Deitrich Bonhoeffer was was born in 1906 to a family in Breslau, Germany. At the age of sixteen he decided to study theology and enter into ministry. Over the next seven years he studied at various universities and seminaries until he returned to Berlin as a pastor and teacher in Charlottenburg, Germany.

Although he was a pacifist, Bonhoeffer became involved in the resistance against the Nazi government, deciding that to resist evil as a Christ follower was better than to retreat an ignore it. He secretly wrote books and trained young men to be pastors, moving from place to place to stay hidden from the Nazis. But in April 1943 he was arrested. Even while in prison he continued to minister to guards and to fellow prisoners. In April 1945, shortly before his concentration camp was liberated by the Allied forces, Bonhoeffer was executed.

Bonhoeffer lived a short live, but the life he lived, he lived for Jesus. His writings and his life are powerful examples of someone who lived out his faith in one of the most hostile environments imaginable.

Sometimes it feels like our world is only getting more hostile toward Jesus and those who follow after him. Our laws and culture used to mostly align with our value systems as Christians, but not anymore. Churches and the leaders of churches used to be looked up to and respected in our culture. Now they are seen by many with a heavy dose of skepticism and suspicion.

We’ve talked a lot about discipleship this year. What it means to be a disciple of Jesus, how to maintain that growing relationship with him. But we are living in a culture that grows more and more pagan every day. While the culture around us slips further and further from God, how do we hang on to our faith like Bonhoeffer did? How do we continue to be disciples of Jesus in a culture that wants nothing to do with him?

Some of the questions that Rod and I hear the most as a pastor are: How do I deal with people who treat me like garbage? How can I maintain my faith when my friends or family members don’t believe? How can I make sure that I guide my kids down the right path when we live in this kind of world?

We all probably want to be disciples of Jesus, but what happens when our faith is challenged by those who we love the most? What happens when we watch people we care about slip further from God? How do we handle that and still remain faithful followers of Jesus?

This is not the first time in history that a follower of God has had to try to remain faithful in the midst of a pagan culture. We have a phenomenal example of what it means to faithfully follow after God in a culture much worse than ours in a man named Daniel.

Daniel is not just a story in the Bible that makes for a good Sunday school class for the kids. The greatest lesson we can learn from Daniel and his friends is not necessarily that God will save us from our trials. It’s how we can remain faithful even when those trials come. Daniel and his friends serve as incredible examples of how we can remain faithful to God in a godless and pagan culture.

Daniel and his friends not only survived as followers of God in a pagan culture, but also thrived and made a huge impact for God. The message I think we need to hear today is that if Daniel and his friends could follow God faithfully in a culture like Babylon, then we can certainly do it in our culture today.

Daniel’s story started in the year 586 BC when the Babylonians came and laid siege to Jerusalem. Daniel makes it very clear that it wasn’t because the Babylonians were the most powerful army in the world that they conquered the Israelites. He says the Lord that gave Judah into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar to wait for their redemption and return to their homeland.

**Daniel 1:3–6 ESV — 3** Then the king commanded Ashpenaz, his chief eunuch, to bring some of the people of Israel, both of the royal family and of the nobility, **4** youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding learning, and competent to stand in the king’s palace, and to teach them the literature and language of the Chaldeans. **5** The king assigned them a daily portion of the food that the king ate, and of the wine that he drank. They were to be educated for three years, and at the end of that time they were to stand before the king. **6** Among these were Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah of the tribe of Judah.

The Babylonians were brilliant tacticians. They were using psychological warfare long before it was ever called that. Some nations, like the Assyrians, just wanted to destroy other nations wholesale. But not the Babylonians.

The Babylonians did everything they could to strip the people that the conquered of their original identity and integrate them into their own culture. Their goal was to take the best the nations they conquered had to offer and claim them as their own. For Daniel and his friends that meant they tried to strip them of their entire Jewish heritage and teach them to be good Babylonians.

First, they were given new names. The name Daniel means “God is my judge”. His name was changed to Belteshazzar, which means “Lady, protect the King” referring to a goddess they worshiped. Hananiah which means “Yahweh is gracious” became Shadrach which means “I am very fearful”. Mishael which means “Who is what God is?” became Meshach which means “I am of little account”. And Azariah “Yahweh is my help” became Abednego “Servant of the Shining one” referring to the god Nabu.

