

**“ACCEPT OR DECLINE?”**

**A SERMON BASED ON PAUL’S SECOND LETTER TO THE CHURCH AT THESSALONICA (2 THESSALONIANS 3:6-13) AND PRESENTED FOR ORLEAN UMC ON MAY 9, 2021----THE SIXTH SUNDAY FOLLOWING EASTER SUNDAY AND THE FIRST SUNDAY OF MY FINAL SERMON SERIES FOCUSING ON THE THEMES OF LEGACY AND THE PROMISES OF GOD**

**IT’S THE “AGE OF THE APP! THESE MINI-PROGRAMS ARE NOW FOUND EVERYWHERE IN THE DIGITAL WORLD: ON DESKTOPS, LAPTOPS, TABLETS AND SMARTPHONES. THEY TELL US THE WEATHER, ORDER OUR LUNCH, ARRANGE OUR DATING PARTNERS AND EVEN ANSWER OUR DOORBELLS.**

**SO YOU DOWNLOAD AN APP — LET’S SAY “BEAR,” A NOTE-TAKING APP RATED AS ONE OF THE BEST NEW APPS WHEN IT WAS INTRODUCED IN 2019 — AND YOU’RE ALL SET..... OR SO YOU THOUGHT..... YOU’RE NOW STARING AT A WINDOW ON YOUR DEVICE WITH A TEENY CHECK-BOX, BESIDE WHICH ARE THE WORDS: *“I HAVE READ AND ACCEPT THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS FOR THE USE OF THIS PRODUCT.”* OUT OF CURIOSITY, YOU MAY SCROLL DOWN AND PERUSE PAGES OF FINE-PRINT LEGALESE, BUT YOU ARE EAGER TO ENJOY YOUR NEW APP, SO YOU SIMPLY MARK THE “I AGREE” OPTION AND MOVE ON.**

**OF COURSE, YOU ARE NOT THE ONLY ONE WHO DOES THIS. THESE “TERMS AND CONDITIONS” (T&C) PARAGRAPHS AND PRIVACY POLICIES ON AVERAGE ARE *MORE THAN 2,500 WORDS LONG!* READING 250 WORDS A MINUTE, IT WOULD TAKE MOST PEOPLE AT LEAST 10 MINUTES TO READ THROUGH THESE CONDITIONS.**

***WHO DOES THAT?***

***VERY FEW.***

**AND GIVEN THE FACT THAT YOU’RE LIKELY TO USE MORE THAN 1,400 WEBSITES AND APPS A YEAR, YOU WOULD NEED TO DEVOTE 25 DAYS ANNUALLY TO READING THESE POLICIES.**

***WHO DOES THAT?***

***NO ONE DOES THAT.***

**YET, IN CHECKING THAT LITTLE BOX, YOU  
AGREE TO THE TERMS OF A CONTRACT THAT  
COULD HAVE SERIOUS IMPLICATIONS  
CONCERNING YOUR RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES,  
AND, SINCE YOU HAVE MADE AN OVERT ACT OF  
ASSENT, COURTS HAVE GENERALLY HELD THAT  
IT IS LEGALLY BINDING.**

**A QUICK ONLINE SEARCH REVEALS THAT  
ENTERPRISING ATTORNEYS HAVE ESTABLISHED  
A COTTAGE INDUSTRY ENGAGED IN WRITING  
THESE STATEMENTS.**

**THESE WEBSITES OFFER A CORNUCOPIA OF  
OPTIONS FOR THE PROSPECTIVE VENDOR TO  
INCLUDE IN THESE TERMS AND CONDITIONS.....**

**THESE OFTEN RESTRICT YOUR USE OF THE  
PRODUCT, YOUR ABILITY TO SHARE IT WITH  
FRIENDS OR FAMILY MEMBERS, AND YOUR  
ABILITY TO OBTAIN REDRESS SHOULD IT HARM  
YOU OR YOUR EQUIPMENT. THERE IS TRULY A  
LOT AT STAKE HERE. IN MARKING "I AGREE,"  
YOU MAY BE GETTING A LOT MORE THAN YOU  
BARGAINED FOR.**

