

## Sermon Transcript from August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2016 Non-Participation Pastor John Mark Comer, Bridgetown Church

Okay. We are three weeks into a brand new series that we're calling "Life in Exile: On Becoming a Creative Minority." If you missed the last month or so, to bring you up to speed, here's the basic idea: we here in the U.S., and really all over the Western world, but in particular in a city like Portland, we're living in a brand new cultural moment. Over the last two or three decades in particular, the ground underneath our feet has moved and we're now full on into a post-Christian society. Now, when I say "post-Christian," I don't mean that there aren't any Christians left in the West or even in a city like Portland. You're here. And there's actually quite a few followers of Jesus in our city. I don't mean that the church is a thing of the past; it's dead; it's gone. Not at all. We're here. We're alive. We're healthy in pockets all over the world.

What I mean is that now the secularization of Western culture as a whole is near to complete. So, really, what happened decades ago, if not longer, at an academic, elite level has just, over the last two or three decades, kind of moved to the popular level. So now, if you're an average 13-year-old kid growing up on Star Wars and Xbox and Pokémon Go, it's easy to just write God out of your mind and live a secular life. So, the question is: how do we, as followers of Jesus, as a Christian, how do we live in a post-Christian world?

This is a relatively new question here in the West, but, thankfully, it's not a new question at all in the global, historic Church. So, to start off, have a look at this. This is a writing from early in the second century. Most scholars date it right around 120 or 130 A.D. So think one generation after the New Testament. It's a letter from a disciple of Jesus to an academic elite, we think the tutor of Marcus Aurelius. He writes this:

"For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of humanity by country or by speech or by dress. For they do not dwell in cities of their own or use a different language or practice a peculiar life. But, while they dwell in Greek or barbarian cities," – or hipster cities or whatever – "according as each person's lot has been cast and follow the customs of the land in clothing and food and other matters of daily life. Yet, the condition of citizenship which they exhibit is wonderful and admittedly strange. They live in countries of their own, but simply as sojourners. They share the life of citizens; they endure the lot of foreigners. Every foreign land is, to them, a homeland; and every homeland, a foreign land. They spend their existence upon the earth, but their citizenship is in heaven."

He's saying that what sets us apart as followers of Jesus is not our country, whether you're American or Mexican or French or German. It's not your ethnicity, the color of your skin. It's not your language. It's not your fashion, your dress, your diet, whether you're a vegan or an omnivore or whatever. What sets you and me apart as a follower of Jesus is our way of life. But, this means that we live in a tension. On the one hand, if you're a citizen of the U.S. or a citizen of whatever your country of origin is, then you are a citizen of that land. But, at the same time, you are "a sojourner." In today's language, you are a refugee or you're a resident alien. So, we live, for example, I live in the U.S. and I'm a citizen and I have a passport and all of that. But, at the same time, my loyalty is not to the United States of America; my loyalty is to Jesus and the Kingdom of God.

But, obviously there's a tension there, right? Between my citizenship here in America or wherever your citizenship is or whatever, and my loyalty to Jesus and the Kingdom. And that tension is what Daniel 3 is all about. So, let's read it. Okay? It's a bit on the long side. So, stay with me. We'll move fast. Keep up.

Daniel 3:1: "King Nebuchadnezzar made an image [a statue] of gold, sixty cubits high..." – so, a cubit's about a foot and a half. So, think 90 feet – "...and six cubits wide, and set it up in the plain of Dura in the province of Babylon. He then summoned the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials to come to the dedication of the image he had set up. So the satraps, prefects, governors, advisers, treasurers, judges, magistrates and all the other provincial officials assembled for the dedication of the image that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up, and they stood before it.

"Then the herald loudly proclaimed, 'Nations and peoples of every language, this is what you are commanded to do: As soon as you hear the sound of the horn, flue, zither,' – wow – 'lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, you must fall down and worship the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar has set up. Whoever does not fall down and worship

will immediately be thrown into the blazing furnace.'

"Therefore, as soon as they heard the sound of the horn, flute," – that old zither – "lyre, harp and all kinds of music, all the nations and peoples of every language fell down and worshiped the image of gold that King Nebuchadnezzar had set up."

So, if you know this story, King Nebuchadnezzar, who is the most powerful man in the world at the head of a global military superpower, he makes this image or this statue. Now, notice that the writer does not say what exactly the statue is of. It could be of Nebuchadnezzar; it could be of one of the Babylonian gods. But, the leading theory that the vast majority of scholars argue is that it's some kind of an image or a statue of Babylon itself; the nation state. It is a national symbol for Babylon. What they are worshiping, what they are bowing down to is the nation state of Babylon; the greatest nation on earth at the time.

And all of Babylon is spread out in front of the image. That's the meaning of that phrase he repeated. The satraps, prefects, governors, advisors, treasurers, judges. That's kind of a way of saying the "who's who" of Babylon is all there from all over the empire. Babylonian, Egyptian, Assyrian, Hebrew. Everybody is there and they all bow down. Or do they?

