

## WHEN YOU ARE PRESSURED TO CONFORM

In 1900 a group of Salvation Army youth in Ireland were conducting a street meeting. A young man named Billy Nicholson passed by. He had been saved a few months before and desired to do great things for God. Several of the members of the Salvation Army troop knew that Billy had come to Christ so they invited him to stand with them. Amid the cat calls from the by-passers, Billy stood bashfully, hoping that no one would recognize him. As he stood there, however, several close friends happened by. Billy felt the pressure to conform, to step down. One of the troop suggested that they kneel to prayer. Billy stooped to pray, no doubt thinking to himself to slip off in the crowd. However, as he prayed, something happened. He determined to give himself completely to God and as he stood up after prayer, all fear of ridicule or rejection was gone. Billy, or W.P. Nicholson as he came to be known, was one of the greatest evangelists of the early part of last century. Nicknamed the Tornado of the Pulpit, he went on to lead many thousands to Christ.

Today we are continuing our series looking at the book of Daniel. We want to talk about what we should do when we are pressured by the world to conform. What do you do when your boss at work tries to pressure you to do something that you know is wrong. What do you do when you feel pressured by people in authority around you like family or teachers or the government to do things that you know are not right, that violate your conscience.

Last week we talked about how Daniel and his friends were put into a 3 year program of indoctrination. Not only were they given new names, they were given new identities, new jobs, new clothes and even a whole new diet. And not just any diet, they were going to eat what the king eats.

Daniel 1:8-16 But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. 9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel, 10 but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you." 11 Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, 12 Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." 14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days. 15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. 16 So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

What's going on here? Anyone who has ever been on a serious athletic team knows the importance of nutrition. If you are training to be an Olympic athlete you don't get to eat whatever you want. The coach tells you what you're going to eat, and they spare no expense. Likewise, Daniel and his friends are being given the best of everything, including food. They would eat what the king ate. This sounds like a good thing doesn't it? So why were Daniel and his friends against this?

First is the health reason. The king's food wasn't really all that healthy. Like most tasty food, it was kind of junk food. It was heavy on sauces and a lot of sugar. It was not good food especially for a growing teenager, so there was the physical reason. You can't live off Doritos and Coke. You can survive, but not in a healthy way.

Second, there was a cultural reason. God, in the Bible, gave the nation of Israel very strict dietary laws. He did this for health reason and to bind the nation together with a common identity. God did this so that Israel would never forget that it was different from the nations around it.

When faced with this challenge, Daniel responded in 4 appropriate ways;

1. Integrity – never forget who you are

Daniel never forgot who he was. He said, you can change my address, you can change my clothing, you can change my name, but you're not going to change my heart or my beliefs. Daniel resolved not to defile himself. He decided he would not conform to that society's values.

Romans 12:2 Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will.

We all have two choices in life. We can follow the world or follow God's word. We can conform or we can be transformed. To be conformed means that you become like everybody else on the world. You look the same, talk the same and believe the same thing as everyone else around you. To be transformed means that understand and obey God's word.

I talk to people all the time who really do not know God's will for their life. It is because they are not really actively seeking it. As long as you worry about conforming you will never be worried about transforming. Without transformation we cannot know the will of God. It is not until you come to the place where you no longer care what other people think but only about what God thinks that you can understand God's will for your life. Daniel's actions reveal his integrity. He doesn't forget who he is, who God made him to be.

The word for CONFORM is the Greek word SCHEMA. It is where we get words like scheme or schematic. If you are a builder you know what blueprints are. They guide the construction. If you want to make a builder really mad just mess with his blueprints. When they were framing our new house in Niagara on the Lake there was a problem. Things did not make sense, until they realized that they were working off two different sets of plans. God has a plan for your life, but so does the devil. The question you have to ask yourself is, which plans are you following?

As I stand here today, I am not just winging it. I am following a script. I have note that I have written and I am following them. You know what a pastor's biggest fear is? Loosing his notes just before the sermon. I had a friend who used to do that to me – not fun. What script are you following?

2. Discipline – control your ego and appetites

Daniel, in this situation, controlled his ego and his appetite. He made up his mind not to eat the food and wine given to them by the king. I am sure it was a tempting offer. Daniel shows tremendous discipline in spite of this great temptation.

Think about this: you are a teenager. You are taken by force from your country. You will never see your parents again. You are in a foreign country with no parental supervision and the most powerful ruler anywhere offers you anything you want. He offers you prestige, power and pleasure. How can you turn that down?

We see this happen all the time today in sports. A young kid that is great at football or basketball or whatever. All of a sudden they're pulled off the street and they are drafted by the NBA or the NFL or somebody else and given enormous amounts of money. They are treated like gods, they are driven in limousines and have money to burn. They are given whatever they want, and if they mess up they have a publicist there to help them cover it up. So what happens? We see this all the time. Too much success too quickly leads to ruin. Lives destroyed by character problems.

When I was in high school I knew a guy who was 7'1" tall. Because of his height and athletic ability he was great at basketball. He was the star of our basketball team all through high school. When he graduated there were dozens of different schools that were wanting him to come and join their teams. Many of those schools were willing to pay for him to come and check them out for a weekend. They would throw big parties and make sure that the prospective athletes could have whatever they wanted. What would you do in that situation?

Romans 6:13 Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.

Instead of just giving in to it Daniel takes a stand and does what is right. He shows integrity, he is disciplined, and third;

### 3. Courage – be willing to stand alone

It took a great amount of courage for Daniel to ask not to eat the food he was given. It could mean that he gets kicked out of the program, perhaps he would be put into slavery or even killed for his disobedience.

What made this even more difficult was that he and his three friends were not the only Jewish kids that were in that program. Many others had also been taken, but we see no indication that they had a problem with eating the food that they were given.

