

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 3: How to Be an Exile, Part 3

Text: Daniel 1:8-21

Dominant Thought: Living faithfully as an exile means not only living distinctly, but also discerning the ways God is calling you to engage deeply and excellently in the sector of culture and society in which he has placed you.

Introduction

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 the first week that the approach of Daniel and his friends was very different than that of a typical religious person. Rather than assimilating or separating, they figured out a way to retain their distinctiveness, yet fully engage in the new pagan culture that surrounded them. Last week, we explored the first aspect of their tactic—how they were able to live in Babylon, yet preserve their distinct identity as God’s holy people. Today, we will explore the second aspect of their tactic—how they went about deeply engaging in the society around them.

Into the Text

Despite the fact that Daniel and his friends retained a clear distinction between themselves and the Babylonian culture, specifically in their choice of food, there are a number of ways we also see them deeply engaging in the society around them and refusing to separate or withdraw. Here are just a few examples:

First, Daniel and his friend accepted new Babylonian names and were willing to forsake their Jewish names at least for a season. These new names were not benign—the names actually referred to pagan Babylonian gods.

Second, Daniel and his friends were enrolled in the Babylonian school system, which meant that they were instructed intensely in the language and all the mythological and religious literature of the Babylonians. The literature was full of superstitions about other gods, occult, magic, and paganism. It was a mixture of good things and degraded, idolatrous things. Yet they applied themselves and gave themselves to these studies fully.

Third, Daniel and his friends accepted careers in the political service of Babylon. They worked in pagan surroundings, in a government that was polytheistic, under a state that had destroyed their own country and temple, defacing their own God. They took the jobs they were given, participated in the Babylonian economy and culture.

So in these three very significant areas—their names, their education, and their jobs, they accepted a certain degree of assimilation. By doing this, were they compromising? Were they giving in to total assimilation? Were they defiling themselves by subjecting themselves to these names, this learning, this education and training, these careers?

Apparently God didn’t think so. God actually blesses what they are doing. In verse 17, the text states, “God gave them learning and skill in all literature and wisdom and gave Daniel understanding in all visions and dreams,” so much so that Daniel gained a very high reputation in the Babylonian courts. In fact, Daniel and his friends not only learned and engaged in the Babylonian system, but they graduated at the top of

their class, they stood out among the pack, and they actually were better in the learning and training of the Babylonians than the Babylonians themselves (v. 20)—10 times better!

What does this tell us? It tells us that retaining their distinctive identity as God's people did not mean withdrawal or separation. It actually meant quite the opposite—it meant deep engagement in the new culture in which they found themselves, even though that culture did not worship their God. Daniel and his friends wisely took the opportunities they were given as a way to bear witness to the living God, and as we will see later in the story, God uses their influence and position for his purposes.

So we learn from this story that God does not want his people to separate, he does not want us to withdraw. Without abandoning our distinctive identity, he calls us to deeply engage in the society around us, and to do so with excellence and love.

This is not a foreign idea in the Scriptures. About 50 years after this, after Jerusalem had been destroyed and the whole remnant of Israel had been dragged into Babylon, another prophet showed up named Jeremiah. The people at that time were sheltered away on the banks waiting for God to rescue them, very happy with retaining their separation. Instead, along comes Jeremiah who says: “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce ... increase in number there, do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jeremiah 29:5-7).

Instead of calling them to condemn their enemies and separate from the pagan city of Babylon, God calls them to work for the Shalom of the city, work for the redemption of the city, work to better the city, contribute to the city, work to bring God's Kingdom to the city!

Similarly, in Matthew 5:14-16 Jesus instructs his disciples, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden ... in the same way, let your light shine before others so that they might see your good deeds and praise your father in heaven.” Jesus instructs, you are a city on the hill! You are God's city in the middle of the human city. You are to shine forth and demonstrate through your lives what God intends this city to be.

Application

So what does this mean for us? It means that rather than withdraw from the city and the society that we find ourselves in, often that very obviously does not share our common values and vision for life, we are called to engage. We are called to learn, grow, and figure out ways that we can contribute to the common good. We are not to run away from the places and institutions in our culture that scare us, but to discern the paths into those places, so that we can be faithful witnesses for Jesus and an influence for him in every sector of our city. And when we find ourselves in those places, we are to work unto God with energy, excellence, and love.

Just think about this for a moment. What if each of us—in all our varied places that we find ourselves during the week—in business, law, art, media, medicine, the service industries, in our PTAs, our schools, our neighborhoods—instead of only seeking to protect ourselves from the pollutants of our society, saw these places as holy and sacred callings that God has given us? What if we believed that in each of these places God was calling us to be deeply engaged, to be the very best citizens, the very best participants, to use our influence for God and his glory? What if we were to serve and love and give and work for the welfare of our city, especially when the people around us are indifferent, ungrateful, or even downright hostile? What would happen to your daily life if you viewed it that way? What would happen to our community? I believe that just as God did for Daniel and his friends, God would bless our work and cause our influence for his sake to grow all over this city.

Conclusion

So let me sum up. Think back two weeks ago to our friend Dave. Here is a young Christian businessman, disoriented and confused about how he is called to live as a Christian in the world and place of work he finds himself. What would you tell him to do?

I'd tell him to read the book of Daniel. And when he did, I hope he would find that on the one hand, the separatists are wrong. Yes, God wants us to be distinct, but he does not want us to withdraw and separate from the world around us out of fear, anger, or anxiety. Such an attitude does not reflect the heart of God, who never moves away from the world in disgusted hostility, but always moves toward the world in redemptive love. This is what our Lord Jesus has done for us. The more you receive his grace for you, the more you will want to extend that same grace to others, especially those with whom you disagree.

On the other hand, I hope Dave would find that the accommodationists are also wrong. Yes, we are called to be involved in the world around us, but when we collaborate with our culture so much that we become totally indistinct from it and when there is no discernable difference between us as God's people and the world around us, we have abandoned the Lord as our true love and loyalty. Jesus Christ has saved us to be his distinct people, and he now rules us as our King, and every day of our lives, in every moment we find ourselves during the week, we are to live as his distinct, set apart people in the world.

As Dave reads the book of Daniel, I hope he finds something altogether different. He will encounter a group of friends who are not separatists, not accommodationists, but men who wisely found a way to be in the world but not of the world.

To be deeply engaged in the world, yet distinct from the world.

To be set apart from the world in order to serve the world.

To be different from the world in order to transform the world.

This is a posture of "faithful presence" that is only possible through the gospel, only possible through Jesus Christ, the ultimate Daniel, who died and rose to set us apart and set us to work for his Kingdom.

May he do this work in us.