**PERHAPS, WHEN WE SIGN ON WITH JESUS,**  
**WE'RE GETTING MORE THAN WE BARGAINED**  
**FOR.**

**ONE WOULD HOPE THAT'S A GOOD THING.**

**BUT THE GOING CAN SOMETIMES BE TOUGH.**

**ONE HAS TO WONDER WHETHER THE DISCIPLES  
OF JESUS UNDERSTOOD FOR WHAT THEY WERE  
SIGNING UP.**

**DID THEY ACCEPT THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS  
WITHOUT ACTUALLY READING THE FINE PRINT?**

**WERE THEY SO EXCITED ABOUT GETTING TO  
USE THIS NEW APP CALLED "THE MESSIAH,"**

**THAT THEY THREW CAUTION TO THE WINDS?**

**“WE’RE IN,” SAYS PETER, SPEAKING FOR HIMSELF AND HIS FISHERMEN FRIENDS.**

**OR CONSIDER THE CHRISTIANS OF THE CHURCH IN THESSALONICA TO WHOM PAUL IS WRITING IN TODAY’S EPISTLE READING..... DID THEY KNOW THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF THE FAITH THEY HAD EMBRACED? AT SOME POINT IN TIME, THEY MUST HAVE BEEN OFFERED AN “ACCEPT” OR “DECLINE” OPTION. THEY CHECKED THE “ACCEPT” BOX AND NOW HERE THEY WERE: A RELIGIOUS MINORITY IN THESSALONICA WITH A MISUNDERSTANDING ABOUT SOMETHING REALLY, REALLY MAJOR: THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS CHRIST.**

**THEY THOUGHT HE WAS COMING SOON — LIKE ANY TIME.**

**THE RETURN WAS IMMINENT, THEY THOUGHT.**

**THEY MIGHT NOT HAVE TIME TO CLEAR THE BREAKFAST DISHES.**

**THEY “ACCEPTED” THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS OF THE “CHRISTIAN FAITH” APP WHICH THEY ASSUMED PROMISED THEM DELIVERANCE AND A FUTURE IN A GLORIOUS NEW WORLD, A KINGDOM OF ANOTHER WORLD COMPLETELY.**



**JUST TO PROVIDE YOU SOME CONTEXT: -----**

**PAUL’S CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE**

**CHURCHES OF THESSALONICA REFLECTED A**

**TRANSITION IN THE LIFE OF THE DEVELOPING**

**CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY. MOST SCHOLARS**

**AGREE THAT JESUS’ MINISTRY EMERGED IN A**

**TIME OF APOCALYPTIC EXCITEMENT. THE NEW**

**ENGLISH BIBLE DESCRIBES THE PEOPLE AS “ON**

***THE TIPTOE OF EXPECTATION*” (LUKE 3:15,**

**EMPHASIS ADDED). SOMETHING WAS ABOUT TO**

**HAPPEN — AND IT WOULD HAPPEN VERY SOON.**

**AFTER ALL, IF GOD WAS GOING TO INTERVENE IN HISTORY, THERE WAS NO BETTER TIME THAN THE PRESENT. AFTER TWO CENTURIES OF FAIRLY BENIGN RULE, ROME WAS BECOMING INCREASINGLY ENGAGED IN THE LIVES OF THE HEBREW POPULATION. ROMAN TAXES WERE NOW BEING LEVIED DIRECTLY (MARK 12:17), AND THE OCCUPIERS WERE BECOMING MORE INTERESTED IN THE AFFAIRS OF THE TEMPLE. REBELLION WAS IN THE AIR, AND THERE WAS AN EXPECTATION THAT SOMETHING WOULD HAPPEN SOON — PERHAPS TODAY.**

**THE ESSENES, THE LIKELY AUTHORS OF THE SO-CALLED "DEAD SEA SCROLLS," HAD GENERATED A DRAMATIC WAR SCROLL, GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF HOW THE FINAL CONFLICT WOULD PLAY OUT. IN THIS COMING BATTLE, THE PRESENT DARKNESS WOULD BE DESTROYED FOREVER SO THAT LIGHT WOULD PREVAIL. IN ADDITION, VIVID, APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE DESCRIBING THIS FINAL AGE WAS WIDELY CIRCULATED. *MANY JEWS BELIEVED THAT GOD COULD NOT ALLOW THE PRESENT SITUATION TO CONTINUE MUCH LONGER; THE LORD WAS ABOUT TO INTERVENE, AND, AFTER THE DEATH OF JOHN, THEY SAW THE MINISTRY OF JESUS AS GOD'S OPENING ACT.***

