

FOUNDATIONS FOR
LAITY RENEWAL

Transforming Daily Life

719 Earl Garrett Street
Kerrville, TX 78028

Three Sermon Outlines on
Work and Faith

“How to Be an Exile”

Corey Widmer

SERMON NOTES

*The
High Calling
of Our
Daily Work*

*Making a real living connects you to a bigger picture,
a grand design, an abundant life.
Each of us has only a small part to play, but what a part!
It's the high calling of our daily work.*

– Howard Butt, Jr., of Laity Lodge
TheHighCalling.org

How to Be an Exile, A Series of Three Sermons

Rev. Corey Widmer

Introduction to the Sermon Series

As our culture becomes more post-Christian, it is increasingly difficult to know how to live faithfully as a follower of Jesus in a world that shares so little of our convictions, beliefs, and values. Some Christians are distressed by this growing secularity as if somehow our very status as the people of God is threatened. Yet, when we read the Scriptures we see that the people of God have always had to figure out how to live faithfully as outsiders and exiles within societies that do not share their beliefs. Perhaps the most enduring Old Testament example is Daniel and his friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. In this book we find an incredibly relevant story that can teach us how we, too, might live and do our daily work in a way that engages with our surrounding society, but also lives distinctly within it.

This set of three sermons is an extended reflection on Daniel 1:8-21. All three sermons are based on this single text, although the whole book of Daniel is in view. The series outlines an approach for cultural engagement that loosely corresponds to what James Davison Hunter calls “Faithful Presence Within” in his book *To Change the World*. My hope is that the sermons will offer not just a reflections on the book of Daniel, but a biblical theological approach to how we disciple our people into more faithful engagement in the world in which we find ourselves. It is an exciting time to be an exile.

Grace and peace,
Corey Widmer

Corey Widmer is Co-Pastor of East End Fellowship in Richmond, Virginia, a multi-ethnic city congregation. He is also Associate Pastor of Preaching at Third Presbyterian Church, Richmond. After serving as Study Assistant to the Rev. Dr. John R.W. Stott, Corey earned his M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary and is currently a Ph.D. candidate in theology at the Free University of Amsterdam. He can be reached at coreyjwidmer@gmail.com.

Sermon 2: How to Be an Exile, Part 2

Text: Daniel 1:8-21

Dominant Thought: Living faithfully as an exile means preserving your distinct identity as the people of God and giving your allegiance fully to the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

Introduction

The purpose of this story is to relay a scenario in which a person has chosen to make a decision that is out of step with their vocational culture because of their allegiance to Jesus Christ and to help people reflect on how their allegiances are manifested in their everyday work.

This week a friend of mine was in a meeting about a business transaction in which she is serving as the liaison between the owner of a building, a businessman who is a Christian, and the developers of the building, who are not. The owner desired to deliberately sacrifice profit in the sale of this building because he believed it serves God's purpose in the neighborhood. But the developers just couldn't understand his decision. They kept questioning. "I just don't get this. This seems weird. Why would he be doing this? Why is he accepting less profit than he could get? What's going on here?" Finally, after exasperating all her explanations, my friend responded, "The owner of this building believes that Jesus is calling him to do this, that's why he's doing it." The developers fell silent, agreed to the deal, and changed the subject.

We are in a three-week series entitled "How to Be an Exile." We are exploring how we can live faithfully as God's people in our everyday lives when we are embedded in a culture that does not share our beliefs and values. We saw last week that the approach of Daniel and his friends was very different than the approach of a typical religious person: that rather than fully assimilating or fully separating, they figured out a way to retain their distinctiveness, yet fully engage in the new pagan culture that surrounded them. This is their nuanced tactic that offers us, too, a way to live faithfully in our own society today.

Today's message focuses on the first part of their tactic: retaining their distinctiveness as the people of God. Like the owner of the building in the story I just relayed, Daniel and his friends made certain decisions that put them out of step with the vocational world they found themselves in, and they did so out of allegiance to their true King. This is the first aspect of our call that we will explore today. Are you living distinctly? Are you ever making decisions because of your allegiance to Jesus that put you out of step with the people around you?

Into the Text

In Daniel Chapter 1, we find Daniel and his three friends in exile in Babylon. Remember that the goal of the Babylonians was to eradicate any vestige of religious or cultural identity of the Israelites, so as to completely absorb them into their own culture. As we will see next week, there were several things that Daniel and his friends were willing to accept about their new forced Babylonian identity. But one particular area in which they clearly drew the line was with food. It says in Chapter 1 verse 8 that Daniel "resolved he would not defile himself with the king's food."

