

Christian Character

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Date: 23 October 2016

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening to you all. I want to begin by asking you to do a little visualization exercise. You don't have to close your eyes or anything, but let's imagine together that we are at the end of our lives, nearing the end of our lives.

I don't know how long from now that will be for you. It could be 20 years, it could be 40 years, it could be 60 years, depending on your age. But imagine that you've lived a full life, you're nearing the end of it. And I want you to think about the kind of person you are.

What are the attributes that people would use to describe you? What would you hope they would say? What kind of character do you have at this point at the end, when the end of all things is imminent?

And then another question would be this. That image of you that you may have in your mind, how do you plan to get there? What happens between this day and that?

The reason I'm asking this question is because as we've been looking at the book of Daniel, Daniel gives us a rare glimpse into the lifespan of an individual.

[1 : 19] We get to see a broad swath of the life of a man named Daniel who has lived his entire life faithfully following God. The book's all about what it means to live a life of faithfulness in a secular culture, in the kind of culture that is indifferent or maybe even hostile to one's faith.

And for those of you who were here weeks ago when we began this series in chapter one, Daniel's a young man. He's got some friends, these young professionals, and they move to the big city of Babylon and they go to university together and they graduate top of their class.

And then they get good government jobs and they're just beginning to establish themselves.

They're at a stage of life much like many of us in this room and much of their life has yet to be lived. But by chapter six, many, many, many years have passed.

Daniel is an old man and we have a chance here to see the kind of character that he has cultivated over a lifetime of faithfulness as it is put to one final test.

So what we're going to look at tonight, the topic is that of Christian character. And for those of us who are here who are Christians, I would hope that you would see how this would be relevant to you. But I also know that there are people here who are not Christians. Maybe you're curious or indifferent. Maybe a friend dragged you here.

[2 : 48] But regardless, you're here. I think that this topic is relevant for you as well and for many reasons. But one reason is this. I don't have any statistics to prove this, but my sense anecdotally is that there are many, many people out there who have never considered the claims of Christianity and who may never consider Christianity. And the reason is not because of a lack of evidence in the Christian claims. Rather, it's because of a lack of character in Christians themselves. So I think this topic is relevant for all of us. And so we're going to look at this. What I want to do is to walk through this story together and then I'm going to draw out three implications about Christian character. So let's pray together as we get started.

Heavenly Father, thank you for your word. Thank you that we have the great privilege here of turning our attention not merely to the wisdom of human beings, that we know that even the greatest wisdom and knowledge that we produce, even the greatest bits of advice we might have for living life, the greatest TED Talks we can watch, that all of this has no power like your word has power. And so we pray that as we come to see your word clearly and to understand it, so we would see your son clearly and come to know him personally. We pray this in the name of your son, Jesus. Amen.

So Daniel chapter 6, let's just get started with the context and the beginning of this story. As chapter 6 opens, as I said, Daniel is an old man. You may know this part of Daniel because it's very famous.

The story of Daniel and the lion's den, right? You could go out on the street to somebody who's never read the Bible and say, Daniel, and the first thing they would say would be, lion's den. It is a commonly known story. And yet often when you see it depicted in paintings, you see a conspicuously Caucasian young man, right? And it's this young kind of boyish figure and he's facing off against the lions and the angel is delivering him. Not so. If you actually know the span of time that has passed, he's an old man, which makes this story that much more harrowing. And he has seen five kings come and go. Imagine that. Imagine serving under five long administrations.

Right? He's seen the rise and the fall of the Babylonian empire. At one time it seemed it would never collapse. And yet now it has. And the Medo-Persian empire has taken over. King Darius now rules over Babylonia. And then King Cyrus rules over the larger Persian empire. But we're concerned here with Babylonia and King Darius. And Darius has begun to set up his own form of government. He's sort of decentralizing the government. He sets up 120 territories and he appoints a satrap over each territory. Think of it like a governor. So 120 governors. Daniel is one such man that he taps for the task of governing a region of Babylonia. And if you know anything about Daniel, it shouldn't surprise you that Daniel distinguishes himself. He does an amazing job and Darius takes note and says, I like this guy. He does good work. I can trust him. I'm going to put him over all of the kingdom.

