

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

10.11.2026 | Working as an Exile | Daniel 1:1-15 |

Paul Taylor - President, Co-Founder of The Bay Area Center for Faith, Work & Tech

Welcome. My name is Paul. I'm really happy to be here. As Clark said, I work with transforming the bay with Christ and I'm a co-founder of a nonprofit that helps churches and individuals connect the dots between their faith and their work and what a privilege it is to be here, to be in this amazing room, to be with you amazing people and to talk about what God is doing. I'm married, my wife is a pastor. She has actually just recently accepted a job at New North Church in San Francisco to plant a campus in Burlingame. We have five kids and I say that my kids are where they belong, which is out of my house. We love our kids, we love our family and we love having them living on their own and this new season of empty nest for us.

So it's wonderful to be here, wonderful to be sharing the word with you. Before I was a pastor, I worked for Oracle as a product manager for seven years. And my first time going to a conference was a sales conference. It was our big conference of the year and it was in New Orleans during Mardi Gras. So I was really excited for this. I was thrilled to be traveling as an employee and go into this thing and what I realized though is that I encountered a side of my coworkers that I didn't see every day in the office when we went to New Orleans during Mardi Gras. And let's just say that some of my coworkers were willing and excited to do things that I was less willing and less excited to do while we were in New Orleans.

But if you work, if you are in the world, which all of you are, then you know that there are different kinds of lines that people draw with the behaviors that they partake in in the world. And when I was working with Oracle, this was kind of my root awakening to realizing that there are different decisions people make. And yet at the same time, that event, that conference, those were some of the easier decisions to make because it was very clear that they were doing things and participating things that I would not partake in. And so that line was pretty obvious. What I found harder is the daily smaller areas where you just don't know, should I act this way or should I act that way?

All of these little micro decisions that happen in the workplace where you're just not sure, it's not clear, it's not black or white, but there's a wide swath of gray. My hope this morning is that as we look in the scriptures, we're gonna find that the biblical theme of exile is a theme that can help us as we navigate those kinds of decisions in our work lives. And when I say work, I mean whatever it is that you do that takes up the majority of your time. So maybe it's working for a paycheck, maybe it's going to school, maybe it's raising a family, maybe it's volunteering, whatever it is that you spend your time doing, I'm broadly referring to that as work. And we're gonna take this biblical theme of the exile and see how it can help us to navigate those tensions in the workplace.

Now it turns out that exile is a theme that runs all throughout the entire set of the scriptures. So that in the very first chapters of Genesis, God takes his newly created people Adam and Eve and he exiles them from the garden. He sends them out and he restricts access to the tree of life and the whole rest of the scriptures, they are living in this kind of exile they get to revelation and the tree of life returns and they once again have access to the tree of life. There's also in the Old Testament, the actual exile where God's people were in Babylon for 70 years in the New Testament, the apostle Peter refers to our place in the world as one of exile. So this idea that we are not in our homes is a common idea. And I think Clark even mentioned it this morning as you were opening up. So it seems like it's something that's familiar with all of you.

What I wanna do is look at the person of Daniel and one little scene from his life where we can see how one particular decision he made can help us to make all of those small decisions that we face in the workforce. So if you have your Bibles, if you have them on your phones or whatever, take them out. We're gonna look at Daniel chapter one and we're gonna look at the very first scene of the lands in exile. And we're gonna take away some lessons from there that can help us to understand better how to represent God in the world. I'll start by reading verses three to five and it's on the screens behind you. Then the king ordered Ashpanaz, 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.

What I want you to notice about these verses is how shrewd the leaders of Babylon were. They had recently conquered Jerusalem, conquered God's people and what they did was they went to the people of God and they selected the best and the brightest people from the most well-to-do families that showed the most potential and they physically relocated them from their kind of place they used to live to the city of Babylon and then they put them in what essentially worked out to be a young executive training program. They were to teach them how to be Babylonian. They were to put them to work. They were to train them in the culture of this new world that they lived in and all the while, they gave them free food and free drink and they treated them really well and they played volleyball during lunch and they washed their cars in the parking lot and they could do their laundry.

