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We live into the *relationship* and the *reality* that all of *that* made possible *for* us. So in light of that, take a look with me at 1 Corinthians 15:

*But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, **stand firm**. (Take heart.) **Let nothing move you**. Always give yourselves **fully to the work of the Lord**, because you **know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain**.⁵*

According to that passage, the **death and resurrection of Jesus means *nothing* is in vain**. Even when it feels like it is. Even when a cynical spirit and cynical world tells you it

⁴ John 16:33b

⁵ v. 57-58

is. If Jesus is risen from the grave, and he is making all things new, that means cynicism is simply unnecessary.

So **that's the alternative story** to cynicism. The question, then, is *how do we live out of that story* instead? How do we, at a practical level, resist the *pull* towards a cynical spirit? I'll give you three ideas to consider before we're done. First...

Bring your disappointment to God.

We've already noted that most *cynicism* is birthed *out of disappointment. Letdown. Frustration with the world the way it is, and being burnt by it all.* And as Jesus mentioned in the gospel of John, there's no way *around* that. In the world as it currently stands, there "*will*" be trouble. So if there isn't a way around it, what should we *do with* that disappointment, such that it doesn't morph into cynicism over time? Here's the answer I think the Scriptures give us: **take every bit of your disappointment directly to God.** As in, *tell it to him. Unload it on him.*

Do you know what *the most common type of prayer is in the Psalms*, right in the middle of your bible? Prayers of *complaint and lament.* Prayers of God's people taking their pain, and their hurt, and their confusion, and their disappointment, and telling God precisely how they feel about it. And I would venture to say that if those are all over the Psalms in our bible, it seems like those are okay prayers to pray to God. I can't help but think that some of us grow cynical, in part, because we don't think there's any worthwhile *outlet* for our disappointment and hurt. And I'm telling you this morning that a relationship with God through Jesus *can be* that outlet.

So **take it all to God.** Tell him *exactly* how you feel. And here's what will happen: a *lot* of the time, he's going to respond to that prayer by *doing something* about your hurt and disappointment—bringing you healing and health and sometimes even *solutions* in the midst of it. But even in the situations where he *doesn't* do all of that, do you know what *is* going to happen? It's going to help guard you against growing cynical and bitter about all of it. God might even show you some things about *yourself* in the process that you wouldn't have discovered otherwise. All of that is the *power* of bringing your disappointment directly to God.

Second practical way to resist cynicism...

Learn the art of curiosity.

I can't remember where I read it, but I once heard someone say that cynical people aren't curious, and curious people can't grow cynical. And I think that's spot on. Cynicism and curiosity are almost mutually exclusive. It goes back to what we said earlier about the scoffer. If you think you already understand everything you need to understand about the world—you will easily grow cynical and jaded about all of it. But curiosity is the opposite of that. Scoffers say "I've seen it all and I'm over it." Curious people say "there's so much I don't know, and I can't wait to learn about it." Do you hear how different those are?

So if you want to resist cynicism in your life, you need to cultivate curiosity. Practice a posture that admits, "you know what? There may be things I don't yet know. There may be things I know, but don't yet understand. There may be experiences out there that fall outside the parameters of the ones I've already had. There may be data points out there that fall outside of my preconceived notions about the world. All of that may be true. And I can't wait to learn more about everything I don't know yet." Stephen Colbert once put it like this: "Cynicism masquerades as wisdom, but it is the farthest thing from it. Because cynics don't learn anything. Because cynicism is a self-imposed blindness, a rejection of the world because we are afraid it will hurt us or disappoint us. Cynics always say no. But saying 'yes' begins things. Saying 'yes' is how things grow. Saying 'yes' leads to knowledge. [...] So for as long as you have the strength to, say 'yes'."

I'm gonna get just a tad esoteric here, so hang with me if you can. But if cynicism is the belief that everyone has a hidden agenda and every belief system is inherently flawed...well then wouldn't those conclusions also apply to me, the cynical person? Doesn't that then mean that I have a hidden agenda behind my cynicism, and that it's not just a natural conclusion? Doesn't that mean that my cynicism is inherently flawed, too? But you see, curiosity breaks that mold. Curiosity reminds us that there is an entire wide world outside of our current knowledge and experience, and that there is plenty to learn that we don't yet understand. Practice curiosity.

And I'll just add this...if you can learn curiosity, you are just a stone's throw away from another substantial remedy to cynicism, and that's gratitude. If you can stay curious long enough to learn more and more about the world around you, you may just discover some things to be in awe of and grateful for, instead of cynical about. But that one's for free. Moving on...

Lastly, to help resist cynicism, most importantly...

Look through the lens of the gospel.

I'll **try to be brief** on this one since I just want to *echo* what we said a few moments ago. **To fight the *partial* story of cynicism, you have to learn to look through the lenses of the *full* story:** which is the good news of Jesus. As we mentioned, the gospel tells us, **first**, that **not everything will go bad**. That is a *selective* reading of the data. Plenty of things turn out pretty *great* if you give them time.

Second, it tells us that not *everyone* is corrupt or motivated by self-interest. *Some* people, actually, are quite incredible. Selfless. Generous. *Namely*, people who have been transformed *by* the gospel. Now, I'm not saying they're *perfect*, and I'm not saying they won't ever do hurtful or disappointing things. But I am saying they are in the process of being made new in the image of Jesus. And that is an absolutely *beautiful* thing to witness up close if you can bring yourself to do it.

And **third**, the gospel tells us that **even in the situations where** everything really does turn out horribly—**even then, God can still use it for good**, for those who know and follow Jesus. I think of that famous passage in Romans chapter 8, where Paul says **“we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”**⁶ And listen, I don't throw that verse out there *haphazardly*—not at all. I know some of you are going through absolute, real-life *nightmares in your life* right now. So I'm not telling you to put on a happy face and sing Romans 8 to yourself until it all goes away. I'm saying it because **I want you to know that even that place you're in now is not beyond God's presence and God's purpose**. And while that doesn't take away the *pain*, it does absolutely change how you think *about* it.

So if I could just **leave us with one thing** this morning, for clarity, it would be this. **I've got no desire to turn any cynics into optimists**. There's nowhere in Scripture I'm aware of that says God just wants us to walk around *ignoring* the hurt and disappointment in the world, *or* in our own lives. **I don't think God wants or needs us to be blind optimists**.

But I *do* think he wants us to be **hopeful realists**. I think he wants us to acknowledge the brokenness of this world, and then be able to *deal* with it head on. I think he wants us to understand that the world *is* a broken place. But then to be people who stare the “trouble of this world” right in the face, and then declare to it that Jesus has overcome it all. And if that's *true*, we can overcome it all through him too. **The world we currently occupy is both horrible and hopeful. Which makes the gospel the perfect story to make sense of it all, because the cross, too, was both horrible and hopeful**. And with *that* story as our lens, we have the ability to navigate whatever is ahead of us.

⁶ v. 28

So in just a moment we're **going to sing and celebrate** all of this. And as we do, we're going to go to the tables and partake in the bread and the cup—the practice that tells us that even as the *worst* was happening, Jesus was making provision *for* us through it. And as we go to the tables, on our own or with others, we remember the power of that provision for every season, every circumstance in our life as followers of Jesus. So if that is the story you live your life by, you're invited to join us in this beautiful, tangible reminder of it.

Let's pray.