

Wilt Chamberlain was a giant of a man—he played 14 seasons in the NBA and was listed at 7’ 1”, 275 pounds. He was one of the leagues most prolific scorers, rebounders, and possessed unbelievable shot-blocking ability—he is considered one of the all-time greats.

Wilt was 6’ 10” when he *entered* high school...yes, you heard me correctly, he was 6’ 10” in grade 9. As you can imagine, he and his team dominated, winning multiple city championships. And Wilt was already standing out in elementary school. Here is a picture of Wilt in 4th grade—can you spot him?

Long before his height did him any good, Wilt Chamberlain was already standing out—nobody wants to stand out that much in 4th grade. In fact, few of us like standing out in a crowd—blending in is simply safer. I remember this reality in High School.

I didn’t fully appreciate it at the time, but my High School had a number of challenges. We had all the usual well-established sub-groups: the jocks, the nerds, the artists, and the stoners. But add to that a growing racial tension: Filipino, Vietnamese, Indo-Canadian, and Caucasian. By the time I finished High School there was a significant gang presence that fell along ethnic lines and a pervasive drug presence in my school.

When I think of it now, there was one other group in High School—in truth, it was less of a group and more of a loose collection of people that no one wanted to be a part of—the social outcasts. If you were to ask many a High School student, they would have told you: better to be a stoner than to be a social outcast. There is an unwritten rule that every High School students knows without ever being told—do whatever it takes to blend in.

At the time, there was a palpable pressure to fit into one of these sub groups, and the added pressure of conforming to the High School party scene—getting drunk, dropping acid, smoking weed, and having sex. I was glad to leave the pressures of High School behind.

But even though I’m older and have a more developed sense of who I am—who I want to be—the pressure to conform hasn’t gone away. Every culture, every sub-group, even a church, applies social pressure—to conform, to toe the line, to blend in—*if you want to be like us, you need to look like us, think like us, and act like us.*

Here’s the question of the hour: if we have decided to faithfully follow Jesus, can we conform to the majority West Coast culture around us? *Which cultural values can we embrace, and where must we draw a line in the stand?* Once again, we are going to look to the biblical text to see how Daniel and his three friends answered this very question.

Please turn with me in your Bibles to Daniel 1:8-21. When we began the story last week, Jerusalem had been conquered and it’s leading citizens deported to Babylon. These exiles were then enrolled in three years of training—they were to be reprogrammed and assimilated so that they could then serve Babylon and her king. But right near the beginning of this process, Daniel drew a line in the sand—let’s read about it, beginning in verse 8.

*“8 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. 9 Now God had caused the official to show favour and compassion to Daniel, 10 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.”*

*11 Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 12 “Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 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.” 14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. 15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. 16 So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.*

*17 To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds. 18 At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. 19 The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so they entered the king’s service. 20 In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom. 21 And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.”*

I want to offer four observations from this text to get us thinking about what this historical account might mean for us today. Here’s the first:

**1. Daniel chooses a curious place to draw a line in the sand.**

Daniel doesn’t resist deportation. He seems willing to be re-educated in the religion, politics, and culture of Babylon; he doesn’t even balk at his new name—one that declares his loyalty to Babylonian gods. So why does he draw the line on the issue of diet?

The simple answer is, no one knows for certain. Some suggest that the issue had to do with ritual purity—Daniel resists because he wanted to maintain the Old Testament food laws.<sup>1</sup> Others suggest that Daniel was uncomfortable with the king’s food being sacrificed to idols. The difficulty is that Daniel doesn’t refuse all food from the king’s table, just meat and wine, and there’s no reason to think that the vegetables weren’t offered to the gods along with the rest.<sup>2</sup>

Others suggest that by refusing the king’s food, Daniel refused to enter into a covenant relationship with the king. But this too is unlikely. Daniel faithfully served the king, and country, for the rest of his life.