Does this sound familiar at all? Does this strategy of relocating young people, putting them to work and treating them lavishly sound like any of the strategies you're familiar with? This is what most of our tech companies do. They take young people from the best schools and from the best places and they bring them and they treat them really well. They pay them lots of great money and they give them free food because they want them eventually to contribute to the corporation that they've brought on to contribute to. This is what Nebuchadnezzar did in Babylon. He took these young people and he trained them to be as Babylonian as he could get them to be. Now, notice how they were to learn the language, learn the literature. He was trying to take them and acculturate them to how things worked in Babylon.

And this is what we do in our culture as well. In fact, some of you may work for Google if you don't, some of you may know about this. As part of Google's regular review process, you're evaluated on how googly you are. This is part of your regular review cycle because they want you to be part of the culture. And so in the same way that Nebuchadnezzar was making them into Babylonians, our companies want us to acculturate to the environment that they've created. Now, this is not nefarious. It's not evil. It's not manipulative. We do this in all sorts of organizations where we want you to really embody the values and the priorities of the organization. So we don't say this to say that our companies are doing something wrong necessarily, but we do want to be aware that they have goals to make us fit in so that we can contribute as well as we might be able to do.

Daniel makes a decision though. Daniel realizes that by fitting in too much, he might be losing something significant about himself. And so he decides to draw a line. Listen to what he does. This is in Daniel 1, verse eight. I'm realizing that I think the version in mine is different than up there. So I'll read from the screens. Daniel resolved that he would not defile himself with the king's food or the wine that he drank. And this is a really interesting decision. And scholars debate about why Daniel made this choice. The Hebrew word there used is a word called *potbog*. And it's a rare Hebrew word that really people think refers to the rich choice food of nobility. There's no indication that that food was not kosher. There's no indication that it contained something that Daniel was religiously forbidden to eat. But for some reason, he decided that he wouldn't defile himself by eating that food. He decided that there was a line that he wouldn't cross.

And I'm convinced that we're not supposed to know the reason. That we are left intentionally in the dark as to why exactly Daniel drew that line. Because if we knew the reason, then we would say, well, that line doesn't apply to me so we can just read over it. But because there's a mystery there, it invites us into the process of saying, well, what in my life might be *potbog*? What in my life might be something that isn't necessarily prohibited, but it might do something within me that I don't want done within me? Daniel makes this decision. And I think what he's navigating is what I call the temptations of the exile. When you find yourself with your certain identity, you are someone and you are living somewhere else, I think you have two temptations as an exile. The first is what I call syncretism. And this is the temptation to adapt and to fit into the culture that you find yourself within. If you see my little chart, there's like a dark blue circle and there's the light blue circle. And in the syncretism side, the core has become dark blue. You've lost your identity. You've just merged into the world that you live in.

And the problem with that approach is that you lose your distinctiveness as a follower of Jesus. You lose anything that defines you. Your core gets hollowed out so that you just melt into the world around you. The Apostle Paul warns against this in Romans 12, where he says, "Do not be conformed to the world." This is what faces us, this temptation of syncretism. And when you're in the workplace, when you're in any type of environment, there's always a temptation to

just be like the world around you. But as followers of Jesus, a lot of us are very aware of this temptation. And so sometimes we swing to the other temptation, which I call escapism. And in that one, we really wanna protect the core of our identity. We really don't want to lose our distinctiveness. So because we are in a foreign environment, we withdraw. We form a protective boundary around ourselves so that we don't get tainted or skewed or get too dirty by the world around us. The problem with that approach is that we lose our engagement. We might be pure, we might be clean, we might be confident in our identity, but we're not close enough to anyone for it to matter. Each of these temptations is a way to solve the discomfort of exile. Because when you live somewhere that isn't your home, you experience discomfort. It's unpleasant. You want to be comfortable. You want for it to make sense.

