

We're going to talk about work, and I'll be talking about the workplace. But let me say that when I say that word, what I mean is the thing that you spend most of your time doing. So maybe it's something for a paycheck. Maybe you're retired, maybe you're raising children, maybe you're in school. There are a lot of different options. But when I say work, I mean whatever it is that you spend the majority of your week doing day to day.

And what I want to really explore is how we connect this worship, this relationship with Jesus that we have, with the work that we do. How do we connect worship and work? And to explore that a little bit, I want to do a little exercise.

Now it's my first time preaching at CPC, so I'm not sure what kind of church you are. I don't know if you're the kind of church that yells in the middle of sermons or if it is just blank faces. So we're going to do a little test and see. We're going to pretend that we're driving and are in a left-turn lane. We're the second car. There's one car in front of us, and it's the left red arrow. And we're going to pretend that the arrow turns green and the car in front doesn't move. What I want to know is how quickly do you honk? So here's what we're going to do. I'm going to indicate the time that the light turns green. Then you start honking after the appropriate time that you would wait. So you're going to yell, "honk" when you would honk in that situation. We're all on the same page here, and we'll see if you're like a honking kind of church or not.

You ready for this? Okay. The light's red. You're standing there. The light turns green now. All right. We got some of you. You honked like right away. I mean, that's like, come on, give it a minute at least. How many of you would never honk? You'd wait the whole cycle. Yep. You'd be like, "I don't want to bother that person. I'm sure there's a good reason that they're delaying my life." And you would just wait for the lights to turn green the next time. There are some of you there.

So the reason for that exercise is I want to invite you to think about that feeling you have when the light turns green, and the person's not driving. It's like one of the worst things in the world, right? Like, how dare they not be paying attention? And I want you to imagine that tension that's growing within you.

Some of you had no tension because you honked as soon as it turned green. But for the normal people here, I want you to imagine how that tension starts to grow, and you feel more anxious, and you feel more worried, and you're wondering, "Should I honk or maybe I shouldn't?" And there's that sense of something's happening, and you're not quite sure what to do about it.

I want to suggest that when we, as followers of Jesus, go into the workplace, there sometimes is that kind of tension where something is

happening, and yet there's something true inside of you. There seems to be some disconnect with what's happening outside of you and with what's true within you. You start to feel that rising kind of tension, and you don't know what to do. You don't know whether to allow that tension or whether to push it down. You don't know whether to honk and say something and make it clear. You're trying to discern how it is that you can be true to what you believe and also be true to this work that you have to do.

That's what we're going to be exploring this morning, and it turns out that there's a lot of material in the scriptures. There are a lot of stories of people who faced tension as part of worshiping God, and they can help us unpack what to do in our own lives. So we're going to look at the character of Daniel.

Daniel is a fascinating example of this because he existed in a world of tension. We're going to see what he chose to do, and we'll use that story as a kind of model for us. If you are a follower of Jesus, then in that place, in that tension, Christ is there. We're often not aware of it, but in that moment, in those times of indecision and discernment and frustration, Christ is there with us. Being able to understand what that means and how to connect with him, listen to him, and follow him is critical for drawing those work and worship parts of our lives together.

The story of Daniel begins with Jerusalem having been destroyed. It's the city of God's people, and it has been completely wiped out by the forces of Babylon. This is a horrific event. This is in the ancient world for people who worship Yahweh, the worst possible thing that could happen. And it happened in a terrible way. If you read some of the prophets, there are stories of people eating their children because the famine is that bad because of the siege. I mean, this is awful stuff.

In that day, what a conquering empire would do is they would assume the resources of the empire they conquered. They would steal the gold, the food, and the people who showed promise. And so what we hear in the beginning of the Book of Daniel is that the king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, had sent his people to Jerusalem to find the people with the most promise and bring them back. They would train them up in the ways of what it looked like to be Babylonian so that they could contribute to the economy and the empire. That's what happened in Daniel 1.

Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them

the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service. Daniel 1:3-5

So what's happening here is that the youth are brought to Babylon, and they are enrolled in a kind of Babylonian executive training program. Now, you may not immediately see it but think about what happens in our part of the world. In Silicon Valley, in the Bay Area, with companies that are trying to build their resource pool of employees, think about how they hire the best of the best. They look for people who graduated from the best colleges, and they look all around the world and bring them here. They train them and give them free food. And they treat them well. They say, "Play volleyball during lunch. Live your good life. And we're going to train you up, and we're going to pour into you so you can contribute back to the life of this company." People have been doing this for thousands of years. It's not a new strategy.

