

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

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Sermon 1: How to Be an Exile, Introductory Sermon

Text: Daniel 1:8-21

Dominant Thought: While believers are always tempted to either assimilate or separate when they find themselves in exilic environments, God calls us to do neither, instead choosing to live distinctly, yet remain engaged in the world.

Introduction

The purpose of this introduction is to tell a story and create a scenario in which the listeners feel the great tension between private faith and public life in our modern world. I made up this story, but it is based on many details of real life situations of friends and congregation members.

Picture a scenario with me. A young man, let's call him Dave, is a strong Christian leader in his university. He is very active in his college fellowship group and helps to lead it. He graduates with a business degree and gets a job in a big consulting firm right out of college. He couldn't believe his break, and he's excited about starting a new life.

But very quickly, he realizes this isn't going to be as great as he thought. The expectation in his office is that employees work long, grueling hours, even into the weekends, including Sundays. At work, he finds himself running up against decision after decision in which the drive for profit is putting him in difficult ethical situations. At times his supervisor encourages him to smudge the truth in order to make an account look better to a client. The cutthroat politics of his office culture are ruthless, as people found ways to advance toward promotion even if it means stepping on top of other people. When there is time off, his colleagues go to local bars and get hammered.

So Dave, good Christian guy Dave, finds himself totally at a loss. He has no clue how to bring his commitment to Christ into his new job. Every day he faces a decision in which he doesn't know what to do, whether he should do what is expected of him and toe the line, or refuse and risk getting fired or socially ostracized. Most of the times these decisions are not black and white, just shades of gray. What is Dave to do?

This situation that I have just painted for you could be the story of ten different friends of mine. This is a story that plays itself out over and over again, not just in the business world, but in every sector of our society: our schools, universities, every field of work, your neighborhoods, your recreational clubs, etc. I don't need to convince anyone here that the broader culture does not share the values and commitments of the Christian community. It is getting harder and harder to be a Christian in public life. The challenges are immense. When it comes to living out your faith, there are endlessly difficult decisions, there are constant pressures to conform, and there is the constant reality that living out your faith in the public sphere will generate apathy at best, disgust, or even hostility at worst. This is what some of you live in every day.

The questions that arise are: how do we relate to the world around us? When is it right to conform and when should you not? What aspects of your cultural surroundings should you accept, and which should you reject? How do we navigate the complicated unbelieving world we live in?

The book of Daniel gives us an amazingly contemporary answer to these questions. Daniel and his friends, in a similar situation as the one I described, give us an incredibly wise, thoughtful, godly model of how we can live in the kind of society we are in while preserving the integrity of our faith in Jesus Christ.

Background to the Book of Daniel

First, let's explore a bit of the historical background of this book. Jerusalem has been sieged, and Daniel and his friends have been taken into exile by their Babylonian enemies. The Babylonians had a very interesting strategy for how they would expand their power. Rather than annihilating their enemies, they would often seek to assimilate them—that is, seek to obliterate the original cultural and religious identity of their enemies and absorb them into the new Babylonian culture. That's what we see happening here as Daniel and his friends are taken into exile, given new Babylonian names, put in Babylonian training school, and so on.

Among the Jewish people, there probably would have been two common responses to this experience of exile:

1. On the one hand, there would have been those Israelites who saw this assimilation as inevitable, and maybe even embraced it as a way to get ahead in this new culture. They willingly severed their ties with their identity of Israel and fully embraced their new Babylonian identity. The prophets often confront God's people when they adapt to the ways of the cultures around them. This approach is what we would call *total assimilation*.
2. On the other hand, there would have been those Israelites who saw this as a terrible and alarming turn of events and assessed any association with the Babylonians whatsoever as compromise. They would have called the Israelites to completely withdraw, have no association with the Babylonians, and completely disengage from everything in the Babylonian society. This is the situation of the people of God that Jeremiah the prophet addressed in Jeremiah 29. This approach is what we would call *total separation*.