I wonder if Daniel drew a line here, simply because it was one of the few lines he could draw. Daniel was prepared to be re-educated and renamed, but he was unwilling to sell his soul. And so, it was important to him that he maintained some aspect of “consecration,” a

---

<sup>1</sup> This seems unlikely. Hosea 9:3 foretells of the day when exiles will eat “unclean” food.

<sup>2</sup> Tremper Longman III, *NIV Application Commentary: Daniel*, 52. Further, Daniel 10:3 implies that later on in life, Daniel came to enjoy Babylonian meat and wine—if it was “unclean” in the beginning, would faithful Daniel welcome it in later years?

visible sign that his life belonged to God, not to Nebuchadnezzar. I think that's what's going on here. Observation #2...

**2. The line that was drawn was relatively small, and private.**

Daniel and his friends didn't take to Facebook and Twitter to stage a protest—granted, social media wasn't the rage in Babylon at the time, but it's interesting to see how went about resisting. They didn't stage a protest. They didn't rally the other exiles. Instead, they went to the chief official and asked for permission to abstain.

Vs. 10 tells us that God caused the official to look upon Daniel with favour, but he was afraid to agree with their proposal; after all, it was his head on the chopping block if these exiles became malnourished. So what did Daniel do? He employed a strategy that he likely perfected as a child—you know it well—when mom says “no” go and ask dad. Daniel to a guard and proposed a 10 day test—for 10 days Daniel and his friends would eat only vegetable and drink only water. The text tells us that at the end of 10 days, they looked healthier than any of their meat-eating contemporaries. And all the vegetarians in the room said, “**Amen!**”

They drew a small, but important, line in the sand. They did it with respect—they asked permission. And they kept it relatively quiet. Outside of Daniel and his three friends, the guard and the chief official were the only ones who were in the know.

When faced with the pressure to conform to culture, drawing a line is never easy. When in exile, we are forced to exercise the muscle of courage—this courage most often grows one small step at a time. By

the time we get to chapter 3 and 6, this muscle had been well-developed in Daniel and his friends, and it needed to be—they drew lines that resulted in the possibility of death. Observation #3...

**3. In spite of all appearances, God is in control.** In spite of all appearances, **God** is in control. Three times in chapter 1 we discover that God gave something to someone. In Daniel 1:2, we discover that God **gave** both Jerusalem and king Jehoiakim into the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. In Daniel 1:9, we discover that God **gave** the official compassion towards Daniel's plight. In vs. 17 we read that God **gave** Daniel and his friends “*knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning.*”

In fact, God gave so generously that when the king interviewed these four (vs. 20), “*he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.*” **God gave**—in spite of all appearances, **God** was in control. Daniel and his three friends outshine all the wisdom in Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar and his royal court will soon discover that their wisdom and courage has a heavenly origin.<sup>3</sup> Observation #4:

**4. It's possible to be faithful—and useful to God—while living in exile.** The description of Daniel and his friends in 1:3-4, is reminiscent of another faithful, Jewish, exile—Joseph (Genesis 41:33, 39-40). Daniel grew up on Joseph's story and likely drew courage from it—“*if God could preserve/use Joseph in Egypt, he can preserve/use me in Babylon.*”

---

<sup>3</sup> Longman, 56.

By the grace of God, Daniel and his friends did more than survive in Babylon, they excelled in every way. God raised them to positions of influence, and for the sake of His glory, He revealed Himself to both king and country through them.

**Application/Integration:** The message of Daniel rings true throughout the ages, and it always will. How do I know? Because in every generation, those who have heeded the call to follow Jesus will inevitably come into conflict with culture. At some point, somewhere, a line will need to be drawn and the question is, *which line, where, and when?*

And it's not as simple as asking what would Daniel do? Should we conclude from Daniel's story that faithfulness to God means we should stop eating meat? And all the vegetarians said, "Amen!" Daniel lived at a different time, in a different culture—the lines he drew were fitting for his time and place, but not necessarily ours.