Daniel 3:8: "At this time some astrologers came forward and denounced the Jews. They said to King Nebuchadnezzar, 'May the king live forever!'"

Suck up.

"Your majesty has issued a decree that everyone who hears the sound of the horn, flute, zither, lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music must fall down and worship the image of gold, and that whoever does not fall down and worship will be thrown into a blazing furnace. But there are some Jews whom you have set over the affairs of the province of Babylon—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego—who pay no attention to you, Your Majesty. They neither serve your gods nor worship the image of gold you have set up."

I love it. So, in a sea of people – picture thousands if not tens of thousands of people, all of the nation in a sense is there. Three Jews, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, refuse to bow down. Now, they are quiet about it. They don't protest. There's not bullhorn or rally or march on Washington D.C. There's no hashtag like #neverNebuchadnezzar or whatever. None of that. The king doesn't even see it at first. But the Chaldeans who, if you remember the story, are essentially the coworkers to Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and we assume here this is like infighting, office politics. The Chaldeans are jealous because three Hebrew, not Babylonian men rise to the upper echelon of government and all of that. So, this is a chance to tattletale and get the Jews in trouble.

Now, for those of you thinking, "Wait a minute. Where's Daniel? Did Daniel bow down or whatever?"

No. If you remember from last week, the last line of chapter 2, we read, "Daniel himself remained at the royal court."

So, Daniel's not here. He's off at the capital and running the empire. Now, keep reading.

Daniel 3:13: "Furious with rage, Nebuchadnezzar summoned Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So these men were brought before the king, and Nebuchadnezzar said to them, 'Is it true, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, that you do not serve my gods or worship the image of gold I have set up? Now when you hear the sound of the horn, flute, zither,'" – good grief, this is just on repeat – "'lyre, harp, pipe and all kinds of music, if you are ready to fall down and worship the image I made, very good. But if you do not worship it, you will be thrown immediately into a blazing furnace. Then what god will be able to rescue you from my hand?'"

Talk about megalomania. "I'm more powerful than your god." Notice the anger, the hostility, the boasting from a political leader. I am so thankful that we've evolved past this in the modern world.

Daniel 3:16: "Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, 'King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter.'"

Watch this. This is just stunning.

"If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand."

"Our God is more powerful than you are."

"But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

Gosh. I love it. They don't yell. They don't scream. They just say, "Okay. Do your worst."

They are respectful. "Your Majesty. But, we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up. I'm sorry, but no."

Keep in mind: this is not the 21st century, Western, secular world. This is 6th century B.C. ancient Near East. This is a world where spirituality and religion and politics and a whole bunch of other stuff are all mixed together. There's no separation of church and state. That's not even in that worldview at all. It's all together. The king, the gods of Babylon, the nation of Babylon. All kind of put together in the mush pot. The three Jews in the story aren't loud or disrespectful or snarky at all. Not even punk rock. But, they are kind of punk rock. But, they're nice. They're straight edge punk rock. You know?

But, make no mistake. To not bow down to the image of Babylon was not only a deeply subversive act, it was a threat to the status quo. Which is why, Daniel 3:19:

"Then Nebuchadnezzar was furious with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and his attitude toward them changed. He ordered the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual..." – that's a literary way of saying "extra hot" – "...and commanded some of the strongest soldiers in his army to tie up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and throw them into the blazing furnace. So these men, wearing their robes, trousers, turbans..." – this writer really likes lists – "...and other clothes, were bound and thrown into the blazing furnace. The king's command was so urgent and the furnace so hot..." – pick up the intensity here – "...the flames of the fire killed the soldiers who took up Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, and these three men, firmly tied, fell into the blazing furnace."

But then, that's not the end of the story.

"King Nebuchadnezzar leaped to his feet in amazement and asked his advisers, 'Weren't there three men that were tied up and thrown into the fire?'

"They replied, 'Certainly, Your Majesty.'"

I don't know why I just made it sound like that.

But, "Certainly, Your Majesty."

"He said, 'Look! I see [one, two, three] four men walking around in the fire, unbound and unharmed, and the fourth looks like a son of the gods.'"

The question is: who the heck is the fourth man? Well, of course Christian tradition has always said it's Jesus because we kind of just always say everything is Jesus. Which is not bad. The Aramaic word here in the original language just means a spiritual being. A paragraph or two later we read it's an angel. That doesn't really matter. Whether it was an apparition or an appearing of Jesus before He was born of the virgin Mary or some kind of an angel or something else, the point is God was with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego right in the middle of the fire.

"Nebuchadnezzar then approached the opening of the blazing furnace and shouted, 'Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, servants of the Most High God, come out! Come here!'