This is what King Nebuchadnezzar does, and he brings Daniel and his friends over for this training program. But remember that the same guy who did this had just destroyed their hometown. Had just maybe murdered their parents, had just wiped out their temple where they worship God. Now he brings them to Babylon, giving them free food and is making them work for him. In the ancient world, it was a great opportunity. I mean, you're working for the king of the world, essentially. This is the best possible career opportunity you could have in the ancient world. So it's an incredible opportunity, but also there's some tension there. What do I do? It's not like you could decline the job offer and post your resume on LinkedIn, hoping for something better. This was literally a do-or-die situation. You didn't have a choice here. So this is the situation that Daniel finds himself in.

It reminds me of when I first started as a pastor here in the Bay Area. I remember a conversation I was having while eating lunch at Google. I took particular pastoral concern for our parishioners who worked at places that gave out free food. So I would, you know, really I wanted to care for them as a pastor because that's what pastors do. So I would, Google, Facebook, I just really want to care for them.

Well, so I was at Google, suffering from eating the free food that Google was serving us. And this young man had just moved here from the Midwest somewhere. I remember him asking me this question. "My job is to fix bugs in Google Maps. What does my job have to do with following Jesus? I'm a Christian. I'm passionate about Jesus, and every day I fix bugs in Google Maps. What do they have to do with each other?" I remember, at the time, I didn't have a great answer. I mean, I'm sure I said something brilliant that changed his life forever, but at least I felt like I wasn't exactly sure.

That's a question that a lot of us find ourselves in. What do we do to make those dots come together? What does one have to do with the other? And I want to suggest that this model of Daniel being in exile is really helpful framing for the kind of experience we have as Christians in the workplace. Let me explain that.

So the nature of being an exile is that you come from a natural environment, and you are compelled to leave that natural environment into an exilic environment. That's a big word to just say something that's not your home. When you move into that exilic environment, you have an identity that comes from your natural environment, but now it has been displaced into the exilic environment. And there is some kind of contrast between who you feel you are and the world that you live in. That's what it feels like to be in exile. It's that waiting, the light has turned green, and you're not sure whether to honk yet. It's that tension of being different in the world that you're in.

And I should say too, that maybe some of you are just checking out faith, you're not sure about this Jesus thing yet, and you might feel this too. This is actually a universal experience in the workplace. We do some stuff with training for faith and work, and one of the assignments we have people do is to ask five of their coworkers, in what ways do your personal values not align with our corporate values? And it turns out everybody has an answer. Everybody feels like there's something true of them that's not quite true of the place that they're employed by. And so this experience is not only something that Christians experience. It's just this state of being part of an organization that doesn't a hundred percent line up with who you are. And that's true for all of us.

The question then is what do we do with that? How do we respond? How do we manage to understand what that difference does to us? I'm hoping as we're talking, as we're exploring this, that you're starting to think of some very specific things, maybe in your work or in your school, or in your volunteering or whatever it is that you do with your time, of the places where you most feel that kind of tension. So as we keep reading in the story, we hear what Daniel did with that tension.

"But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way" (Daniel 1:8). That's a really interesting verse. Scholars debate about this verse a lot about what exactly it was that would be defiling about this food and drink. Some people think that it must not have been kosher. And of course, the Jews had very strict food laws about what God permitted them to eat or not. Some people don't think that's true. Personally, what I believe is that the text is intentionally vague. You know, the author could have told us exactly what it was that would've been defiling.

The Hebrew word there is actually an Assyrian word, which makes sense because he's living in Babylon. The word basically just means the king's food. It's the privileged meal of those in power. I think what's going on here is that Daniel has a sense that eating this food would be equivalent to being bought. That he would be trading something of himself by accepting the generosity of this food. I think that was a deeply personal thing for Daniel.

We know from other parts of the story that Daniel had a dedicated regimen of prayer and worship. We know that he had a community of people, we heard their names read, that he connected with and processed with. So I think we can assume that when Daniel made this decision, he made it with the people in his life. He made it through prayer.

And he came to a conclusion that he knew would be difficult, but he felt God was leading him to. Daniel drew a line in the sand and said that he would go up to here but not any further. This is as far as he would go and would not defile himself.

What I like about that is that I can't tell you what kinds of lines you might draw. There's no manual, there's nothing that says that if you work at Google, don't eat their food. I'm not saying that, but maybe the Spirit is, who knows? Or, you know, when you come across this situation, don't do this and do that. That's up to the Spirit and the community to discern together. This is how God works.

There's a spectrum. You know, some people might draw the line here, some people might draw the line there. What happened is that Daniel drew this line, and then he acted upon it. Listen to what he said.

Now God had caused the official to show favor and compassion to Daniel, but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you." Daniel 1:9-10

Notice that this official wasn't concerned about Daniel not being well fed. He wasn't concerned about the situation. He was concerned about his own wellbeing. He was concerned that it would affect him negatively, and that's really important because the decisions we make affect other people.