All four of them had names that referenced the one true God, names that reminded them who they belonged to and who was really in control. The Babylonians took those names away and began to call them by names that spoke of serving their pagan gods and how they were nothing in the Babylonian culture.

They were made to study the state religion that was satanic, full of demonic influences, and included astrology and the occult. These young men went through a three year course of study to be indoctrinated into the Babylonian culture. That’s about how long it takes for the average person to become fluent in a language and really get to know a new culture.

The Babylonians changed their names, their diets, and what they took into their minds day after day. They were trying to fully assimilate them into their culture and make these top tier Jewish men into servants for the King.

The final part of this plan to assimilate them into the culture of Babylon isn’t explicitly mentioned, but we can make some pretty confident inferences. When the ancient kings like Nebuchadnezzar took the best of the young men from the conquered lands, he also took the best of the young women into his harem. In order to keep his male servants from causing problems with his harem, and to diminish the chances of rebellion, they were made into eunuchs. In fact, the man who was put in charge of Daniel and his friends is even called the chief of the eunuchs.

That would be a blow to any man, but especially to a Jewish man. For a Jewish man, it was incredibly important to have a family, and especially sons. They provided him with social status, they worked his land, they were the ones who took care of their aging parents, and most importantly, they were the ones who continued the lineage and legacy of a Jewish family. Having a family and continuing his line was a major part of a man’s life and honor. Without an heir a Jewish man’s family would end, and his family’s portion of the Promised Land would be given to others.

Because of their positions in the Babylonian government and the complete silence about any kind of family, we can be pretty sure that Daniel and his friends were stripped of that honor and privilege to continue their line and heritage with a family.

To top it all off, from this point forward in biblical history, Babylon is used as the personification of evil. In the book of Revelation, at the end of all time, Babylon is used as the epitome of an evil and godless culture. Not Sodom and Gomorrah, not Nazi Germany, not anything we see as evil today. Babylon tops them all.

So in this most evil of cultures that was doing its best to pull these young men in, how did they manage to be faithful followers of God? How did they hold onto their faith even when they had seen their homeland destroyed, had their identity stripped of them, and been immersed into this evil culture whether they liked it or not? These four guys had three characteristics, three things that helped them to overcome and thrive as followers of God in a pagan culture like Babylon: wisdom, humility, and hope.

For the next three weeks I’d like to look at how we can use those characteristics in our lives as well to learn how to thrive as followers of Jesus in a culture that is more hostile to him all the time.

Today I’d like to talk about the kind of wisdom that Daniel had that made him able to handle the situations he faced in Babylon. If I asked you to think of the people you know who are wise, you probably immediately have people come to mind.

The people we think of as wise are usually people who are knowledgeable, at least about some things. They also tend to be the people we go to for insight and judgment about things. If you need some help making a big decision of some kind, you seek out someone with some wisdom so they can help you make the right choice. If you look up wisdom in the dictionary, you’ll find that it is defined primarily by those three things: knowledge, insight, and judgment.

But biblical wisdom, the wisdom that is from God, is not simply knowledge, insight, and judgment. That’s the world’s standard for wisdom. The Bible is very clear that biblical, godly wisdom looks far different than the wisdom of the world.

There are lots of people that the world thinks are wise that never even come close to the biblical, godly kind of wisdom that Daniel had. The world venerates people that make it to the top of the corporate ladder no matter what it took to get there. They are inspired by people who gave up everything in their life for their career and their wealth, even if that means they left their family behind. They look at those who put all their stock in science and seek to explain everything scientifically or mathematically as wise. By the same token, the world often looks at those who believe in the spiritual or supernatural as naive and foolish.

But that’s not what the wisdom looks like that comes from God. The book of Proverbs is full of sayings about wisdom, what to do with it, and where it comes from.

**Proverbs 9:10 ESV — 10** The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.

True wisdom comes from seeking after God. Jesus talked about it as seeking first the kingdom of God. When Solomon was given a blank check from God and told to ask for whatever he desired, he asked God for wisdom. God was so pleased with his decision that he gave him that, and everything else he could have asked for as well, riches, power, peace, and reputation.