"So Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego came out of the fire, and the satraps, prefects, governors and royal advisers crowded around them. They saw that the fire had not

harmed their bodies, nor was a hair of their heads singed; their robes were not scorched, and there was no smell of fire on them."

Like, not even a little snow peak, polar, post-campfire smell. Nothing at all.

"Then Nebuchadnezzar said, 'Praise be to the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego,'" – so, now he starts to worship the one true God – "who has sent his angel and rescued his servants! They trusted in him..." – and listen to this – "...and they defied the king's command..." – I love that he talks about himself in the third person. That's so Kanye – "...and were willing to give up their lives rather than serve or worship any other god than their own."

So, he has respect. "They disobeyed me. My command."

He has respect for it now.

"Therefore I decree that the people of any nation or language who say anything against the God of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego be cut into pieces and their houses be turned into piles of rubble, for no other god can save in this way."

So, he's a little far from the heart of God still. But, this is essentially legal protection. It's a way to legalize the Jewish worship in the Babylonian empire. It's a good thing.

"Then the king promoted Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego [again] in the province of Babylon."

Okay. What is this story about exactly? Well, first off, just to clarify, this is not a children's story. So, how many of you grew up in the church? I'm guessing a lot of you. Yeah. Okay. How many of you are just old enough that you remember the felt board? Anybody around? Oh, yeah. Okay. I'm not that old. Alright. Well done. The felt board. It was a thing of glory. iPad has nothing on the felt board. Okay? If you were around in whatever that year was, this was a good story on the felt board. Do you remember it? We had the image, we have the crazy, megalomaniac king, we had the blazing furnace, we had dying Babylonian soldiers, we had the Jesus in the fire. It was a good one.

Remember youth camp when they would preach from this and talk about secular music and how if you listen to secular music you bow down? Was that just my fundamentalists? That was just me? You have no idea how lucky you are, people. You have no idea how lucky you are. I wanted to listen to Hootie and the Blowfish, but no. Daniel 3. The zither got me.

Now, sadly, this is not a children's story. In fact, on a serious note, my theory here – and maybe this is the Portland cynic in me – is that we frequently tame a dilute a story like this down to a Sunday school, felt board, happy level because, if you actually read it at face value, it is far too provocative and explosive and disturbing to the status quo, especially in a country like America. Especially if you're from a conservative background.

So, what exactly is this about? Well, honestly, it's about the two most taboo topics in our society: politics and religion. So, tonight, because it's an election year and because our nation is so unified right now; all the love around Trump and Hillary, I just thought we would talk about politics and religion in church. Does that sound fun? Yeah. There we go.

On a serious note, more specifically, tonight I want to talk about nationalism. That's what this is about. Nationalism is when politics and religion join up into this nasty beast. Alright? Now, for all of you political diehards who are starting to freak out right now, when I say "nationalism," I don't mean patriotism. So, if you're like, "I love my country," or if you wear that American lapel to work in the morning or you weep at the Star-Spangled Banner, that's great. Fantastic. This is not about you. Alright? When I say "nationalism," what I mean is when you mix politics and religion and the Kingdom of God is swapped out for your political party, Jesus is swapped out for your candidate of choice and Jesus' way of love, mercy, justice, non-violence and other centered self-sacrifice, "Hey, what's best for you is what matters most," is swapped out for anger, hate, fear, xenophobia, pandering self-interest and self-preservation.

It is when people import a religious level of zeal into a political party or a candidate. And

this is especially acute in a secular society, because we have no more hope in God or the Church or the Kingdom of God anymore, so we have to put our hope somewhere. So, we have this messianic hope every election cycle. It is just like, "Seriously? We're here again? This guy, this woman, this political party, this idea."

It might be great; it might be better than the next. But, it is not the Kingdom of God. This will not fix all of our problems, fix all of our issues and usher in utopia. But, there is this insane messianic hope that people put at a borderline religious level around politics. Put simply, nationalism is the idolatry of the state. It is the worship of the state as a pseudo-god. And nationalism is nothing new. It's been used by kings and governments for millennia to consolidate power across a large area. Okay? In particular, when you have more than one ethnicity and more than one culture. So, just like here in the story for example, Nebuchadnezzar has an empire that stretches from Egypt almost to India. All sorts of diversity in it. There's no internet, there's no TV, there's no social media. So, if you're King Nebuchadnezzar, if you're the "most powerful man in the world," how do you consolidate power?

Well, it's easy. You come up with some kind of a civil religion. It's a polytheistic world in the sixth century B.C. So, that's not really a problem. If you're an ancient Babylonian or Egyptian or Hebrew, you just add the worship of the state as a pseudo-god. And nationalism is nothing new. It's been used by kings and governments for millennia to consolidate power across a large area. Okay? In particular, when you have more than one ethnicity and more than one culture. So, just like here in the story for example, Nebuchadnezzar has an empire that stretches from Egypt almost to India. All sorts of diversity in it. There's no internet, there's no TV, there's no social media. So, if you're King Nebuchadnezzar, if you're the "most powerful man in the world," how do you consolidate power?