Before I became a pastor, I worked in technology for seven years, actually, right around here. I worked at Oracle in one of the buildings over here. I was a product manager. I was a fresh grad out of college, and I was all on fire for Jesus. And I was like, I'm going to go, and I'm going to be a Christian in the workplace, and I'm just going to really figure this out. It's going to be great, and I'll just maintain my integrity.

I remember getting there, and what surprised me the most was the kind of social environment that exists in the workplace where your decisions affect everybody you work with. So I was newly married, and I said that I wanted to go home at five, but then my coworkers were working hard until six or seven. And it wasn't just me establishing boundaries; it was me letting down the team. I realized that my decisions affect other people. There's a sense of loyalty and of being in it together.

Think about Daniel. He was probably 15 or 16 years old when we read this story, and he's part of this crew of young men eating good food, and he decides he doesn't want to be a part of it. Think about the social consequences of that kind of decision. That's not easy. I don't think I could have made that kind of decision at age 16. Think about how people might be let down by him. Think about what they might think of him. When we make decisions in our workplace not to do this, it affects people.

You know, if we're making a moral stand, they're going to feel like, "Well, I'm eating the food. Does that make me a bad person? Are you judging me now because I'm doing the thing that you're not willing to do?" Or maybe they'll judge you for being holier than thou. So all of

these decisions, it sounds easy in principle to just draw a line in the sand and not do it. Don't do something you're not comfortable with. But there are all sorts of forces, and so that's the tension that we're talking about.

Syncretism

This experience of an exile is living in that place of tension, and I'm convinced that what we are tempted to do is to resolve the tension in one of two ways. These are what I call the temptations of the exile. On one hand, we resolve the temptation by what I call syncretism or conforming. See, there's this contrast between who you are and the world around you, and you feel the tension. And one way you can resolve the tension is just be like the people around you. Be absorbed into the community to lose that distinctive identity that's causing the problem. You assimilate into the environment. You don't do anything different than the people around you. What happens then is you've relieved the discomfort by changing your values. I can tell you it's a whole lot easier to do this than to stay in the middle. It's a whole lot easier to resolve the tension by conforming to what's happening around you.

Escapism

But there's another temptation. Instead of becoming like the people around you, you just distance yourself from them. So you disengage. I call this escapism. You separate from the environment, and you do your own thing, head down, do your work. You are not going to be a part of what's happening over there. Or in Christian culture, this is what happens, where we create all of our own little Christian versions of things because we don't want to be involved. The world is so complicated; let's get Christian tables, Christian carpet, and Christian buildings, and then we don't have to worry about all the complications. We'll just create our own little version of the world that's safe.

The problem with that is you lose engagement, you lose the call to be involved, and be a light, to be a part of the world, because you're just protecting yourself. What I want to suggest this morning is that the call of God on the life of a follower of Jesus is to live in that tension, is to be uncomfortable, to embrace it even.

What I love about the story of Daniel is that he shows us it is possible to embrace that tension, and not only to embrace it, but to thrive within it. That we don't have to white knuckle it; we can actually live as faithful followers of Jesus engaged in the world while we feel that tension. The lights turned green, the car hasn't moved, and we're not sure what to do. And we feel that rising sense of should I honk or not, but we can stay there. We don't have to become like the world; we don't have to disengage from the world. We can stay right in that place.

The way we can do that is through Jesus. We can find Christ in that tension. I've talked to lots of people who found creative ways to do that. One person I know who's the CEO of a small company, her decision is she's just going to pray before every meal and they do as a company. So she says, "Hey, this is my thing. I'm going to pray. If you're uncomfortable, just tune out for a few seconds." That's her way of showing who she is, even though she leads a company.

Another friend of mine built a company that has values built into the company that are from the Bible, values of transparency, leadership, and servanthood. They aren't saying you have to be a Christian to work there, but you have to abide by these values. This is how we're going to structure our company. This is how we're going to do work. Another friend I have in the workplace, her thing is she just asks people if she can pray for them. She says that almost never does someone say no. They might not believe in God, but I mean, it's worth a shot.

Alliance

So what is it for you? What is the way that you might be called to live in that tension and to thrive in it by finding Christ there? Here's what I found: these words are really helpful to unpack the different things. On the one hand, alliance is what we owe to our companies. Alliance is a temporary merging of interests, and so we have this sense that we have an alliance with our employers because they pay us to do certain things. So we temporarily align our interests and our efforts and our creativity or our bodies, whatever it is, the work we do, we align ourselves with our companies, for the time being, for the duration of the employment contract.

Allegiance

Allegiance is something deeper. Allegiance is the giving over of our souls. It's that giving over of something that's deeper. Allegiance is loyalty or devotion to some person or group because of love.