Commentators have different theories about why Daniel drew the line when it came to food, but one makes the most sense to me. In many ancient cultures, to share someone's food was to share a permanent

bond with them, to establish a permanent covenant with them. To eat from another's table was to swear allegiance to the one whose food you were eating. So Daniel's decision to not eat the food from the king's hand was not about diet so much as it was about *loyalties*. To accept the king's food from his table was to accept dependence on the king and to give him unequivocal loyalty.

So Daniel and his friends decided this was where they had to draw the line. By rejecting the king's food, they were rejecting unqualified allegiance to the king. By refusing to eat the king's food, they were reminding themselves continually of their own particular identity as God's people. They reminded themselves that they did not belong to this new pagan king, but to Yahweh alone.

The steward, as we can see in v. 10, was very nervous about this idea. He understood the significance of Daniel's action. He knew that what Daniel and his friends were doing was tantamount to treason. If it became known that the steward allowed this, the king would have his head. But Daniel assured him: "Let's just test it out for a few days." And after ten days it was seen that God rewarded their faithfulness and that they were in even better shape than the other men who were eating the king's food (1:15). God affirmed their commitment to give their loyalty first and foremost to him, to retain their distinctiveness as his people.

Application

Let's apply this for a moment to our situation. The people of God throughout history have always had to struggle to retain a distinctive identity within a culture that does not share their values and beliefs. Unfortunately, in the United States, Christianity has been so merged with the broader American culture that it is has been difficult to distinguish what it means to be distinct from the society around us. The result is, as one recent survey demonstrated, that there is no discernable difference between evangelical Christians and the wider non-Christian population in anything—in consumer habits, in political and social and racial attitudes, in divorce rates, or anything else. No difference.

Can we own this? Often we shake our heads and mutter about "those Christians" who are compromised in various ways. But can we for a moment stop, bow our heads, and confess that we are the ones that this survey is talking about?

Oftentimes we do in fact have the same goals as those around us who do not share our beliefs—the goal to be comfortable, secure, safe, successful, powerful, or wealthy. We often have the same values of self-reliance, independence, personal autonomy, and success. We spend our time and money the same ways. Our churches reflect the same socioeconomic and racial realities as the broken and segregated neighborhoods and regions around us. We have to own up to the fact that, in many ways, there is no difference between us and those around us. In many ways, we have allowed ourselves to be assimilated.

Here's a question to consider: As you live in this world, is your loyalty to Jesus ever creating scenarios in which there is direct conflict between the values of his Kingdom and the values of the world around you?

Or, are you so completely assimilated, so completely accommodating to the broader society, so completely uncritical in your support for a leader, an institution, a political party, a company or employer, that you are prepared to go along with whatever is required?

The story that I opened with today was so striking to me because there was no way to understand the businessman's actions other than his allegiance to Jesus Christ. There was no business justification for him taking a loss of profit. His allegiance to Jesus put him out of step with his colleagues and made people stop and ask, "What's up with that guy?"

Is anyone saying that about you? Is anyone looking at your life and your decisions and your work practices and saying, I don't get him? I don't get her? How can you explain how different she is? Daniel and his friends figured out a way to retain their identity as God's distinct people in an alien environment.

Conclusion

In 1 Peter 2:11-12, Peter writes the following: "Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles in the world, to abstain from the passions of the flesh which wage war against your souls. Live such beautiful lives among the unbelievers, that though they accuse you of doing wrong they may see the attractiveness of your life and glorify God on the day he visits us."

I believe Peter is saying here: our words are not enough. Talk is cheap. Especially in a culture like ours, in which so many people have heard the gospel and are inoculated against it, what people need are credible lives of believers who are actually living the gospel, who are showing the beauty and goodness of God through their lives. People are so tired of sales tactics, tired of religious hypocrisy, tired of seeing Christians as the crankiest, angriest people around. They need to see the beauty of the gospel lived out clearly by the people of God.

And how do we do this? By living distinctly. Both Peter and Daniel remind us in different ways that we are to be a "holy People." Holy simply means "different" or set apart. Living according to the values of the Kingdom out of allegiance to our King.

So think about your daily life for a moment. Think about your daily work. Think about your financial decisions. Think about your habits. Think about your weekly patterns. Think about your relationships and social networks. In what parts in your life may God be calling you to live distinctly? How might he be calling you to live out of step with the people around you?

Above all, remember our motivation. We do this not to earn anything from God or to get him to love us. We do this because we are already loved, we already have all things in Christ. Peter addresses us as the "beloved" (v. 11). That is who we are. We belong to the one who gave himself for us: Jesus Christ, our ultimate Daniel. He died and rose to make us his own. We now respond to him by giving him our lives, by giving our loyalty to the only King who has given himself for us. Will you live distinctly for him?