The Oxford professor, John Lennox, in a great little book on this chapter, writes this:

"It's all too familiar a scenario, as history repeatedly testifies, the attempt to harness religion in the interest of the totalitarian state by making the state an object of worship."

And I love that, but my only pushback to the quote is this: I don't think this is only a problem in the totalitarian state. I think it's just as acute – if not more so – problem in a Western, secular democracy. Because, once God is out of the picture from a worldview, into that void something has to step. So, for a lot of people, it is a political party, a candidate or whatever. My point is it's easy to think, "Oh, yeah. Nationalism. That's really lousy. But, that's like an old thing. That was a thing in ancient Babylon or I know about British Imperialism or Nazi Germany or communist Russia in the 1970s or whatever or China. But, you know, that's not a problem here and now."

I beg to differ. Two thoughts on nationalism if you're taking notes. First: nationalism is a huge part of American culture. It just is. We read about a 90-foot statue in Babylon and we laugh it off as pre-modern and primitive and, "Ha ha ha," what do we have in New York Harbor? Yes. A statue of liberty. Does anybody know how tall it is? It's not 90 feet high, it's 305 feet high... and 6 inches. I looked it up on Wikipedia.

So, more than three times as high. Now, yes, we don't bow down to it. Like, if you've been there we are more likely to take a selfie with it in the background. But, think about the national anthem before a sports game. Somber moment. Hush falls over the rowdy, raucous crowd, hand over heart. It's a worship song. But, it's not worshipping Jesus. What is it worshipping? Essentially war, if you know the story of that.

I'll never forget. This was years ago. It was the Fourth of July. I was on vacation. I went to this suburban megachurch that I'd been hearing great things about. And it was a great church. But, I go there. It's Fourth of July. I walk in. I'm in the back. And they are singing, "America the Beautiful." And it's just like so bad. On the megachurch, giant, jumbo screen. There's a video of the American flag in the breeze. Then, right as you get to the amber waves of grain, it fades to a Kansas picture or whatever. You know? I'm like, "Okay."

And then people start to stand up all over the room and put hands up in the air and worship. And this was years ago. I was way more into politics at the time than I am now. But I remember, even then, it was appalling to me. I just remember thinking, "Who are you worshipping? Who the heck are you worshipping? And why is this going down in church? This is not the Super Bowl; this is the community of followers of Jesus. Like, what in the world?"

Think about the Pledge of Allegiance. "I pledge allegiance to the United States of America."

What is the relationship of a follower of Jesus to that pledge; that oath? I don't know. But, I wonder what Jesus would think. He was put to death as an enemy of the state. I

wonder what Paul would think, who was beheaded for preaching the Gospel that Jesus is Lord; i.e. not Caesar.

I don't know what they would think, but that's a weird one. My point is yes, we don't bow down to the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor, but we do take a photo of it and go visit it and stand at attention at a football game and indoctrinate our children from five years old up to make an oath to the United States of America and mark holidays – or "holy days." And please listen, I'm not even saying all of that is bad. All I'm saying right now is that we still do this. Think of both the republican and the democratic conventions that were just held. They were essentially gigantic, televised worship services. Right? The crowd, the signing, the passion. I mean, it's like watching a secular evangelistic crusade for the democratic party or the republican party. They were worship services.

My point is nationalism is very much alive and well. It is a huge part of the "greatest nation of earth." Oh, I could give a whole teaching on that. But, second thought is this, and this is hopefully going to not get me in too much trouble: nationalism is a huge blind spot in the American church. I would argue that. Nationalism is a huge blind spot in the American church. You know, every generation has its blind spots. We look back on 18th century American and we think, "How did you think that slavery was okay?"

And, of course, there were a lot of people, in particular followers of Jesus, who did not think it was okay. But, as a general rule, how in the world? We look back at 19th century England and think, "How did you think colonialism is okay?"

We're still reaping the consequences all over the Middle East, all over Africa. What in the world, right? But, here's the thing: a blind spot is not a weak spot. A weak spot is like, "Oh, man. I really struggle with this. I need to watch out for that." A blind spot is, by definition, something you can't see. It's something that is just a few feet away from you and is lethal, but you are blind to it. You can't even see it. I would argue, with a lot of humility, that nationalism is a huge blind spot in our country right now in the church in America. Now, I don't mean this as a political statement. Please take my word for that for the left or for the right or for another third party or anything. I think both the left and the right are both just as prone to nationalism. I do think that due to history, in particular the last three or four decades, in the church, it's the conservative republican arm of the church that is the most prone to nationalism. I don't have time to unpack all the reasons why I think that.