James starts out his letter to the churches talking about what to do when you go through suffering. He talks about counting it as joy when you suffer, because through that testing, God will produce in you what you need to be complete and mature in him. Right after that, he tells his readers this:

**James 1:5 ESV — 5** If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

We need the wisdom of God to handle the trials and sufferings we will go through in this life, and especially in a culture that becomes more pagan every day. The great news that James tells us is that we don’t have to go looking for that wisdom. It’s available to us if we will just ask God who James tells us gives generously to all.

The mistake that a lot of Christians make is that they feel like the need to be wise and capable all on their own. We often feel like we have to make it work, we have to have the ability, we have to have all the right answers. But that’s not how this works. James says when you need wisdom, and all of us do, then you go to God and ask him.

James tells us what that kind of wisdom looks like a couple chapters later.

**James 3:13–16 ESV — 13** Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. **14** But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. **15** This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. **16** For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice.

That wisdom of the world that is all about how far ahead we can get or how much wealth we can acquire for ourselves here on this earth. James says it’s earthly, unspiritual, and even demonic. That’s the kind of wisdom that comes not from God, but from our enemy who wants to see us fall away from being disciples of Jesus. If he can get us to follow the wisdom of the world, he has a pretty good chance of pulling us away. This is what the wisdom of God looks like instead:

**James 3:17 ESV — 17** But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

That’s the kind of wisdom we need to have as disciples of Jesus. That’s the kind of wisdom we need to continue being faithful followers of his in the pagan world that we live in. So how do we do that? How do we live out that kind of wisdom in a godless culture?

1. First, we go to God for our wisdom, not our culture

There will always be the temptation to go to our world for the wisdom that we need instead of God. How many of us, when we have a question, go type it into Google before we go searching through the pages of Scripture? But like James says, the kind of wisdom that comes from the world is not the kind we want. Always go to God for the wisdom you need.

2. We take a stand for the right things

There were some things Daniel and his friends took a stand against. But there were even more the didn’t. They didn’t object to being called by new names that spoke of the pagan gods the Babylonians worshiped. They knew the Babylonians were going to try to indoctrinate them and make them forget about their home and their God. But these men decided knew their identity was about far more than the name they were called.

They didn’t object to learning the culture, the language, and the religious courses they were forced to take as a part of their schooling. They didn’t worship the gods they learned about, but they were learning the culture around them. Instead of refusing to learn what they were taught, Daniel and his friends were the top students. They worked hard at learning what was put before them, even though they didn’t believe it.

They didn’t object to serving in the courts of an evil King, the very one that had destroyed their homeland and carried them off to Babylon as captives. They didn’t say ‘I would die before I would serve you’. Instead, they chose to serve where God had placed them.

My question for you is this: if Daniel and his friends were to make the same choices today, do you think they would be criticized for what they didn’t stand up for? Do you think they would have people telling them they should have more courage and they should have done things differently?

Daniel definitely could have taken a stand on some of the things that he made no objection to. He surely didn’t enjoy being called by a name that spoke of a false god everyday? But choosing what to stand up for and what to allow to happen to him gave Daniel the opportunity to have real influence over the most powerful Kings in the world at the time.

Just because they didn’t object to everything doesn’t mean they didn’t take a stand on anything. Daniel took a stand almost immediately after he got to Babylon because he refused to defile himself with the food from the King’s table.

Daniel and his friends refused to eat from the King’s table is because their diet plan would have consisted of all kinds of foods that were forbidden in the Law of Moses. Even in a foreign land, even in the courts of the King of Babylon, these four men had resolved to keep themselves as pure and holy as they could.

They also refused when the King told them who they should worship. In Daniel 3 Nebuchadnezzar set up an idol 90 feet tall and 9 feet wide. Whether it was a statue of Nebuchadnezzar himself or one of their gods, we don’t know. But everyone was commanded to worship this idol. The consequences of not doing so were dire, to be thrown into a blazing furnace to be burned alive.