I want to be careful, lest anyone confuse what I am saying with what I am not. Where the Bible has provided clear guidelines that transcend time, place, and culture, there is nothing for us to discern, instead, there is something for us to obey. And so, where the Scripture prohibits certain attitudes (hatred, pride, envy), and certain actions (gossip, greed, sex outside of marriage), a clear line has already been drawn between Christ and Culture.

What I am talking about is something different altogether. What we need is a way to remain true to God, **and**, move towards the world that God loves—this isn't a case of either/or, it's both/and.

**illus:** when I grew up, the evangelical church was in a different place than we are today. Like all generations of the church, there are things to commend and things to critique. While I commend the church's courage to draw a line between Christ and Culture, I would offer a critique on where the lines were drawn.

My friend tells the story of a preacher who came to their church—he was of the hellfire and brimstone variety. He came preaching the evils of secular music—if the music wasn't Christian, Christian's had no business listening to it. He invited people to come back the next night with any album from their home that didn't fit his—and God's—criteria. The people came back, with boxes full of vinyl albums, and proceeded to throw them in the dumpster behind the church.

I can't quite decide whether my friend was hard-hearted, or, the smartest guy in the room. What I can tell you is that he snuck back to the church later that night, and with flashlight in hand, he treated that dumpster like it was Christmas morning—I must say, he now has a very impressive record collection.

Nearly 20 years ago, when I first became a pastor, I was asked to sign an agreement that said, among other things, that I would not drink any alcohol. On one level, the agreement was easy to sign—alcohol held no appeal to me then or now—but it seemed ironic to me. If you know your Bible, then you know the first miracle Jesus performed—He was at a wedding feast that ran out of alcohol, and so, Jesus turned water into wine in order to keep the party going. I was being asked to draw a line that Jesus crossed in miraculous ways.

Sometimes Jesus has been misrepresented. Can you picture Jesus in a monastery? Dressed in white? Pristine, untouched, unsullied by the world? This is not the Jesus we read about in the Scriptures. But neither did Jesus embrace the values, priorities, and behaviours of the culture around Him.<sup>4</sup> I believe that Jesus stands between God and culture with an arm reaching in both directions. The church has always been at her best, when it stands with Him and does the same.

Because I believe this to be true, each week I'm going to attempt to pair our Daniel story with a Jesus story—we all need flesh and blood examples of what it looks like to remain true to God and move towards the world He loves. This morning's text can be found in Luke 5:27-32. But before I read this story, let me set the stage, beginning in Luke 4.

Jesus was baptized—it was a symbolic act of dedication; He would live a life set apart for God. Following His baptism, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the desert where the devil tested Him. The devil was testing Jesus' consecration—would He remain faithful? Would He crack? Would He take the easy way out? Jesus emerged from the desert, weary but victorious—and what followed was a whirlwind of activity.

In Luke 4:35, Jesus met a man plagued by a tormenting spirit—with a word, Jesus commanded the spirit to leave and the man was set free. From there Jesus went to Peter's house, and He discovered that Peter's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever—Jesus spoke a word of healing and her health was restored. This healing seems to have

sparked a chain reaction of sorts—people with various kinds of sickness flocked to Peter's house and Jesus healed them all.

In Luke 5:1 we are told that Jesus chose His first disciples—Peter, Andrew, James and John—and they began to follow Him. In Luke 5:13, Jesus healed a man with a deadly skin disease, and later, healed a man whose legs were paralyzed—the man got up and walked away on his own two feet.

Those first disciples must have been excited: *Can you believe it? We have a front row seat to the best ticket in town. Did you see that guy's legs? They were size of toothpicks—the muscles grew right in front of my eyes!* I wonder, did any of it go to their heads—being chosen by Jesus I mean? *Jesus had to have seen something in us! He could have picked anyone, but He picked us—He must have seen our hidden talents, our brilliant character qualities, our leadership potential.* Greatness by association.