Everybody's doing it! How many times did you use that one on your parents? Not Daniel. He did not care what everyone else was doing. He just knew that he personally could not do it. He is willing to stand alone. He was willing to say that the majority was wrong. History has proven that the majority is wrong much of the time. And just because the majority likes a particular value or passes a particular law doesn't mean that value or that law is right. Who determines what is right and what is wrong? God does. No matter how many people say something is wrong or right, only God decides what is truth. It's not up to majority vote.

Exodus 23:2 Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd

How many times have you been with friends at school, or with coworkers at the office and someone starts talking about something that you know it is flat out wrong but you don't say a word because you are afraid of speaking up?

I attended summer camp as a kid. One of my friends from camp was a guy named Colin Baker. I really respected him. What I liked about Colin was that he was always thinking of others. I remember one day everyone was talking trash about this one person.

Colin spoke up and said “I don’t think we should be talking about that person this way. It is wrong” and then he walked away. That really impacted me as a kid. The fact that Colin had the courage to speak up and was willing to go against the pressure to conform and speak the truth made a lasting impression on my life.

#### 4. Humility – be tactful with authority

Daniel knew that he could not do what he had been instructed to do. It was a violation of his morals and values. So what does he do? He handles the situation with tact. Instead of just making a scene, he is tactful and humble in dealing with authority.

King Nebuchadnezzar was not a godly man. Still, he was in a position of authority. He was Daniel’s boss. Some of you have ungodly bosses as well. God has allowed them in your life. Maybe your boss is dishonest or abusive. That does not mean that you do not treat them with respect.

What do you do when someone is in authority and they ask you to do something that violates your conscience? You need to know how to make an appeal. You need to know how to make your case. There are many examples in the Bible of how to do this. Queen Ester makes an appeal to King Xerxes. Joseph makes an appeal to Pharaoh. Paul many times had to appeal to a pagan Roman government. Daniel does it here. He makes an appeal.

How do you make a case to an authority? You do these 6 things;

##### a. Develop Trust – have a reputation for responsibility

Daniel 1:9 Now God had caused the official to show favor and sympathy to Daniel

Why did this official show special favor to Daniel? There must have been something in the life of Daniel that had earned this official’s trust. Trust is something that must be earned. It is built up over time. It takes a long time to build trust, and a short time to lose it.

I remember watching a father play with his little boy, repeatedly throwing him in the air and catching him just before he hit the ground. The child is relaxed and having a great time saying, "Do it again! Do it again!" I thought, If that was me, I'd be stiff as a board. "Can you explain why he's so relaxed, even when he's out of control?" I asked the father. "It's very simple," he said. "We have a history together. We've played this game before, and I've never dropped him."

##### b. Show Respect – be humble and not belligerent

Daniel 1:8 But Daniel ... *asked* the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.

Notice here that Daniel did not tell the official what to do. He made no demands and gave no ultimatums. He simply asked. He knew what was right and he showed respect for the official.

Character is always lost when a high ideal is sacrificed on the altar of conformity and popularity --  
Spurgeon, Charles

##### c. Be Transparent – do not be deceptive or manipulative

Daniel 1:10 but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

Daniel tried to get to the root of the officials concerns. He wanted to know what the real issue was. Why was the official so worried? He sought transparency, a clear sense of the true issue.

During the US civil war, Abraham Lincoln met with a group of ministers for a prayer breakfast. Lincoln was a man of deep faith. At one point one of the ministers said, "Mr. President, let us pray that God is on our side". Lincoln's response showed far greater insight, "No, gentlemen, let us pray that we are on God's side."

d. Be Constructive – appeal to goals and interests

Daniel 1:11 Daniel then said to the guard ...12 Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. 13 Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see."

Daniel addressed the official's concerns by asking for a test. If the issue was that of concern for the health of he and his friends, then he offers the official a way that his concerns could be addressed while at the same time meeting his own objections. He looked for a way in which everyone wins.

e. Be Tactful – choose the right place, time and words

Daniel 1:14 So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

The plan that Daniel suggested was thoughtful and tactful. It just made sense. Because it was understandable and made good sense, the official agreed to it. This is why it is so important to always pray for wisdom when dealing with authorities.

f. Be Trusting – trust God with the outcome

Daniel 1:15 At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food.

We see that in the end Daniel is rewarded for his faith. The outcome was positive. Daniel stood by his convictions and it proved to be the best thing to do.

Is there an area in your life today where your convictions are being challenged?

Farmers in Japan found a new way to grow watermelons. They are square! They were placed in tempered-glass cubes while they were still growing. Why would anyone want a square watermelon? They're much easier to store in a refrigerator! It's amusing to think of how a naturally round watermelon can become square because of the shape of the container in which it's grown. This reminds me of the forces in the world that exert their influence on us and attempt to shape us. Don't be conformed by the world around you. Be transformed by allowing the word and work of God to change you.

When Regan was president, the Secretary of State was a man named George Shultz. He kept a large globe in his office. When a visiting or newly appointed ambassadors would meet with him he would give them a test. He would take them over to that globe and say "prove to me that you can identify your country." They would go over, spin the globe, and most would put their finger on the country to which they were being sent. One day the US ambassador to Japan came for a meeting and he was put to the test. He spun the globe and then put his hand on the United States. He said: "That is my country." George Shultz shared that story with every ambassador that he sent out. He would say "Never forget while you are over there in that posting, that your country is the United States. You are there to represent us."

We must never forget that our home is heaven and that is where our allegiance is. Daniel worked in a land that was hostile to the faith he held. His bosses were some of the most powerful, most ruthless, and egotistical kings in all ancient history. Many times Daniel's faith placed him in inconvenient and uncomfortable circumstances where the odds were against him. It was there that he held fast to his faith and learned not only survive but thrive.