But, I say that – I hesitate to go further. But, it has been really hard for me, and my guess is I'm not alone. Honestly, it has been nauseating for me over the last few weeks to see a certain, well-known political candidate who is openly – this is not even John Mark's opinion. This is fact for everybody. Wife number three openly said he's been unfaithful to all three of them, is openly, in public, misogynistic – I mean, just his treatment of women alone is heinous. Owner of a strip club, ties to the mob, all sorts of legal trouble, serial liar, has been openly diagnosed by psychologists across the nation with everything from manic disorder to narcissistic personality disorder to sociopathy, braggart, megalomaniac. That's just what we know about. What was terrifying for me was to see this political candidate stand up in his acceptance speech for the nomination of his party and say, "Evangelical Christians put me here."

That was a low point in the story of the Church in America. Once again, this is not a political statement. Please hear me. If you know me, I am Anabaptist, if you know what that means. I am apolitical to a fault. If there's any critique of me, it's that I don't care enough about politics. I could care less which party you're a part of. It's not a political statement, it is a character statement. We are followers of Jesus. Our defining narrative is that human beings are made in the image of God to rule over the world. That power and influence, we were created for that and that the fundamental problem, what's gone wrong in the world is not that we have the wrong political system or the wrong economic system or the wrong legislation. We believe that the fundamental problem in the world is sin in the human heart.

So, we believe more than anything that character trumps political policy – no pun intended – every single day of the week. And I could go off about the other candidate and the other party. I do not care about your political party. I do not care about your economic theory. I care – to a fault – about the witness of Jesus and the Church in the United States of America. And the modicum of moral and spiritual authority that we still have in our post-Christian society is rapidly plummeting with every single day that we, as the Church in America, support somebody whose very fabric of personhood is anathema to Jesus and everything that Jesus stood for.

Just pray for my email box tomorrow. Okay? But, I do not mean this as a political statement. I really don't. I mean this as a case study in the way that nationalism has infected the American Church. And I could give you more for the left as well.

Greg Boyd has a great book on this. Really provocative if you want to read it. Two thousand people left his church over this book. It was just crazy. Really good. It's actually worth a read. He writes this:

"The myth of America as a Christian nation with the Church as its guardian has been and continues to be damaging both to the Church and to the advancement of God's Kingdom. Among other things, this nationalistic myth blinds us to the way in which our most basic and most cherished cultural assumptions are diametrically opposed to the Kingdom way of life taught by Jesus and His disciples. Instead of living out the radically counter-cultural mandate of the Kingdom of God, this myth has induced us to Christianize many pagan aspects of our culture. Instead of providing the culture with a radically alternative way of life, we largely present it with a religious version of what it already has."

The fact is he's spot on. America is not a Christian nation. Why? Because there is no such thing. And if there was such a thing, which there's not, it would not have been built on the back of slavery and genocide and on down the list. The reality is that America is what the New Testament writers call "the world." It is a culture built with autonomy from God. There are great parts about American culture. Have you been out to eat recently in our city? Some great stuff. There are some really warped and bent out of shape parts of our culture. We'll talk about the difference between empire and kingdom in a few weeks. But, for now, know that America is an empire by every definition of the word. Here's a quote from Old Testament scholar, Tremper Longman, on his commentary right here on Daniel 3. He writes this:

"We need to remind ourselves that no modern nation, whether America, England, Korea or whatever, is in a situation like Israel. America is not a Christian nation. There is no such thing as a Christian nation. America is more like Babylon in Daniel's day or Rome in Jesus' day than Israel."

So, when you read through the Old Testament and you look for a parallel between the nation we live in and a nation in the Old Testament, don't think Israel under Moses or a theocracy with the Torah, think Babylon, think Rome, think Alexander the Great or something like that. America – once again, this is not to say that America is evil. A lot of it is great. Babylon was the zenith of human civilization at the time. Daniel was the number two man in the kingdom. Rome, a few hundred years later, was even better. Pax Romana, the legal system, the trade system, it was incredible. I've been all over the world. America is great, but it is not the Kingdom of God. It is an empire. And, just like all empires, America and its way of life has been elevated to the role of a de facto god in our secular culture.

So, what is this story about? Well, it is not a children's story. It is about how to live in the shadow of an empire like Babylon or Rome or Greece or the United States of America. How to live, as a follower of Jesus, when our allegiance is to the King and the Kingdom, under the overwhelming pressure to do what everybody else is doing; to bow down. I mean, this is a beautiful story. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego refuse to worship what everybody else is worshipping; refuse to bow down before what everybody else is bowing down to. Now, I get that for most of you, especially at the 7, nationalism is just not a huge problem for you. I say that just statistically. Like, it is far more of an issue for 40 and up if you have a conservative background. That's not remotely a slam. There's all sorts of reasons for that. One is just, at a statistical level, a huge problem for politicians right now is that millennials just don't really care about politics.

So, do you "Feel the Bern" or are you into "Make America Great Again?" You're like, "I'm kind of into Stranger Things right now on Netflix."