I think that as followers of Jesus, we're actually called to live into that discomfort, to embrace that tension, to say that this is the life that God has called us to. And it's never gonna feel all that great because we are in a place that we don't belong and yet we can navigate that tension faithfully, staying with the discomfort. I have a friend from seminary who told me when he does sermons, he really wants people to understand that we tend to idealize marriage, and marriage is often a lot more challenging than people assume. And so he says, when he does his wedding sermons, he stands up there, the groom and the bride are there, and he tells them, "Lower your expectations." And then he waits a minute and he says, "Now take your lowered expectations and lower them again." And he waits another minute and he says, "Now take them and lower them one more time. That's what marriage will be like." Which I think is probably a little severe. I mean, weddings are supposed to be fun, right? Like maybe there's a little bit of idealism, but like you want to also not leave people in tears.

But I think sometimes we do that with our jobs too, where, especially in the Bay Area, we so identify with our work that we expect it to be everything. We expect to love it. We expect to be passionate about it. We expect to go there and be fulfilled and to find ourselves in our jobs. And yet I think sometimes we just have to lower our expectations a little bit. That God is sending us into a place that might be great and it might be challenging. And it's probably going to be some mix of both. That we are going to experience that tension as followers of Jesus in the world. And honestly, if you don't feel the tension, you've probably relieved it in one of two ways. You've probably conformed to the world around you or you've isolated yourself so that you're protected. So if it's super easy and everything is just flowing, maybe there's some hard questions to ask yourself about whether you've relieved the tension in one of two ways.

Daniel makes a decision to embrace that tension. He decides not to defile himself. And this ends up working out pretty well for him, but notice what he does. I'm going to read now from verses nine and 10. He says, "Now God had caused the official," he asked the chief of the eunuchs, "to allow him not to defile himself." So he asks his boss, "And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs. And the chief of the eunuchs said to Daniel, I fear my Lord, the king, who assigned your food and your drink, for why should he see that you were in worse condition than the youth who were of your own age? So you would endanger my head with the king." This is a really interesting observation because Daniel wants to not defile himself. And notice that his boss's objection has nothing to do with the fact that, hey, I really want you to be defiled. I really want you to be more Babylonian. I really want you to be like us. That's not his problem. His problem is that he's afraid for himself. His problem is that he's worried for his own head.

And this is helpful to realize because sometimes, and probably not at first, but other Christians I know, can sometimes characterize the world as if the world is out to get us. As if the world is trying to make us lose our integrity. They're trying to make us fail. They're trying to defile us. But really, most people are most concerned about themselves. And in the workplace, our companies are mostly concerned with how the company does. Most of our managers are concerned with their needs, not with ruining our lives. And when we're able to go into the settings with that realization that people generally, now there are exceptions for sure, but generally people are trying to reach their own goals. And so Daniel's manager says, hey, if you do this, I might lose my job. And in Babylon, losing your job meant losing your head. So it was like a little more significant of a risk. And what's fascinating is that Daniel respects that.

He manages to find a way where his manager's goals can be reached and his integrity can be protected. He manages to find a solution. Listen to what he does. Starting at verse 11, we read that Daniel then said, Daniel said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel. He said, I'm sorry, I don't have this verse in my slides. So Daniel says, give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food and treat your servants in accordance with what you see. So he agreed to this and tested them for 10 days. So

what Daniel does is he comes up with a solution that allows his manager to reach his goals and protects his own integrity. It's really fascinating. I think it has to model for us in the workplace to figure out ways where we can actually serve the people around us by helping them reach their goals as we protect our calling to follow Jesus. Daniel does this and it ends up turning out very well for him. Daniel ends up succeeding. It turns out after 10 days, they're just as healthy as everybody else, even healthier and Daniel has succeeded in allowing the people around him to reach their goals.