We know that Daniel allied himself with the king of Babylon because he lived well into his sixties. In that age, if you didn't do your job well, you weren't laid off; your head was cut off. So the fact that he lived meant that he did his job well. So we know that Daniel used his intellect, passion, and creativity to make the kingdom of Babylon successful. The kingdom that destroyed the temple of the God that he worships. The kingdom that probably killed his parents. The kingdom that lay siege to his city for years while his people suffered. Daniel made that kingdom successful through his efforts, and yet he also maintained his allegiance to God. He figured out what it looks like to worship God in the midst of that.

If Daniel can do that, if Daniel can work for Nebuchadnezzar, you can work for anyone. I don't know your boss. But your boss is probably not as bad as Nebuchadnezzar. Maybe close. Some of you are thinking, you haven't met my boss. Okay, fair. Nebuchadnezzar was a really bad dude. If Daniel can work for him, you can work for anybody and stay faithful to Christ. It might cost you.

When Daniel made this decision, he didn't know what was going to happen. He didn't know that it turned out they did fine. They were healthier than the people who ate the food. But when he made that choice, he knew that it might cost him. A friend of mine works at a large tech company. She was having a Bible study at her home, and she invited people who were on her team to the Bible study and dinner if they wanted to attend. She got written up by Human Resources for doing that. They said that she wasn't allowed to do that because it might be

coercive authority. They worked for her. People might attend to curry favor. She was in danger of losing her job for doing that.

What's it going to cost you? I mean, the worst possible scenario is that it costs you your job. Most of you won't be executed for drawing a line in the sand. Are we okay with that? Are we okay with suffering a little bit for following Jesus? If that's what it means, are we willing to do that? See, I think if you don't feel the tension, then you've probably relieved it in one of those directions.

If you're like, "I don't know what you're talking about, Paul, like, my job's fine. I don't feel any tension. It's just great." Then my guess is probably you've either conformed to the world that you live in, or you've separated yourself from it. But finding Jesus in the middle of it is the way that we stay faithful.

This is what I think Daniel felt. Daniel is in the middle, and I think he felt like he was being drawn in different directions. So we have Daniel in the middle, we have Nebuchadnezzar and Babylon, which are the two forces that he was around. Then he also had this relationship with God and Israel. He felt this tension of being drawn from these different directions. On the one hand, we know that he owed his allegiance to God and his love to Israel. That was what was called for from him, allegiance to God and love for his people.

On the other hand, we know that he owed his alliance to Nebuchadnezzar and his service to Babylon. He was supposed to work for them. He was supposed to serve the interests of Babylon, and somehow, he was able to do that by embracing that tension in the middle. The question is, what does it look like for you? Who is your king? Who is your Nebuchadnezzar? What is your Babylon? Where do you owe your alliance? Where do you give your service? And how do you do that in a way that maintains your allegiance to God and your love for God's people? Where's the line between allegiance and alliance?

Now, as with everything, the answer to this question for us is Jesus. It's the presence of Christ within us. It's walking with him. It's asking for his guidance. It's being in a community of people to say, "Hey, I'm facing this situation at work, and what would you do? How would you handle this?" And then, when you take a stand, ask for prayer.

Being part of a supportive community. I know you have your Work Life ministry here at CPC, that's a great place to wrestle these things through. There aren't easy answers to this. As with anything in the Christian faith, it's about walking in the presence of Christ wherever we go and following him courageously with how he leads us. When we do that, we don't just manage to find the right balance in our lives; we represent Christ to the world.

That's the incredible part about the story of Daniel. Over and over again, you see how the forces that he sees the nature of God in Daniel's choices. That's the opportunity we have to be Christ to the people around us. So my question for you is, where do you find yourself? Where are you resonating with this in your life? What's going on for you? What is your temptation? Is your temptation more to withdraw? Or is your

temptation more to conform? Each of us usually finds ourselves in different places. What is the line for you between allegiance and alliance?

One last thing. I want to invite you to do something. I want to invite you to pull out your phones. This is like a pastorally sanctioned use of your phones during church. Don't tell Kevin. I want you to set a timer for 12:15 pm tomorrow. Maybe there's a better time than that, maybe you're in a meeting at 12:15 pm. Pick a different time if that's not a good time. But I want to invite you tomorrow to just indicate some way to remind yourself to pray for this.

Give yourself a reminder to say a simple prayer. When that timer goes off, say, "God, help me to find that balance between allegiance and alliance. Christ, guide me. Christ be with me." It's something that draws those together for you. It's your relationship with Christ. So talk to him. Invite him into that moment. And as you do that, as you grow in that, you will find this exciting dynamic way of following him in everything you do. That's the goal. We find ourselves in Christ; we root ourselves in Christ, drawing everything together into the person of who Jesus is.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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