Which is so good, by the way. Oh my gosh. I said a few weeks ago the Spirit had been convicting me about this show I was watching on Netflix. I had so many people be like, "Dude, you need to watch Stranger Things."

So, I started it last night. Oh my gosh. I could not stop. I had to go to bed. My wife was with me and she's like, "We're watching another one. We're watching another one."

It was one in the morning. I said, "I'm preaching tomorrow. We're done."

Oh my gosh. So, if you're a millennial, whether you're from the right or the left, the odds are you just don't really care all that much – and I'm not saying that's a good thing or a bad thing. I'm just saying it is. Alright? So, maybe this is way more an issue for you if you are a political diehard or that's part of your career or you're listening online and you're from a very different cultural context than Portland, which is very "Feel the Bern," as it is. But, here's my point: the issue for you might not be nationalism, but the odds are that there's something about the American way of life that it's really easy for you to elevate over your allegiance to Jesus as King and the way of Jesus. And when I say the way of Jesus, I mean the collection of all of Jesus' teachings about how to be human in the world.

There's all sorts of aspects of the American, Western way of life. It might be secularism, it might be money, it might be materialism, "it might be sexual freedom," he said with a lot of sarcasm. It might be issues of justice. It might be issues of radical autonomy and individualism. Whatever it is for you, it's really, really easy to misplace your loyalty not to Jesus and the King, but to America and its way of life. And there's a lot that we can all learn, whether nationalism is your temptation or not, from Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the story here.

And what is the response? When you're living under empire, when you're in the shadow of Babylon or America, what is the response? It's really, really easy. Write this down if you're taking notes: non-participation. That's it. That's right. That's it. Non-participation. It all starts with simple, ordinary acts of non-participation. Here's a famous picture from World War II. A guy named August Landmesser at a Nazi rally in the late 1930s. Everybody there. "Heil Hitler." Every arm up in the air. And I just love it. Like, sea of people. Just this one dude is like, "Nope. Sorry. I'm out."

One man. Now, the backstory to this, by the way, is he was dating a Jewish girl. It's always the girls that get you. He's like, "I'm sorry, Hitler, but she's hot."

You know? No. Now, they were later separated. He was put in jail for two years and then he was drafted against his will into the military and killed and she was put into a concentration camp and put to death. One man. "Nope."

The story Malcolm Gladwell made famous, the story from World War II around the same time of Andre Trocme. Trocme, if you know the story, was a French Anabaptist pastor in the town of Le Chambon during the Nazi invasion. At one point, they got a letter from the Nazi party saying that they were to round up all the Jews in town and turn them over to the party, we assume to ship off to Auschwitz or whatever. Instead, they sent an official letter, Trocme, on behalf of the town – this is a true story – to the Nazi party. It reads this:

"We have learned of the frightening scenes which took place three weeks ago in Paris where the French police, on orders of the occupying power [Nazi Germany], arrested in their homes all the Jewish families in Paris to hold them in the Vel' d'Hiv. The fathers were torn from their families and sent to Germany, the children torn from their mothers who underwent the same fate as their husbands. We are afraid that the measures of deportation of the Jews will soon be applied in the southern zone. We feel obliged to tell you that there are, among us, a certain number of Jews. But, we make no distinction between Jews and non-Jews. It is contrary to the Gospel teaching. If our comrades, whose only fault is to be born in another religion, receive the order to let themselves be deported or even examined, they would disobey the order received and we would try to hide them as best we could. We have Jews. You're not getting them."

That's a true story. That is some kick butt Jesus pacifism right there. That's a true story. Now, Trocme was later put in jail. He did make it out of the war alive. Estimates say that he saved right around 3,500 Jewish men, women and children. How? Non-participation. "We have Jews. You're not getting them. Put me in jail. Kill me. Okay? We have Jews. You're not getting them."

Now, that story, obviously, is dramatic. Most of the time, non-participation is far more ordinary and run of the mill. You're out for drinks with your friends, most of whom aren't followers of Jesus. A couple are and then you always have the kind of ones in the middle. Whatever. You have a drink. It's great. You have a great night. The server comes back. Round two. Who wants another one? Round three? Who wants another one?

You just, "No, I'm okay. Thanks."



"Why not? Don't you want a second drink?"

"Oh, no. I never have more than one at a time. I'm good. Thanks. It was a great glass, but thanks."

You're out shopping with your girlfriend or your boyfriend or whatever and there's a great jacket there. Oh, it's great. "Are you going to get it? I know you like it."

"No, I actually already have a jacket. I actually have four. And that's pretty good for an American, actually. You know, I follow Jesus and He said a lot about money and stuff and how it's actually all linked to anxiety. I'm okay."

"But it's on sale and it's so cheap."