Luke 5:27-28, *“After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of [Matthew] sitting at his tax booth. “Follow me,” Jesus said to him, and [Matthew] got up, left everything and followed him.”* Can you picture the disciples faces? Mouths open, eyes bugging out. Tax collectors were the scum of the earth, the lowest of the low, and now Matthew was one of them—so much for their greatness by association theory.

Later that day, to celebrate his spot on Jesus' team, Matthew threw a party and invited all his tax collector friends to come—and wouldn't you know it, the religious police showed up to complain. *“Why do*

---

<sup>4</sup> Michael Frost, *Exiles: Living Missionally In A Post-Christian Culture*, 15.

*you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus answered them, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.”*

Jesus came to save—He came to make sure there is a place set at God’s table for you, me, and anyone willing to turn to Him. Jesus was labelled a “friend of sinners,” a label He proudly wore. This is where we regularly find Jesus, the Christ—standing between God and culture, with an arm reaching in both directions. And the church has always been at her best, when it stands with Jesus and does the same.

And so, it’s important church, that we do more than tell our culture what we are against; we could begin by showcasing what we are for. Rather than pointing out what’s “wrong,” we could offer a radical alternative to West Coast culture.

What would it look like to offer a radical alternative to the greed present in West Coast culture? Why not draw a line in the sand on this issue? God is the most generous Being in the universe—*God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son*—surely, He can show us the way forward. If radical generosity were lived out in and through our community, it would offer a far more compelling alternative than greed. Can we not show the way?

What would it look like to offer a radical alternative to the individualism present in West Coast culture? Why not draw a line in the sand on this issue? We have the opportunity to be a community that practices forgiveness, patience, and humility. We can offer a

radical embrace to friend and enemy alike. We can offer dignity to people who haven’t found it anywhere else. We could be a healing community—a place where broken people are rescued from the ash heap—where God restores people to health.

What would it look like to offer a radical alternative to the hedonism present in West Coast culture? Why not draw a line in the sand on this issue? Hedonism is the philosophy that our desires—and the satisfaction of them—is the highest good and proper aim of life. But don’t we know that this pursuit is a bottomless pit? Jesus offers a radical alternative—He promises life to the full—a life where joy and hope can be ours even in difficulty.

What would it look like to offer a radical alternative to the current definition of “love” in West Coast culture? Why not draw a line in the sand? The love that God offers is willing to wait—it’s caring, considerate, helpful, and big-hearted.

The love we’re invited to practice isn’t envious, it doesn’t boast, brag, or strut about. This kind of love doesn’t demand its own way, and it isn’t always “me first.” The love we are invited to showcase is slow to anger, and quick to forgive—a love that doesn’t keep “score”. A love like this always protects, never loses hope, always looks for the best, and endures in every circumstance. What do you think church? Isn’t this what we are for?

Michael Frost writes, “the best way to critique the old is to fashion the new.”<sup>5</sup> In every generation the church must seek not remain faithful to Jesus, and, move towards the world that God loves. At

---

<sup>5</sup> Frost, 16-17.

some point, somewhere, a line will need to be drawn. Is there a line God is asking you to draw today?

**Benediction/Invitation to Healing Prayer**

**Pray (include Gospel)**

**The Lord's Supper**

*“The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.”*

This morning, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, I want to invite you to behold Jesus once more. Jesus was the ultimate exile. God the Son left His heavenly country to be born into ours. He fully embraced our humanity—our limitations, our temptations, our weaknesses, our pain—and yet, He remained true to God the Father in every way.

Jesus became the ultimate exile on the cross; He cries out, *“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”* His exile was complete—He felt cut off and utterly alone. Jesus died, bearing the sin and rebellion of the world. This is love—Jesus laid down His life for us. His sacrifice ensures that we can return to God and find in Him our heart's true home.

**Invite servers to come forward**

**Worship**