

LIVING IN A CYNICAL WORLD

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Text: Ecclesiastes 2: 12-26

■ Charles Swindoll, in *Growing Deep in the Christian Life*, tells of a man who bought chicken dinners for himself and his date late one afternoon. The attendant at the fast food outlet, however, inadvertently gave him the proceeds from the day's business – a bucket of money (much of it cash) instead of fried chicken. Swindoll writes: After driving to their picnic site, the two of them sat down to enjoy some chicken – over \$800! But he was unusual. He quickly put the money back in the bag. They got back into the car and drove all the way back. By then, the manager was frantic. Mr. Clean got out, walked in, and became an instant hero. “I want you to know I came by to get a couple of chicken dinners and wound up with all this money here.” Well, the manager was thrilled to death. He said, “Let me call the newspaper. I’m gonna have your picture put in the local paper. You’re one of the most honest men I’ve ever heard of.” To which the man quickly responded, “Oh no. No, no, don’t do that!” Then he leaned closer and whispered, “You see, the woman I’m with...she’s uh, somebody else’s wife.” One can be honest and still not have integrity. (Larson, 112)

It’s stories like this that add to the cynical attitude of many people. Americans have begun to doubt just about everybody’s integrity. Even the good deeds done by others are thought to be based in some ulterior motive. In fact, the definition of the word *cynic* is, “*A person who believes all people are motivated by selfishness.*”¹ Therefore, a person who is *cynical* is, “*Scornful of the motives, virtue, or integrity of others.*”²

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With this in mind, let me ask you, how are Christians supposed to conduct themselves in such a society of scornful doubters? After all we are supposed to be willing to look for the good in others, believe in miracles, hope in times of hopelessness and believe in the power of God to truly change someone's life. In hopes of trying to give an answer let's deal with the *uncertainties* that plague the mind of many.

I. IS ANYBODY REAL ANYMORE?

A. Are people less trustworthy than ever?

Whatever the case, our perception of our society has changed.

■ George Barna writes, “We are very skeptical and suspicious people. We no longer trust other human beings – often because we know that they probably maintain the same self-absorbed values and goals as we do. We are dubious about product claims, unpersuaded by scientific studies, lacking confidence in the leaders we elected to public office, and judgmental of people who are different from us. People are now deemed guilty until proven innocent, a perverse twist of the justice system upon which this nation was built and one reason why America has more lawyers... than any other nation in the world.”

(Barna, 22)

B. Are people more immoral than ever before?

Part of the problem with our view of society is the slant with which it is presented to us by those in the media and movie and literary industry. It is a slant that is often founded in the desire to find fault – something that is clearly not a Christian attribute.

■ According to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, “In 1596 we find the first instance of *cynic* meaning “faultfinder,” a sense that was to develop into our modern sense. The meaning “faultfinder” came naturally from the behavior of countless Cynics who in their pursuit of virtue pointed out the flaws in others.”³

I choose to believe that people are no less immoral than in the past; but our society is fixated on the faults and shortcomings of others. After all, “*Those with Enquiring minds want to know.*” Want to know what? **The dirt – that’s what!** Simply put, we make ourselves feel better by low-rating others.

Cynicism and faultfinding may be acceptable among the world, but among the family of God, Christian people, it should have no place.

C. No matter what others do the love of God should still be seen in our lives.

■ Paul writes in I Corinthians 13:5b-7, “(Love) thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

■ One of the people most admired by Charles Swindoll is Dawson Trotman, who died after helping to rescue two drowning girls. Says Swindoll: “When Dawson Trotman passed away he probably left a legacy of discipleship on this earth that will never be matched except perhaps in the life of Jesus Christ Himself. I’ve become a real student of Dawson Trotman and believe wholeheartedly in the methods of discipleship that he taught and emulated throughout his days. He died in Schroon Lake, New York. He died of all things in the midst of an area that he was expert in – he drowned. He was an expert swimmer.

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The last few moments he had in the water he lifted one girl out of the water. He went down and got the other girl and lifted her out of the water and then submerged and was not found again until the dragnet found him a few hours later...*Time* ran an article on Trotman's life the next week, and they put a caption beneath his name, and it read, 'Always Holding Somebody Up.' In one sentence, that was Trotman's life – investment in people...holding them up." Discipleship is not having others follow you as much as it is lifting others up to see the Lord and then serving them so they can follow Him wholeheartedly. (GDLB, 307)

II. IS THERE ANYONE ON WHOM I CAN DEPEND?

A. Instead of doubting *everyone* try believing in *someone*.

People, as a whole, will always give us a reason to doubt their trustworthiness or their motives; but if we will ask God to help us to see the good in them they might just surprise us.