So here are the two approaches that were the common tendencies of the Israelites in exile. Total assimilation or total separation. Completely become like the new culture they were a part of or totally detach from it. These are the opposing propensities of the exilic mindset.

Contemporary Exiles

It is not difficult to make the jump into our contemporary situation and see these same two approaches within the American church today. We, too, have the feeling of exiles. We, too, look around in this new landscape in which so much has seemed to have changed in such a short period of time and feel often out of place and out of touch. So little of our beliefs, convictions and behaviors are shared by the broader culture, and we are left feeling alienated. We, too, struggle to know how to respond to this experience of exile, and we are tempted by the same strategies that the ancient Israelites employed.

On the one hand, there are those Christians who willingly embrace *assimilation* with the broader culture. Their deep concern is relevancy and staying in touch with the society around them. The best way we can have a voice in the larger culture, they say, is to embrace the things that the culture embraces. So whether that is the newest media or the latest philosophy or some new innovation in sexual ethics or whatever it may be, these folks have no problem with the assimilation agenda. If they were advising our friend Dave, they would probably say, "Hey, it's no big deal, that's just the way you have to get ahead, don't worry about it—become like those around you." That's total assimilation.

On the other hand, there are those Christians that are so alarmed by the culture around them that they want to disassociate with anything and everything. These are the separatists. They are so distressed and fearful about the culture that they call for separation from it. They reject any music, movies, or anything culturally relevant. Relevancy, in fact, to them is a bad word! They form separate parallel institutions, their own schools, their own music, their own neighborhoods, their own sports teams, even their own breath mints!

If they were advising Dave, they would tell him to quit his job, move back to his hometown, and find a job in a nice Christian firm with people who share his values.

So here we have it: on the one side, there are those who value relevance; on the other side, there are those who value separateness. So which is right?

Well, according to this story in Daniel at least, neither.

This passage will show us that Daniel and his friends had an entirely different tactic that gives us a model for our engagement with the broader society around us. We will see them live out a tactic that neither completely withdraws nor completely assimilates. We will see them retaining their distinctiveness as the people of God, yet at the same time deeply engaging in their new society, bearing witness to the true God of heaven and earth. This story will give us a model for how we, too, can remain true to our identity as the people of God, while at the same time involving ourselves in the life of the world for sake of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

This book gives us a wonderful example of how to be an exile. But we need more than just a good example. The world we live in is just too difficult and dangerous, and we are too inconsistent and unfaithful to ever really get this right. Thankfully, the book of Daniel offers us more than just an example—it also points to the power we need to actually live this out. Specifically, it points to a person, Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate Daniel we need to carry this out.

Only one person ever got this tactic right—and that is Jesus himself. Jesus came into the ultimate alien environment and lived as the ultimate exile, exiled from the very perfection of heaven in order to dwell among us sinners. And in doing so, he epitomizes the tension we will be talking about in the coming weeks.

On the one hand, Jesus was totally distinct from the environment around him. In a totally alien environment, when the pressures of the world pushed him to deny the mission of the Father and live for himself and his own protection, he persisted in love, in selflessness, and was like a shining star in a dark universe around him.

On the other hand, Jesus never separated from sinners but deeply engaged in the life of the world. He did not remain isolated—in fact, he engaged so deeply in the people and places of sin around him that he was often accused of being a drunkard and a partier. But Jesus did this in love. He wrapped himself up in the trials and problems of the world, so much so that he took those sins and trials on to himself, dying on the cross, allowing himself to be destroyed.

Why did he do this? Why did Jesus live this amazing life? Why did he live in a way that was in the world, yet not of it? Why did he persist in modeling total distinction, yet total engagement? For us. For you. To save you from your sin, to redeem you from your brokenness, and to make you like himself. And he did this so that we, too, can live the kind of life that he did. A life that is distinct, yet engaged all at once. In the world, but not of it. Saved from the world, for the sake of the world. Let's pray that he empowers us to live this out as we learn from him in the coming weeks.