I remember when I was working, I think it was one of the first meetings I went to where there were representatives from different teams. And so we were working on a collaborative project from different product areas and I went to a meeting and so there were probably six or seven different product areas represented at this meeting. And we just went around in the discussion and I just, it was so clear. And many of you might know what I'm talking about, how everybody's trying to protect their own interests. Everybody's working for their product, for their team. They're trying not to lose reputation. They're trying not to lose resources. They're trying to protect their little domain. And so when you're collaborating with other product teams, you're always trying to kind of navigate this. And this is the world we live in.

Daniel somehow is able to go into that kind of environment and recognize other people's goals and act in a way that honors their goals. This is something that I think is uniquely able for Christians to do. We're actually able to go into our settings where God has put us and see other people and see their needs and even sacrifice our own goals for their sake. So Daniel, even in his desire to protect his integrity, even in that he's able to serve the people around him. That's what's really remarkable. That's why I think Daniel can be such a great example for us. But what Daniel is able to do is he's recognized a line between two different ways of being in the workplace. And I wanna just map that out for us so that we can understand how this might apply to us.

If you think about the word alliance, an alliance is defined as this, a merging of efforts or interests by persons, families, states, or organizations. An alliance is a merging of interests. And this is what we do in the workplace. We go into work and we merge our interests, our personal interests with the interests of the companies that we work for. We say, you're gonna compensate me, and in return, I'm gonna spend my effort and my creativity and my energy for your goals. That's what happens in an employment contract. That's an alliance. Now, the same thing with volunteering. If you're volunteering, if you're raising kids, if you're going to school, you're merging your interests with the interests of the larger system that you're a part of. This is something that we are meant to do, to find our alliance.

But a lot of our companies and a lot of our organizations and a lot of the world around us actually wants a little more from us. And this was very clear to me when I was working in the tech industry that they didn't actually just want my alliance, they wanted all of me. They wanted my heart and my soul. They wanted what I call my allegiance. An allegiance is something deeper. Allegiance is loyalty or devotion to some person, cause, or the like. Allegiance is my heart. Allegiance is what I'll sacrifice for. Allegiance is what I love. And I realized very early on that this is what was being asked of me, that by giving free food and by offering all these perks and by expecting people to be there, they're asking for my loyalty, my devotion.

Now, what I want to suggest is that we can offer our alliance to our employers, but our allegiance to God. That we offer our alliance to our employers, but our allegiance to God. That part of the challenge and part of the task of following Jesus in the world is to figure out what we can offer to the world around us. I would call that our alliance and figure out what we need to hold back for God. What that allegiance looks like. So if you think about Daniel and what he did, let's just kind of map out a chart of what Daniel's done. So Daniel found himself in Babylon and he was able to say that my alliance is with Nebuchadnezzar. So there's Daniel and he's kind of in the middle of all these forces. And maybe you feel this way as well, that you're kind of in the middle of your world and your family and your home and your church. And Daniel's able to say my alliance is to Nebuchadnezzar. I owe him my job. My allegiance is to God. My love is for my people. Daniel above all loved the people of God, the people of Israel. And my service is to the world of Babylon. That's where I serve.

I think that the fact that Daniel could faithfully serve Nebuchadnezzar and maintain his integrity as a follower of Yahweh is one of the most remarkable stories in the Old Testament. I mean, Babylon would become the archetype of the evil empire. And Daniel's job was to make Babylon successful. We know that he succeeded in his job because he survived. They didn't do layoffs in Babylon, they did beheadings. So the fact that Daniel lived as long as he did meant that he was

good at his job. He was able to help Babylon succeed, even though a lot of Babylon's purposes went against the purposes of God. And yet he found this line and he said, "I will go this far in my alliance, but I will not cross the line into allegiance." And I'm convinced that that decision is what's before all of us as we follow Jesus in the world, to find that line for ourselves. And it's not something I can tell you where it is. It is something that the people around you can help you find, that the spirit can guide you into, that searching the scriptures can help reveal some wisdom in that. But understanding what it is there that you're not willing to cross is your call as a follower of Jesus.