■ One day the Pahouins brought a giant native in chains to Albert Schweitzer's hospital. In a fit of madness, N'Tschambi had killed a woman. Reaching down to help the man to the landing, Schweitzer saw fear and sadness in his face. When others refused his order to remove the man's chains, he did it himself. He then explained sedatives to N'Tschambi, and the fearful man gratefully accepted them. That night he slept for the first time without nightmares. N'Tschambi became a model patient and soon Schweitzer gave him periods of freedom outside his room, to which he often returned voluntarily if he became agitated. Still, any task he was given, he tackled with a fierce energy that frightened the staff. One day Schweitzer gave him an axe and asked him to help him make a clearing. N'Tschambi drew back in alarm, stating he was afraid to touch the axe for fear of what he might do with it. Schweitzer replied, "If I'm not afraid, why should you be?" The two then went into the jungle as the entire hospital watched. Hours later, they returned, N'Tschambi's big body dripping with sweat but a radiant smile on his lips. The giant inside him had been felled by kindness and the faith another human being had put in him!

Instead of being determined to be “Nobody’s fool,” try being determined to be someone’s friend.

B. Instead of criticizing the actions of others try changing your own.

■ Someone wrote, “If I can throw a single ray of light across the darkened pathway of another; if I can aid some soul to clearer sight of life and duty, and thus bless my brother; if I can wipe from any human cheek a tear, I shall not have lived my life in vain while here.

If I can guide some erring one to truth, inspire within his heart a sense of duty; if I can plant within my soul of rosy youth a sense of right, a love of truth and beauty; if I can teach one man that God and heaven are near, I shall not then have lived in vain while here.

If from my mind I banish doubt and fear, and keep my life attuned to love and kindness; if I can scatter light and hope and cheer, and help remove the curse of mental blindness; if I can make more joy, more hope, less pain, I shall have not lived and loved in vain.

If by life’s roadside I can plant a tree, beneath whose shade some wearied head may rest, though I may never share its beauty, I shall yet be truly blest – though no one knows my name, nor drops a flower upon my grave, I shall not have lived in vain while here.”

(GDLB, 67)

D. Instead of depending on human flesh and blood – try Jesus Christ.

■ Jesus said in Matthew 11: 28-30, “Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

III. IS THERE ANY REASON I SHOULD PUT MY TRUST IN GOD?

A. We must not fail to see the hand of God continually at work in our lives.

■ Solomon wrote in verses 15-17 of our text, “*I thought to myself, ‘If the destiny that waits for the fool waits for me as well, then what is the advantage of being wise?’ So I thought that even this is pointless.*

Neither the wise person nor the fool will be remembered for long, since both will be forgotten in the days to come. Both the wise person and the fool will die. So I came to hate life because everything done under the sun seemed wrong to me. Everything was pointless. It was like trying to catch the wind.” (God’s Word Series)

Some have become so cynical that they have even begun to doubt that God is still in control. Life is not what they thought it would be and therefore they have begun to doubt that God will do what the Bible promises. This reminds me of a little story that I read.

■ Imagine a family of mice who lived all their lives in a large piano. To them in their piano-world came the music of the instrument, filling all the dark spaces with sound and harmony. At first the mice were impressed by it. They drew comfort and wonder from the thought that there was Someone who made the music – though invisible to them – above, yet close to them. They loved to think of the Great Player whom they could not see. Then one day a daring mouse climbed up part of the piano and returned very thoughtful. He had found out how the music was made. Wires were the secret; tightly stretched wires of graduated lengths which trembled and vibrated. They must revise all their old beliefs; none but the most conservative could any longer believe in the Unseen Player. Later, another explorer carried the explanation further. Hammers were now the secret, numbers of hammers dancing and leaping on the wires. This was a more complicated theory, but it all went to show that they lived in a purely mechanical and mathematical world. The Unseen Player came to be thought of as a myth...But the pianist continued to play. *Anonymous*
(Hewett, 187)

Some have reduced life to the mechanical and the mundane. They think that they have it all figured out and God is not in the picture. For them there is no divine intervention, no divine providence and no divine justice.

B. We must not fail to see the reward that awaits the *faithful and believing*.

■ Paul wrote in Romans 8:16-17 that, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.” (NKJV)

C. Our hearts must be transformed from that of a cynic to that of a little child.

■ Jesus tells us in Mark 10:15 that, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it.” (NKJV)

This does not mean that we must be born again as a child or we have no hope. It means that we must be as open and receptive as a little child in our faith. We must have that innocence and willingness to believe like a child.

CONCLUSION

As Americans it seems that we have been force-fed the faults and shortcomings of others. So much so that we have become jaded, hardened, callused by the wear on our minds and thoughts. Few things shock us anymore because we will believe just about anything about just about anybody. The *uncertainties* of life are bad enough without wondering if a trusted friend will fail you or without wondering if God really cares anymore. But if anyone can rise above times like these, God’s people can.

■ I like what humorist Garrison Keillor had to say on having faith in a day of cynical thinking. He writes, “What else will do except faith in such a cynical, corrupt time? When the country goes temporarily to the dogs, cats must learn to be circumspect, walk on fences, sleep in trees, and have faith that all this woofing is not the last word.” (Rowell, 59)

As long as a critical and suspicious attitude prevails we must see that our lives are in line with the Word of God. We must walk a straight line, live above suspicion and above all believe that God is still in control.

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