"Well, actually it's so cheap because of globalization and I'm a follower of Jesus and I have a real heart for justice and I'm not a huge fan of the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer. And actually, the odds are this was made by a woman in Bangladesh working 12 hours a day, 7 days a week in an unsafe, sweltering hot warehouse. And actually, the cotton that it's made from, the odds are it was picked by a 7-year-old child slave in the cotton fields of Uzbekistan. We had a lecture at my church about it. It was pretty intense. Yeah. I'm okay."

But, that was kind of a sermon blog post thing there. Maybe you're just more like, "I'm glad I know labor ethics. I don't know this brand."

Maybe that's all you say. But, the point is you're there and you're just, "No, great. Go for it. Get the jacket. Cool. I'm okay."

You're in a conversation with a classmate or a coworker about this guy you're dating or this girl you're dating and like, oh, you're in love and it's amazing. "I think he's the one," or "she's the one," or whatever. And then the inevitable question: "Are you guys sleeping together," or "are you guys living together? I mean, it's Portland. Rent here is expensive. Dang Californians."

Whatever. You are a Californian. But, "Are you guys living together?"

"No, we're not, actually."

"Why not?"

"Well, we're not actually sleeping together."

"Are you kidding me? Why not?"

"Well, we're followers of Jesus and we believe that we're created in the image of God and every man and every woman has value and dignity and self worth and we actually have a really crazy high view of sexuality and marriage and we believe that God created it, He thought it up and He knows way better than Beyoncé does how it actually is set up to flourish and thrive. So, we're just waiting, if that's the next step, for the wedding night. We're cool. Thanks."

It's just this quiet rebellion. Not a soapbox, not a hashtag. Just a quiet rebellion against the status quo. A few months ago, I gave the commencement address for this Christian high school. It was this last minute thing. My old youth pastor from high school who played this huge role in my life called me up and said, "Hey, we lost our commencement speaker. Can you help me out? I literally need just 20 minutes. Just drive down, speak, go back home."

So, "Okay, sure."

So, I go down and I walk in and it's huge. This is the largest Christian high school in Oregon. So there's like, I don't know, at least 1,000, maybe more like 1,500 people out in the crowd. And the orchestra starts to play. You know, "Dun dun dun," whatever. And we walk in and I'm in the procession and it's like the principle and the vice principle and the dean of students, my old youth pastor and me. Okay? I'm like, "Oh, wow. This is pretty cool."

So, "Commencement address. Yeah."

I walk in and we walk right up on stage and it's that thing where they have seating up on stage and there's just six seats up there for me and the key faculty or whatever. And I sit down. Now, back story to this. And I hesitate to say this just because I'm so scared to check my email this week. And please don't get mad at me over this. But, I don't say the Pledge of Allegiance. I'm not an anarchist. I'm not a Russian spy. I pay my taxes. I volunteer at the local public school. I barbecue on the Fourth of July. A veggie burger, but I barbecue. Okay?

But, I don't personally feel comfortable giving me allegiance to the United States of America. I pay my taxes, pray for my president whether I like or dislike, agree or disagree. Absolutely. But, I volunteer, work for the healing renewal of my city, but I don't personally feel comfortable saying "I pledge allegiance" in particular because of some of my deep convictions around military violence and if the draft were to ever happen I would be more than willing to die for my country. But, I would not be willing to kill for it. So, for a number of reasons, I don't say it. It's not like a soapbox. I don't think it's wrong if you say it. I let my kids decide if they want to. Whatever. But, I don't say it.

So, backstory. I walk up on stage. I sit down. Now think conservative Christian high school. This is not "Feel the Bern." Okay? This is something else. I sit down. The first thing. No, "Hi," no opening prayer. "All rise for the Pledge of Allegiance."

We all stand up. Guess where the flag is. It is right next to me. Literally an arms length away. And I'm like, "Oh, crap." I'm like, I'm supposed to stand up and give the take over the world for Jesus speech or whatever and I turn and there's 1,500 eyes all on the flag 2 feet away from me. And I'm thinking, "What the heck?" This is split-second. I have to make a decision. In that moment, the overwhelming pressure on me to, "Dude, just put your hand over your heart. Speak in tongues at a whisper. Just do it. Okay? Just do it."

Or, "Just let it slide this once. Just say the pledge. Suck it up for mom and dad and uncle Bob. Okay? Just say it."

But, in that moment, I just could not. I'm like, "No. I have a conviction. I have a conviction. No."

So, I just smiled. Really, really. I don't think I will ever get invited back. Now, I tell you that story at the risk of getting trouble – because I know people are really, whatever, into that – not because I think it's wrong for you to say the Pledge of Allegiance, although I do think, every single one of you, if you're a follower of Jesus, you have to think long and hard about that. I say that because every day we are faced with a battery of decisions – at times, split-second like that in the moment – where we have to choose between allegiance to Jesus and the Kingdom of God or worship of Jesus and the idolatry of America and the American way of life. And it takes a whole lot of wisdom and discernment to navigate the post-Christian world. There are grey areas like the Pledge of Allegiance. That's not a great example. But, there are other times when it is crystal clear the only right thing to do as a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth is non-participation.

