I Quit Cynicism

Think back to when you were a kid. What were you like… would you say you are more cynical or less cynical than you are today? If you are like me there’s no question, I know I am more cynical today than I was when I was a kid. I mean come on when you are a kid you are upbeat and positive believing the best about people. And yet psychologists tell us that cynicism can actually begin as early as the first or second grade. Even at that young age they are already showing signs they are gaining the lifelong skill of taking some information they hear with a grain of salt. And yet I know that I’m more cynical today than I was as a child, in fact I can say I’m more cynical today than I was in High School. Most High School students are optimistic, even hopeful for what might come in the years ahead. For me by the time I hit my 20’s I was on my own and downright idealistic! I was a newlywed and Sandy and I already had our first child, I was certain I could make the world a better place. I felt God’s call on my life for ministry and yet at the same time I had this entrepreneur thing going on in my life. I wanted to be successful at running my own business and maybe do ministry later on in life. Well at first it seemed like everything I touched turned to gold, I owned 3 restaurants, a radio station and a financial planning firm, so I was the most optimistic guy you would ever meet. But then things began to go south, and I began to blame God for my problems. I thought because I was running from Him that He was doing this to punish me. Listen friends there are a lot of attitudes that are destructive to our faith and to our joy, attitudes that will keep us from healthy relationships in our life. And I’m just saying that we need to get rid of those attitudes… we need to get rid of that stinkin thinkin that’s derailing God’s plan for us. So today we are going to start a 5-week series called I Quit… as we start a new year and think about New Years Resolutions, what are some of the things in our life that we need to let go of… some things we need to stop doing? And today we are going to talk about Cynicism because I’ve got to believe it’s somewhere near the top of the list. Cynicism is an attitude of scornful or jaded negativity, especially a general distrust of the integrity or professed motives of others. But cynicism isn’t just something other people experience; it can be a problem we all struggle with to one degree or another. Unfortunately, cynicism is increasingly the dominant spirit of our age. Actually, I think Cynicism has an unfair advantage in how it takes hold of our hearts because we are surrounded by it every day and at times we equate it with ‘being realistic.’ We have this mistaken thought that being cynical is what comes from knowing what’s ‘really going on.’ It feels real, it feels authentic, it feels brave to look at our world and embrace the ugly, unsettling reality of our slow slide into the abyss. But the truth is cynicism makes us numb and it kills our hope. And surprisingly it can happen rather quickly. The optimism of your teens and twenties can give way to the realism of your thirties. Once we hit thirty many of our married friends have split up, many of our once-enthusiastic coworkers now hate their jobs, and many of our once-solid friendships have dissolved. But here is the irony of cynicism… it doesn’t happen because you don’t care… it happens because you do. It usually starts because you poured your heart and soul into something and got burned in return. Maybe you fell in love only to have that relationship dissolve. You put your all into your job, only to be told you were being downsized. You were there for a friend only to have that friend later say you disappointed them. You see most cynics used to be optimists, you would never know it now but there was a time they were full of hope and enthusiasm. So what happened? How do you go from being so positive to such a cynical attitude? Well at least three things can happen. #1 You know too much. Normally you would think that knowledge is a good thing, but sometimes knowledge can sadden you. Listen to Ecclesiastes 1:18NLT. That passage is not real inspiring and yet Solomon is respected for his insight and wisdom. And I think what Solomon is saying is that ignorance is bliss. You know years ago when I was doing investment planning I had a partner lie to me and rip off his clients. When I discovered what he had done I confronted him and he simply laughed in my face. I had traveled with this guy… I trusted him and considered him a friend… So learning this information about him was really hard. And then later as a new pastor I just wanted to help people and my assumption is that they would appreciate the sacrifices of my time and efforts. And there were of course those families that were going through a difficult time and I spent hours helping them through difficult situations in their life only to later have them leave the church and go to the church down the street because they said no one at this church cares about us and besides we aren’t being fed spiritually. Are you kidding me? That was so hurtful. Hearing those comments cut directly and deeply into my small but growing pastoral heart. I was shocked and angry and heartbroken. And because of the cynicism that began to take root in my life I seriously considered leaving the ministry and going back to the business world. Again, knowledge often brings sorrow because the more you know the more you see people in a different light. I’m sure all of you at one time or another have had those disappointments and setbacks. Another thing that can happen is #2 you project past failures onto new situations. Listen cynicism grows when you start trying to protect yourself from future hurt. Somebody hurt you, so you decide you will never let anyone hurt you like that again. So what starts as self-preservation morphs into something more dangerous, in fact you become a bit jaded. Of course, you think you’re wiser now but the reality is your hurt and fear are forming calluses around your heart. Maybe you were hurt by a guy you dated and so now you feel like you better be careful of this new guy showing you some attention because he will most likely hurt you as well. Or you get a new boss and assume she is probably as unfair and arrogant as your old boss was. You no longer see people for who they are you just see potential hurt. Guys past pain will become future hurt if you let it. And then a third thing that can happen is #3 You decide to stop trusting, hoping, and believing. Your cynicism gets you to a point you think I don’t need friends… they will