**THE GOSPEL ACCOUNTS AND LUKE'S NARRATIVE IN THE BOOK OF ACTS CONTINUE THAT APOCALYPTIC NARRATIVE. AFTER EASTER, JESUS' FOLLOWERS ANTICIPATED HIS IMMINENT RETURN..... LONG-TERM PLANNING WAS THUS UNNECESSARY AND MUCH THAT WAS DONE WAS AD-HOC AND TEMPORARY. LUKE'S DESCRIPTION OF THE COMMUNAL LIFESTYLE (ACTS 4:32-5:7), IN WHICH "EVERYTHING THEY OWNED WAS HELD IN COMMON" (4:32), IS AN EXCELLENT PICTURE OF THIS "AD-INTERIM" LIFESTYLE.**

**BUT WAS THIS TENABLE IN THE LONG RUN?  
WHAT IF JESUS DID *NOT* MAKE A TIMELY  
RETURN? WHAT IF THE CHURCH WAS FORCED  
TO REORIENT ITS THINKING TO A LONGER-TERM,  
MORE-SUSTAINABLE SITUATION?**

**THIS IS THE SITUATION IN THIS MORNING'S TEXT.  
JESUS HAS NOT YET MADE HIS TRIUMPHANT  
RETURN. THE BATTLE ANTICIPATED IN THE WAR  
SCROLL HAS NOT YET OCCURRED. AND THE  
CHURCH IS FORCED TO DEAL WITH THIS  
UNEXPECTED SITUATION.**

***IT HAS TO LEARN TO LIVE IN THE WORLD OF THE*  
*"NOT YET."***

**BUT THIS IS NOT WHAT EVERYONE HAD SIGNED UP FOR. WHEN THEY CHECKED “ACCEPT,” THEY EXPECTED RESULTS. SO THEY HAD A HARD TIME “ACCEPTING” THIS CHANGE IN PLANS..... SOME MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY WERE STILL LIVING FROM THE LABORS OF OTHERS AND NOT CONTRIBUTING TO THE ONGOING COMMON SUPPORT. AS PAUL’S LETTER PUT IT, THEY WERE “LIVING IN IDLENESS” (V. 6).**

**SO PAUL INSTRUCTED THE COMMUNITY:  
“ANYONE UNWILLING TO WORK SHOULD NOT EAT” (V. 10).**

**HE'S REFERRING TO THOSE WHO — TO THEIR CREDIT — ACTUALLY BELIEVED THE RETURN OF CHRIST WAS IMMINENT. THESE WERE TRUE BELIEVERS. AND THEIR SO-CALLED IDLENESS WAS A TESTIMONY TO THEIR FERVENT BELIEF, HOWEVER MISGUIDED, THAT JESUS WAS COMING, LIKE, ANY MOMENT!**

**BUT PAUL DESCRIBES THEM AS “WALKING IDLY” (V. 6), “BEING BUSYBODIES” (V. 11), AND HE EXHORTS THEM TO “DO THEIR OWN WORK QUIETLY AND TO EARN THEIR OWN LIVING” (V. 12). IT APPEARS THAT THEIR OFFENSES MAY HAVE BEEN PARTICULARLY INSTITUTIONAL ONES: LAZY, OBNOXIOUS, AND GETTING IN THE WAY OF OTHERS.**

**IT WAS NOT JUST THAT THEY ATE THE “BREAD OF OTHERS WITHOUT PAYING FOR IT,” (V. 8) BUT THEY WERE ACTIVELY KEEPING OTHERS FROM DOING THE WORK OF THE COMMUNITY.**

**THE TAKEAWAY FOR THIS TEXT THIS MORNING COULD BE WHETHER WE ACCEPT OR DECLINE THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS JESUS CHRIST LAYS OUT BEFORE US, AND WHETHER WE FULLY UNDERSTAND THOSE CONDITIONS.**

**LET’S GO BACK TO THE EARLY GOSPEL ACCOUNTS WHICH DESCRIBE THE CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP.**



**IN MATTHEW (4:19), FOR EXAMPLE, JESUS INVITES SIMON AND ANDREW WITH THE WORDS, “FOLLOW ME,” AND THE WRITER REPORTS THAT “IMMEDIATELY THEY LEFT THEIR NETS AND FOLLOWED HIM.”**