[6 : 24] Make my job easier. Have a guy like that running things. Well, the other governors, they notice this and they get wind of the promotion that's about to happen. Obviously they're not too pleased with this. So they do what any good politician would do.

They try to dig up as much dirt on Daniel as they possibly can. Hoping to discredit or even incriminate him. But guess what it says? Verse 4. No matter how hard they look, it says, they could find no ground for complaint or any fault because he was faithful and no error or fault was found in him. So we see right away, Daniel is a man of solid character. There's no dirt. So they devise a plan. A bunch of them come to Darius. They convince Darius to issue a decree. It's the kind of decree that would appeal to the ego of a man like Darius. They say this, that for 30 days, O King Darius, issue a decree that no one is allowed to pray to anybody except you. You, King Darius, become the sole mediator of prayer throughout the kingdom. Outlaw all other religions. Darius says, I like that idea. I mean, who wouldn't?

So he issues the decree, puts it in writing and makes it clear that even he, King Darius himself, cannot break this decree. Once it is written, it is written in stone. Now what does this have to do with Daniel? How could this be a trap for Daniel? And here's the answer. These governors are wise. They know their enemy. They know Daniel and they know something about Daniel's lifestyle. They know that no matter what, Daniel has a daily habit of kneeling and praying to God three times a day. Probably morning, noon, and night. And you actually see this in verse 10. It says, he, Daniel, got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, comma, as he had done previously. This is a longstanding habit in Daniel's life.

[8 : 28] So what I want to do is to stop here and to kind of draw out our first point, which shows us something about the formation of Christian character. How is Christian character formed? How is it cultivated?

And that is this, that Christian character is formed through regular habits of faithful obedience. It's formed through regular daily habits of faithful obedience.

Aristotle was the first to write, and I'm not sure that he was the first to realize, but he was the first to write that actions produce habits and habits produce character traits. He made this observation. Now that was a long time ago, but he was writing and expressing that which neuroscience has come to affirm more and more and more. That when we do things habitually, those things, those actions form neural pathways. And the more we do those things, the more those pathways are embedded in our cortex.

And over time, our habits and the repeated actions that we engage in actually increase the likelihood that we will repeat those things down the road. This is simply how human beings are wired.

[9 : 56] We are literally shaped by our habits over time. Our brains are literally wired according to our daily habits. Right? So I want to make this clear. There's nowhere in the Bible where it commands Christians to pray three times a day. You're not going to find it. So why is Daniel doing this?

He's not just being a legalist. Right? He's doing it in the privacy of his own home. Nobody even knows that he's doing it unless they're spying on him like these governors were. Here's the thing we need to understand about Daniel. Daniel lives in a society where the vast majority of cultural institutions are pluralistic, polytheistic, syncretistic, and in many ways hostile to his beliefs. Daniel is a monotheist. Daniel believes that his God is the only true God. Any Babylonian hearing that would say you're intolerant. You're a bigot. You're exclusive for saying that. How could you be so close-minded?

Daniel knows that because his lifestyle is not going to be reinforced and his beliefs are not going to be reinforced by any of the existing cultural institutions. They're not going to be reinforced out there so they have to be reinforced in here. He has to have ways of reinforcing his beliefs and his lifestyle because he I think has a sense of what we've come more and more to realize that many of our beliefs whether we admit whether we admit it or not depend largely on the existence of plausibility structures. In other words it's very hard to believe something in a society that does not consider those beliefs to be plausible. So he realizes that he needs something to reinforce those beliefs in his lifestyle and so he has developed a habit of stopping and kneeling and praying and giving thanks to God three times a day. This is what we might call a rule of life using the ancient, the older way of defining rule. It provides a kind of shape or structure or scaffolding to enable the cultivation of a Christian character. And we need to understand that these days our cultural institutions are the same. Maybe arguably not as much so 50 years ago but definitely these days government, art, academia, education, the media, they're every bit as pluralistic, polytheistic, and in many cases hostile to Christianity as Babylon would have been. So now it is more important than ever for those of us here who are Christians to think about the ways that we are cultivating daily habits that are shaping and wiring us and growing in us the kind of character that we see has been formed in Daniel. Christians have been doing this for the very same reason as long as the church has existed, right? Now as I commend that to you I know that there will be people who object and we can't deal with all the objections but I want to deal with a couple of objections. The first objection is this. I know that there are probably people here, maybe some people who are not Christians who say, well you know I really love the idea and this idea is very popular among a lot of us even. I really like the idea that we should as people simply be ourselves.