When all the other people in the valley chose to bow to this idol, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused. They would not worship any God but the true God of Israel. When they were about to be thrown into the furnace, Nebuchadnezzar was furious. He asked them **Daniel 3:15 ESV — 15** ...who is the god who will deliver you out of my hands?” Do you hear the arrogance there? The obvious feeling of superiority even to God?

I love their response to him. **Daniel 3:16–18 ESV — 16** Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, “O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter. **17** If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. **18** But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.”

Of course you probably know the end of the story. They were thrown into the blazing furnace. But then God stepped in. The were unharmed and not even a hair on their heads was singed, they didn’t even smell like smoke.

The third time we see that happen is under another King, Darius. By that time Daniel was one of three high officials in Babylon. Daniel’s enemies knew his character and integrity, so they knew the only way to accuse him was to attack his faith. So they created a decree for the King to sign that if anyone prayed to someone other than King Darius, he would be cast into the lion’s den.

But Daniel refused to stop praying to the one true God.

**Daniel 6:10 ESV — 10** When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously.

Daniel, knowing that the decree had been signed, knowing that to pray to the one true God meant that he would be executed, and probably knowing it was a trap for him the whole time, changed nothing about his relationship with God. He didn’t decide to pray silently in his head for the time being, he didn’t even close his window. He knew that remaining faithful to God was the most important thing he could do, even if it meant his death.

Now why were they willing to undergo things like the 3 years of training in the pagan culture, the change of their names, and serving in the courts of a pagan King? Why would they let those things happen, but wouldn’t eat food from the King’s table, worship his idols, or stop praying to the one true God? These four men were determined to keep themselves holy in what they did while still being a part of the culture so they would have an influence for God and God’s people. They were living out what Jesus said centuries later, to be in the world, but not of the world.

These men participated in the culture, they helped lead this nation, they were some of the most trusted advisors to the Kings they served. They were carried off to Babylon as youths, and Daniel served all the way through the exile, even serving Cyrus King of Persia who allowed the Israelites to go home and rebuild.

Daniel was doing whatever he could to follow the command of God in **Jeremiah 29:7 ESV — 7** But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. He was making use of the gifts God had given to him no matter what situation he found himself in. He was focused on being in the world, being an influence on the culture around him for God, but not being of the world. He kept himself holy and set apart from the evil that was going on around him.

3. We don’t expect godless people to live godly lives

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard Christian people rail against people who do not follow Jesus for their behavior or their lifestyle. If we want to be influences in our world and help people get to know Jesus, the way to do that is not to tell people how wrong they are or how horrible they are when they don’t even know Jesus yet.

We can’t judge someones behavior or lifestyle if they have no relationship with Jesus and no foundation for living according to biblical truth. Paul talks about this very thing in:

**1 Corinthians 5:9–13 NASB — 9** I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; **10** I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. **11** But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. **12** For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? **13** But those who are outside, God judges….

See we have no basis for judging others for things they don’t know and don’t believe yet. Our job is not to convict the world of their sin. Our job is to introduce them to Jesus. That’s exactly what Daniel and his friends did. They lived as a part of the pagan world where they were placed by God so that they could be influences for God in a godless culture. And they were.

In Daniel 4, Nebuchadnezzar, this evil, pagan King, finally praised the one true God for what he had seen happen at the fiery furnace. At the end of Daniel 4 we read this: **Daniel 4:37 ESV — 37** Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

After Daniel was spared in the lion’s den, King Darius wrote to his whole Kingdom, **Daniel 6:25–27 ESV — 25** Then King Darius wrote to all the peoples, nations, and languages that dwell in all the earth: “Peace be multiplied to you. **26** I make a decree, that in all my royal dominion people are to tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, enduring forever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end. **27** He delivers and rescues; he works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth, he who has saved Daniel from the power of the lions.”

Instead of bemoaning and complaining about the ever more pagan and godless culture we live in, perhaps we need to be a little more like Daniel. Living in the culture, but not being of it. Seeking to always honor God by being an influence for Jesus where God has placed us.

People don’t need us to tell them how wrong or immoral they are. People’s behavior won’t change until their heart changes. We can’t change people’s hearts. What they need is a relationship with Jesus. He’s the only one who can change hearts. He’s the only one who can change lives. And he’s the one who will change us and the world around us as we make more disciples of his.