"Yeah, I'm sorry, but I won't lie to make the sale. I'm fired? Okay. I'm sorry, but I won't sleep with you. I'm sorry, I know that's legal now, but not me. I'm out."

But, two things you need to know about non-participation by way of warning. One is it will upset people. Why? Because no matter how quiet and kind and gracious you are, non-participation carries with it a critique of the status quo and, hopefully, a vision of a better way of life. To say, "No. I'm sorry, but no," is, by default to say, "Because I think that's wrong." Which is why non-participation, no matter how nice you are, makes people defensive and angry and insecure and hostile to you. I mean, silly, stupid example: if you're a vegetarian or a vegan, no matter how chill you are about it or nice about – Paul's laughing or whatever – the second that a meat eater finds out that you're a vegetarian, they just start to mercilessly mock you. It's just insane. It's like, "Yes, your muscles are big. But, you are a jerk."

You know? Like, why is it? You're like, "I'm just eating plants. What's the big deal?"

But, there is some kind of an upset to the status quo. That's a dumb example. On a serious note, why were Anabaptists like Andre Trocme and the Huguenots in France, like the Plymouth brethren who came over on the Mayflower, the first settlers in America,

why were they persecuted to death? Why were they killed? They were non-violent. Why do you kill pacifists if you're in a "Christian" nation, which is a myth? But, like England or France or whatever? Why? Because the Plymouth brethren said, "We will not kill for England."

The Huguenot said, "We will not kill for France. Those are our brothers and sisters in Jesus. We will not kill them. And even if they were not our brothers and sisters in Jesus, Jesus said, 'Love your enemy.' We will not go to war."

They were non-violent. Why were they killed? Because that is a threat to the status quo. In particular, if you live in a culture where religion, in the name of Jesus, is coopted to support the empire. Non-violent, quiet, peaceful people. "Let's escape to America and set up our own to worship in freedom."

Why were they persecuted? Because non-participation is a threat. So, first, know that if you do this it will upset some people. Secondly, know that it will cost you. It might cost you a sale or a promotion or even your job. It might cost you a friendship. It might cost you, in the not too distant future, a night or two in jail depending where our legal system goes in the supreme court and all of that which is up in the air right now. Thankfully, unlike Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, we're not under pain of death. We don't have to worry about that. But, millions of our brothers and sisters in Jesus across the world are, and they aren't always saved out of the fire.

Every day, we think around 270 followers of Jesus are put to death for faith. From 2000-2010, most scholars estimate that one million followers of Jesus were put to death, mostly in the Middle East and throughout the Muslim world, for faith in Jesus. More than any other time in Church history. Now, thankfully, here in the U.S., we do not face persecution. Don't say that we don't. We face more like a soft discrimination. An emotional and social pressure to just bow down. Put your knee on the floor and get on with it. The most that non-participation will cost most of us is a little teasing or a socially awkward moment.

But, Jesus said this: "A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."

Paul said, "Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

That's like a promise. We don't put that in the knit, grandma frame thing in the bathroom. "Promise of God: You want to live like a follower of Jesus? You will be persecuted."

Now, if you're not feeling that tension, that begs the question: are you living a godly life in Christ Jesus? Now, to end: there are times – I just want to say one last thing – when non-participation isn't enough. When, as followers of Jesus, we have to take it up a notch from non-participation to resistance. In particular, when it comes to issues of justice and oppression. A great example, in my opinion right now, is the racial tension in our country. It is not enough to just not be racist. As the people of God, and especially if you're white, but no matter the color of your skin, you bear a responsibility to stand with the black community in a creative, prophetic, non-violent resistance until the tyranny is over.

Next week, my mentor and our favorite South African, Chris Wienand, will be here to teach on resistance, tell stories about living under and marching against Apartheid 20 years ago. It should be amazing. So, we'll talk about that. For tonight, here's my last thought: don't underestimate the power or the influence that non-participation can have on the people around you and even on culture at large. That's right.

Look at the end of the story and we're done. Chapter 4. The story's actually not over.

Daniel 4:1: **"King Nebuchadnezzar, To the nations and peoples of every language, who live in all the earth: May you prosper greatly! It is my pleasure to tell you about the miraculous signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed for me.**

**"How great are his signs, how might his wonders! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom; his dominion endures from generation to generation."**

This letter went out from the most powerful man in the world to the entire empire, the entire known world, all because three men had the courage, the backbone to say, "No. We will not serve your gods or bow down to your image. I'm sorry. No."

YEAR OF  
BIBLICAL  
LITERACY



There are way more than three people in the room tonight. And if three men, empowered by the Holy Spirit, could do this to an empire, just think what all of us could do to our city. Let's stand and pray.