That the most authentic, the truest, the most real way to live is to simply be who you are. Be true to that which is your authentic self. That's the way to live. The idea that you would ask me to change, the idea that I would need to change, that's almost offensive. It's almost intolerant.

Now I hear these kinds of things and I love the idea and then I think a little more and I look at myself and I think when people say this, are these people who have ever actually met a human being?

[13:48] I don't know. You know my favorite example of this comes from the film *The Last Days of Disco*. I don't know if anybody's ever seen this film. But Des McGrath is a not so reputable character and he's in a particular moment at this point in the film, he's in a particular moment of character weakness.

There's something that he knows he should be doing but he's running away and the scene literally takes place in a cab as he is fleeing responsibility. And he says this to the guy next to him. He says, you know that Shakespearean admonition to thine own self be true? It's premised on the idea that thine own self is something pretty good, being true to which is commendable. But what if thine own self is not so good? What if it's pretty bad? Wouldn't it be better in that case not to be true to thine own self? And then he says, see, that's my situation. And I love that example because I identify with it.

I think anybody who thinks that being true to yourself is the best thing we can do for ourselves and for our families and for society, spend a few days with me. In fact, spend a few days with yourself. Get to know yourself a little bit. Go to a counselor and then see, is this the best thing, is this the best thing that you have to offer the world, right? In my case, it would not be, right? Second objection may come from Christians. Christians would hear this and I think some people would hear this and they would rightfully sort of take a moment and say, now wait, you're saying that I need to work and to put effort into changing my character through doing things on a, and, but that doesn't square with the gospel. I thought that the Christian gospel was all about God accepting and embracing me exactly as I am. Now you're telling me that I've got to do all this stuff? This sounds like legalism. I'm suspicious of this and that's great. I'm glad that you're thinking on that level.

And actually you're right. The Christian gospel is the good news that when we repent, when we come to God, when we put our trust in him, that God fully embraces us, that he wraps his arms around us like a father to a son, exactly as we are. The gospel says you don't need to change in order to come to God. It says you need to come to God in order to have any hope of changing, right? So you're right.

The gospel is that God's salvation is a free gift that he gives to you, not because you deserve it, not because you've earned it, not because you've gotten your stuff together, but because he loves you and he knows you can't do it without him. But then the question becomes, what will we do with so great a gift?

[16:27] Once you've received it, what will you then do with it? And N.T. Wright, the New Testament scholar, in a book called *After You Believe*, says this, the aim of the Christian life in the present time, the goal you are meant to be aiming at once you have come to faith, the goal which is within reach even in the present life, anticipating the final life to come, is the life of fully formed, fully flourishing Christian character. You hear that? So here's the point. The gospel is not an invitation to be who you are. The gospel is an invitation to become who you were meant to be.