A good friend of mine worked for a streaming company a few years ago, and her job in her streaming company, her KPI every quarter, was to reduce the amount of time between when somebody finished an episode and started the next one. So, you know, it was like 10 seconds down to eight seconds, down to seven seconds. She was evaluated on how much she could shrink that gap. At the same time, she had young kids at home, and her job with young kids was to increase the amount of time between stopping one show and starting the next. So as a parent, her KPI was how big she could get that gap before she resorted to technology to entertain her children. And she felt stuck in between this, "On the one hand, I'm supposed to shrink the gap, "on the other, I'm trying to enlarge it." And she wrestled with that for years, eventually deciding that that was something she couldn't in conscience do. And so she ended up leaving that company and doing something else. And God called her into this amazing kind of ministry. But that's not that this was wrong, it's she's navigating that tension with the spirit, with her community, with the scriptures, and trying to figure out how God is calling her.

That's the question for you. How is God leading you? What does it look like for you to draw the line between alliance and allegiance? That's really the question I wanna leave you with. What is your line between alliance and allegiance look like? In reality, it's probably something small, it's probably small decisions, and it might change over the course of your career, it might be something different at different times. But what does that look like for you? You owe your alliance to your king, you owe your allegiance to God, you serve your company, and you love God's people. But what is the practical difference for you between merging your interests with your company and the loyalty or devotion that you offer to God? Now, I wanna also acknowledge and wrap up by saying that this task of navigating the tension, of finding that line and being true to it, is one that we all fail in. That it's not obvious, it's not black and white, it's not easy, and we're all gonna make mistakes, we're all gonna decide something and not be able to hold to our own convictions, or we're all gonna wish we'd done something else, I don't know how many times

I've come out of meetings and then as I'm falling asleep the night before, thinking, man, I wish I'd said something else, I wish I'd treated people differently, I wish I had done something that honored people more. I preached a sermon, some of this material from the book of Daniel several years ago, when I was pastoring, I had a young woman who worked at Google to me afterwards, just distraught, and she said, I have let my company buy me, I have given them my allegiance, I have not drawn a line, I've given them my whole life, and I haven't held anything back, and I feel like I don't know what to do. And I was able to say to her, this is the gospel, this is, Jesus died for that, Jesus died for our failures to even protect our own integrity, and so there is forgiveness, there is the spirit of God in you and through you, there is repentance, and you can say, okay, maybe I haven't acted the way I've wanted to, but I can repent, and I can ask God, I can rest in the gospel of Jesus Christ and ask him to help me as I move forward, to help guide me, to help lead me, to help direct me.

So I wanna make sure that you know that this is a challenging thing, but that the gospel says that we are forgiven, and not just forgiven, but redeemed. Jesus comes into us and he helps guide us, he helps to shape us as we navigate this tension, as we try to serve God in the world, he is there with us, we do not do it alone, we do it with him and through his power. So my encouragement this morning, what I just wanna leave you with is this idea of navigating the tension of following Jesus in the workplace, navigating that line between conforming and escaping, and being willing to hold true to that, to ask yourself, what is the line that I can't cross, what is the difference for me between alliance and allegiance, how can I play that out in my life?

And I'd ask you just as I close us in prayer, I'm gonna leave just a few seconds, that you would ask the spirit to show you something practical, not just a concept, not just words, but that as you start whatever you start tomorrow morning on Monday, and as you enter this week, that maybe there's an actual practical, I'll do this but not that, or decision that you've been wrestling with, or a relationship at work, or something that you've struggled with, that God would speak to you and give you guidance about a practical way you can put this into play this week. So navigate that tension, find the

line for yourself, and trust Jesus, that he has forgiven you, that he redeems you and he will guide you as you play this out in your life.