**THIS CALL APPARENTLY CAME WITHOUT THE “TRIGGER WARNINGS” THAT WE EXPECT TODAY. THERE WAS NO STATEMENT OF THE POTENTIAL SIDE EFFECTS OF SUCH AN ACTION, NO DISCLAIMER OF CONSEQUENCES AND NO LIMITATIONS OF LIABILITY. THERE WAS SIMPLY THE COMMAND, “FOLLOW ME.”**

**PERHAPS THE “IDLERS” IN TODAY’S EPISTLE  
READING HAD RECEIVED JUST SUCH A  
SUMMONS, AND THEY ACCEPTED IT WITHOUT  
LOOKING AT THE FINE PRINT. PERHAPS, LIKE  
SIMON AND ANDREW, THEY LEFT THEIR NETS  
AND FOLLOWED JESUS. THAT MADE SENSE,  
SINCE JESUS WAS BRINGING IN THE KINGDOM  
OF GOD. IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME — A  
BRIEF ONE, AT THAT — BEFORE THEY WOULD  
ALL BE IN THE “GREAT LIGHT” (4:17).**

**BUT THERE WAS MORE TO THIS BARGAIN,  
WASN'T THERE? JESUS DID NOT SIMPLY ASK HIS  
DISCIPLES TO FOLLOW HIM; HE WARNED THEM,  
SAYING, "IF ANY WANT TO BECOME MY  
DISCIPLES, LET THEM DENY THEMSELVES AND  
TAKE UP THEIR CROSS AND FOLLOW ME"  
(MATTHEW 16:24).**

**THERE WERE CONSEQUENCES TO CLICKING "I  
ACCEPT" ON JESUS' "APP," AND THOSE  
CONSEQUENCES WERE FRIGHTENINGLY REAL.**

**A CROSS IS INVOLVED. THE SOCIAL AND  
POLITICAL COST OF IDENTIFYING WITH CHRIST  
WAS REAL, AND THE INJUNCTION TO "TAKE UP  
YOUR CROSS" WAS NO MERE METAPHOR.**

**IN ANY EVENT, FOR THE DISCIPLES IN THESSALONICA, A COMMUNITY UNDER SIEGE, THERE WAS NO PLACE FOR THOSE WHO WERE UNWILLING TO CARRY THEIR SHARE OF THE LOAD. PAUL PRESSED THEM TO CONTRIBUTE TO THE TASK, NOT ONLY FOR THE SAKE OF OTHERS, BUT THEIR OWN. THERE WAS WORK TO BE DONE; A PRIZE TO BE WON.**

***IN HIS CRITICISM OF THOSE WHO HANG ON, BUT DO NOT CONTRIBUTE, HE COULD HAVE BEEN ECHOING THE WORDS OF JESUS: “FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO SAVE THEIR LIFE WILL LOSE IT, AND THOSE WHO LOSE THEIR LIFE FOR MY SAKE WILL FIND IT.***

***FOR WHAT WILL IT PROFIT THEM IF THEY GAIN  
THE WHOLE WORLD BUT FORFEIT THEIR LIFE?  
OR WHAT WILL THEY GIVE IN RETURN FOR THEIR  
LIFE?” (MATTHEW 16:24-26).***

**AFTER ALL, THAT SAME JESUS IS THE ONE WHO  
SAID, “I CAME THAT THEY MAY HAVE LIFE, AND  
HAVE IT ABUNDANTLY” (JOHN 10:10).**

**THERE’S A TRUISM THAT SAYS THAT YOU CAN  
DO ANYTHING YOU WANT IF YOU’RE WILLING TO  
PAY THE PRICE.**

**THE PROBLEM IS THAT OFTEN WE DO NOT KNOW  
THE PRICE.**

**THE CALL IN THIS TEXT, ONE THAT ECHOES  
JESUS' CALL TO THE GALILEAN FISHERMEN, IS  
TO FOLLOW HIM.**

**WE CAN DO THIS, BUT DO WE ACCEPT THE  
TERMS AND CONDITIONS? DO WE KNOW WHAT  
THEY ARE?**

**AND IF WE DO, ARE WE STILL WILLING TO  
FOLLOW, SURRENDER ALL AND NOT COUNT THE  
COST?**

**WORDS TO CONSIDER THIS MORNING AND  
PRAISE GOD.....MAY IT BE SO FOR YOU AND FOR  
ME.....AMEN.....**