Salvation enables you to do that. The Holy Spirit empowers you to do that. That is the gift. It's a gift that keeps on giving. But it also asks of us. So this is a bit about the formation of Christian character. Let's dip back into the story and keep going. If we look back at the story, we see in verse 10, a few things about Daniel. Daniel knows that this decree has been issued. For 30 days, you're not allowed to pray to anybody except Arius. Furthermore, Daniel knows, he's very clear, it says in verse 10, he knows the penalty. If you break this decree, you will be torn apart by lions, a brutal, agonizing death. And yet Daniel decides to pray anyway. It says he goes up as he had done previously, kneels and prays three times a day to his God in his upper room. Now I want to make this point. A lot of people read this, read Daniel chapter 6, verse 10, read this act of defiance, and they point to Daniel and they say, see, Daniel took a stand for his faith. They said Daniel wasn't allowed to pray, but Daniel defied them and he took a stand for his faith. And so people will then take that and they'll apply it to issues like prayer in public schools, hanging the Ten Commandments in public buildings, having a manger scene in front of City Hall. They say, see, Daniel took a stand and we as Christians in this country need to take a stand too. And I would just humbly suggest that that's an awful way to understand this passage. For one thing, Israel and the United States of

America are not the same thing, right? The continuation of Israel is the church. For another thing, the decree does not forbid Daniel from praying in a public building or leading other people in prayer in a school or a court. It forbids Daniel from praying at all, even in his own home, which is, by the way, where he's doing it. He's not making a public display. He's in his attic room and they catch him because they're spying on him, right? In my opinion, by the way, I think that Christians should actually oppose prayer in public schools and hanging the Ten Commandments in public buildings and setting up manger scenes in City Hall, primarily because I think that we're called to seek the common good. And the common good involves a healthy pluralistic society with freedom of religion. I also think that history shows us, and I think you can make the case, that anytime the church gets too involved and gets too much of an entree into the power structures of the state, it actually does harm to the kingdom work. I don't know that it necessarily helps. That's a different sermon. Let's get back to Daniel. I'll just drop that little nugget out there and just move right along. The point is, back on script, the point is this. This is a test. This is a test of Daniel's Christian character.

And it reminds me, you know, John Stott was a great pastor, great theologian, great missionary, and he died recently. And there were some amazing things said about him in places like the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*. And one *New York Times* columnist described John Stott. They said, you know, on the one hand, he had this kind of warm, welcoming vibe like Mr. Rogers, only with a backbone of steel.

[20:39] And I love to think of Daniel like that, this warm, old, wise man, but with a backbone of steel. And this shows us that he indeed has this backbone of steel, that there is a place, a line at which he will not compromise. And this brings us to the second point that I want to focus on with regard to Christian character. We looked at the formation of Christian character, and this shows us something about the testing of Christian character, the testing of character over time. In January 2009, you may know this story, U.S. Airways Flight 1549 takes off from LaGuardia. It's bound for Charlotte.

Captain Sullenberger, called Sully, checks, and everything is as it should be. And then two minutes later, the plane strikes a flock of Canada geese. It takes out both engines, and the plane starts to lose altitude over one of the most densely populated parts of New York City. There are only seconds to react, and Sully realizes that the only viable option, since they can't make it back to the airport, and there's nowhere to land, is to literally land on the Hudson River. And this requires an incredibly complex sequence of very specific maneuvers that have to be performed perfectly. And he pulls it off.

And everybody lives. And the press freak out, and they say, this is a miracle, it's a miracle, right? And Tom Wright, in this book, *After You Believe*, he talks about this story, and he questions that. He says, was it really just a miracle, or was there more going on? Yes, it was miraculous, but is that the only explanation? And he says, in fact, if you knew anything about Sully and his life, you realize this, that what people witnessed that day was, in its purest form, a test. And Sully had years of experience flying planes, and guess what he did at his off time? He taught gliding. So what better person to glide a passenger aircraft into the Hudson than a gliding instructor, right? In other words, what people saw that day was the product of thousands and thousands of times that he had made similar decisions and performed similar actions, when it didn't seem to matter nearly as much. In other words, he had passed thousands of low-stake little tests, seemingly inconsequential. And because he had passed all of those little tests, when the big test came, he was prepared, as prepared as anybody could be. In other words, if you put somebody like me in the cockpit, everybody would be dead. But thank God, in his wisdom, he put Sully there. A lot of people make the same mistake with Daniel that they do with Sully.

Right? We look at this and we assume, what a great miracle, what a great act of faithfulness, and you be ready because when the time comes, will you dare to be a Daniel? But we say that without any appreciation of the daily faithfulness in Daniel's life.