just end up hurting me anyway so what’s the point! Well that’s actually your pain speaking. And the problem with generalizing or applying one particular situation to all situations is that the death of trust, hope, and belief is like a virus infecting everything and everyone that’s dear to you. While you most likely think you are protecting yourself from the future you are actually infecting your present. And the people you care most about are the ones who suffer from it. You see as a cynic you begin to project your suspicion on everyone which cause the relationships that should matter the most to dial back a few notches. So you end up becoming numb to the people you say you love the most! Including your relationship with God. Guys when you begin to close your heart to people, you close your heart to God. You find yourself trusting less and doubting more. You convince yourself that the promises of God might be true for other people but they’re not true for you. Even your prayer life is affected. But what’s the point of prayer anyway? You feel like you are praying for things that won’t happen anyway so why bother? Do you see how dangerous this progression of cynicism can be to your spiritual life as well as the relationships that matter the most. Listen cynicism may not always be a conscious decision, but it is a decision none the less. It’s the decision you make to stop hoping, trusting, and believing. But guys is that really the way you want to live your life? Cynics never change the world… they just tell you why the world can’t change. So guys if you’ve grown cynical please understand that cynicism happens not because your heart is closed but because it was once open. And then as we said life happened… hurt happened. When I was at the point of cynicism about ministry, the thing that died within me was hope – hope that the future would be any different than the past, hope that my heart would ever feel again. Hope that I could ever make any kind of difference. Listen hope is cynicisms first casualty and at the same time it is also the antidote to cynicism. Guys the concept of Hope is the thread that runs through the scriptural narrative and is at the epicenter of what people call the Gospel. The cynics thought they were winning on the last Thursday of Jesus’ life and they were certain they had the final word on Friday. They thought they were in control… even the disciples went back to fishing. But nobody saw Sunday coming… nobody saw Hope rising! No one saw love breaking out from the ashes of hate. No one saw Jesus coming back. You know the remarkable part of Christianity is not that we have a Savior who came to deliver us but that we have a Savior who sees us for who we really are and loves us anyway. Jesus stared hate in the face and met it with love. He confronted despair and made it abundantly clear it wouldn’t win. The thrust of the Gospel is that Jesus sees your hate and meets it with love. He sees your despair and counters it with hope. He sees your doubt and lobs belief back at you again and again. Guys listen cynicism melts under the relentless hope of the Gospel. You know of all the people on the earth, I think Christians should be the least cynical. What do we have to be cynical about? We have a hope that God loves us and has a plan for our lives. So if you want to kick cynicism in the teeth… trust again… hope again… believe again. And in the end it will defeat cynicism. So how do you battle cynicism on the days when discouragement and despair are once again knocking at your door? Listen I think an incredibly effective antidote to cynicism is curiosity, I’m serious. Curious people are never cynical and cynical people are never curious. Curious people are still exploring, still thinking, still open, still wondering, still asking questions. So if curiosity is the discipline that kills cynicism and keeps hope alive… how do you become more curious? Well curiosity is certainly a habit that can be nurtured and developed. Feed curiosity and it will grow… starve it and it will die. So here are 5 keys to help a person become more curious. #1 Schedule Thinking time. Romans 12:2NLT. People are so busy today and busyness is the enemy of wonder. I mean when was the last time you felt curious while you were in a hurry? When you are in a hurry you don’t have time for questions, but curiosity needs time to breathe and explore. So schedule time to learn and grow and ask questions. Pick up a book on a subject you know nothing about and start reading. Or take a friend to lunch and ask a lot of questions. Go for a walk or a bike ride and take the time to think. #2 Ask Open-ended questions. Good questions are open-ended. Questions that can be answered with a yes or no kills the discussion. So guys if you learn to listen longer than most people listen, you will learn more than most people ever will. #3 Give Fewer Answers. In addition to being skilled at asking broad questions the curious also try to refrain from always giving an answer. In other words, if you need to be an authority on everything you will shut other people down and not learn as much as you had hoped to. James 1:19NLT. A curious person learns to ask questions and will then listen. #4 Dream More. Do you remember when you used to dream? Where did that go? Because guys curious people dream, they wonder, they imagine. If you spend more time dreaming, you’ll find that cynicism fades. And #5 Ask Two Pivotal questions. Why? and why not? Of course why is at the very heart of curiosity. Your answer to the why questions will keep you motivated and moving forward. Again when you’re cynical you don’t care why because you’ve lost hope. But in order to foster curiosity you should also ask ‘why not?’ Why not give it a try? Why not say yes? While most people are trying to narrow their universe why not try to widen yours? Listen guys curiosity is a discipline and it’s a viewpoint. If you can adopt a curious outlook day after day you will discover that cynicism cannot get a grip on your life. Remember the cynics are never curious and the curious are never cynical. So now imagine yourself at 80. What’s happened to you in the decades between today and then? Has your heart grown or has it hardened? Is your mind flourishing or has it shut down? Are you alive and filled with wonder or did your passion die decades ago? So Quit being cynical… and hope again, believe again, trust again and be curious. Guys cultivate curiosity long enough and hope will flourish. And when hope flourishes cynicism doesn’t stand a chance in your life. Bow your heads - How many would say I can be a bit cynical and I want that to stop in my life?