Right? Daniel's brave defiance of Darius was the product of years of preparation. Because listen, if you've ever tried to pray daily, if you've ever tried to live by a rule of life, you know that there are thousands of reasons. Right?

[23 : 59] There's a decree from Darius, that's one reason not to pray. But before that happened, there had been thousands of reasons why he probably didn't want to pray. Right? It was too late. He was too tired. He had had a really busy day. He had already done this other religious thing. So the quota was met for the day. Right?

There's all kinds of reasons, ways that he could have justified not doing it. But we know from the text that he did it anyway. And those were low stakes, little tests. Nobody would know the difference. He could have just let it go. But he didn't. And because he had passed all those little tests, when the moment came, Darius issues this decree, his life is on the line. What does he do? Does he run? Does he revise his practices? Does he justify working along with this new decree? No, no, no. He continues to pray and he prepares to die. God allows us to face tests in our lives because that is how character is formed.

You know, Peter in 1 Peter calls them fiery trials that refine us like metal is refined in a furnace. And here's the thing we need to understand.

An unshakable faith is only possible if you allow your faith to be shaken. If you think that somehow you're going to have a strong faith by insulating yourself, by never interacting with the scholars who say that all of this is bunk, if you think that insulating yourself from atheists who put their finger in your face and say everything that you believe is stupid, if you think that insulating yourself by never listening to all of the counter arguments or reading all of the media or exposing yourself to all of the bodies of work out there that try to debunk all of this, then your faith is going to be a house of cards.

[25 : 43] An unshakable faith is only possible when you allow your faith to be shaken. In the same way, an unbreakable character is only possible for people who have endured brokenness.

When you don't hide from it, don't run from it, don't shake your fist at God when it comes into your life, but recognize this is how your character becomes unbreakable. This is how your faith becomes unshakable. You have to be shaken. Yeah, you're afraid.

We're all afraid. There's no reason not to do it. Tests of Christian character are times when faithfulness to God will cost us something.

So it could be anything, right? Hopefully they won't outlaw the practice of our faith anytime soon.

But it could be something else. Maybe you work crazy hours. You never have time for your family, your friends.

You rarely have time to make it to worship. If that's you, we're so glad that you're here tonight. But your only choice is to cut back hours if you want to change that. But maybe you do that and it may cost you your job, right?

[26 : 46] Or maybe you know if somebody's in need and you're the best person to meet that need, but it's going to require that you give sacrificially to help them out. But you're the person who's best positioned to do that. But you know that if you do that, if you help them out, it's going to mean that you can't take a trip.

It's going to mean that you can't do the renovation you're wanting to do. It's going to mean that you can't get the car that you really need. It's going to cost you something. Or, you know, there are social circles in this city where if you even just admit that you're a Christian, people without really knowing you will immediately call you a hate-filled bigot, regardless of whether it's true.

Right? So you have to decide in those cases, am I going to be honest about who I am and what I believe even if it costs me my reputation? Am I going to be honest about that? Right? So these are all moments.

They're all tests when we decide whether or not we will compromise our fate. And the point is this. We don't have to wait until those big tests come in order to answer that question.

We can begin now by recognizing all of the little tests of daily faithfulness that God provides us. That's the supreme value of building your life around a rule, building these habits into your daily practice.

[27 : 57] So Christian character is formed through daily habits of prayerful obedience. And then our character is tested, Christian character is tested in many small ways and every now and then a very big way comes along.

Like here in Daniel. Those are the first two points. The last point I want to make is I think most important it's also our shortest. What's the aim of all this?

It's the point. I mean if we get in, if God accepts us as we are then why strive for anything more? Let's look back at the story. The governors catch Daniel praying as we knew they would and they run and they tattle to Darius.

And Darius is heartbroken because he likes Daniel. This is a great guy. He does good work. It's really hard to find somebody you can trust. It is. And he doesn't want to do it but like a fool he said I can't even break this law that I made.

Nobody can break it. It's unbreakable. It's the highest law on the land. So he's bound by his own law to put Daniel to death. He strives to set him free but he can't find any out.

[29 : 06] So he has Daniel thrown in with the lions and he has a stone rolled over the entrance to cover it and then he seals it with a royal seal. And it says he tosses and turns all night agonizing over Daniel's fate.

And then amazingly in the morning when he comes to the den he rolls the stone away there is Daniel. Not a scratch. And so Darius is overjoyed and he has all of Daniel's accusers then thrown in with the lions and all of their wives and all of their children and they're torn apart by the lions.

It's a horrifying scene. And then Darius issues this new decree that everyone should fear and worship Daniel's God. And it's tempting at this point to look at that and say victory, great, happy ending.

But I think we'd be missing the point. Because this tells us something about the aim of Christian character. And this is the point in the story when we have to realize this. While Daniel provides a useful example he is not the one that we should emulate.

I could give you a lot of reasons for that. But I'll tell you this. I agonized over how to make sense of those accusers and the wives and the children being thrown into the lion's den and Daniel says nothing.

[30 : 21] How do you preach that? One of the only ways I can make sense of it is to recognize the larger arc of the story in the Bible. And that is that Daniel is a useful example.

But he's not the example. And Daniel is an amazing example of character. But he does not have perfect character. What we need to recognize is this. Is that ultimately what we see in Daniel is a living preview.

The story in Daniel's life is actually a preview of someone else. Someone who is far greater than Daniel. Someone who had perfect character. And that is Jesus Christ. And it's amazing if you look at the parallels between Daniel 6 and Jesus.

Like Daniel there were leaders who conspired against Jesus and tried to dig up dirt but they couldn't find anything. Like Daniel those leaders then hatched a plan to frame Jesus to have him arrested even though he was blameless.

Daniel was thrown into a lion's den that was then sealed with the royal seal. Jesus was thrown into a tomb that was then sealed with the Roman seal.

[31 : 28] And when people came expecting to find them dead both men emerged fully alive. And you know there's only one real major difference between Daniel and Jesus on this point and that is this that Daniel survives the whole ordeal without a scratch.

Jesus on the other hand endures some of the most awful torture we can imagine. Some of the most awful torture ever devised by human beings. And then ultimately he endures death.

Right? But because of that through his death he was able to deal with our sin. Daniel was not.

Through his resurrection he was able to overcome death which Daniel was unable to do.

And because of those two things the eradication of sin and death the Bible promises that one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Not because somebody like Darius issues a decree and makes it happen but rather because the majesty and the glory and the beauty and the awesomeness of God will one day be on display so that no man woman or child will ever be able to resist it.

[32 : 36] It will break our hearts and drive us to our faces. So the point is not to dare to be a Daniel. God help you if you try. It's to be like Jesus who is the ultimate Daniel.

The one to whom this whole book points. So just to kind of pull all of this together the formation of Christian character happens when we commit ourselves to regular habits of prayerful obedience and faithfulness.

And then the testing of Christian character helps to form and to shape and to refine that character over time. And then finally the aim of Christian character is to one day be like Jesus.

And if you're like me and you hear this and you look at your own heart and you think even with all the effort in the world I still feel like I fall far short. You're right. We will. We will.

And that's why it's so encouraging to read this promise. As we think about the question at the very beginning at the end of all things what kind of person will I be? What will I be like? For all who have put their faith in Jesus here's what John says in 1 John 3.2 Beloved we are God's children now and what we will be has not yet appeared but we know that when he appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is.

[34 : 05] Let's pray. Our Father we thank you again for your word. Lord this is not something that can be accomplished by human effort and willpower.

It's a work that you have to do in us. Lord give us the courage to participate in our own renewal that was initiated by you and that has its end in Jesus Christ.

Lord help us to encourage one another help us to inspire one another to stir one another up to good works that we would become more and more and more like you individually and as a body here at this church and help us to look forward with great anticipation excitement and hope at the day when we will behold you face to face and we will see a clear resemblance in ourselves by your grace and power.

In your son's name we pray. Amen.