

Sermon: Opting Out by Opting In

Year C, Proper 28

[Isaiah 65:17-25](#); [Isaiah 12](#); [2 Thessalonians 3:6-13](#); [Luke 21:5-19](#)

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In Judaism today, during the High Holy Days, a devout Jew aims to be free, as much as possible, from the distractions of worldly goods so they can fully experience this annual period of reflection and self-appraisal. The High Holy Days run for 10 days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. What if, for the sake of argument, you decided you wanted to do something similar for the eight days from Palm Sunday to Easter. What would you do? [Suggestions].

If you owned a multi-million dollar business, what would you do? Every year, there's a Jewish businessman in Boston who sells his café to his employees for \$1 and buys it back from them 11 days later. Now, let's set aside the devotion and religious aspects of that action. What are the purely secular complications that come from that decision? What if someone gets sick from something they ate, what if the owner died during that period, what if the employees won't sell it back to him? Businesses are just not set up to change ownership for a week and half. The business world can't handle that kind of transaction. So imagine the legal wrangling that the café owner has to pay for every year in order to opt out of the business world for 10 days. Surely he could just tell his staff not to call him for 10 days. And even if he sold his business, knowing that he was going to buy it back in less than two weeks, wouldn't he probably be thinking about the business during that period? When you go on vacation, even when you say, "I didn't think about work once!", what most of us mean is, "I thought about work but I put it out of my mind pretty quickly because I was on vacation."

In today's reading from 2nd Thessalonians, we hear *Anyone unwilling to work should not eat* (2 Thessalonians 3:10). That seems pretty familiar and not unreasonable. We know that there are folks who can't work, and Jesus has been pretty clear through his whole ministry that we should take care of them. We know that there are people who can't find work, but are looking, and that doesn't seem to be the situation here. The "unwilling" in *unwilling to work* implies both that they could work and they could find work. And yet they are not working and they are eating. The communion meal in that period was more like a church potluck; everybody would bring a dish and they'd share. I'm sure every church had an equivalent to our Ethel, where everyone hoped she was coming because she was such an awesome cook.

But there's more here than meets the eye. We assume that all economies are like our economy. And the Roman system was different in a couple of key ways. First, it was a patriarchal, patronage society. Each family was headed up by a father, and that could be a grandfather or a great uncle. There was some top guy in your family tree. The entire family worked to build a web of connections so that that head of family had something to bargain with. He could get you seats at the theater or access to fresh fish, or 10 votes in the senate. He would take whatever it was that he had and he would find a more powerful household in hopes of having them as a patron. Every day, he or someone from his household network would go to the patron's house to see if there was something his network could do for the patron.¹ One way to get prestige was to be seen in Rome walking with a big entourage, so some patrons just kept people hanging around

¹Bruce W. Winter, "If a Man Does Not Wish to Work...' A Cultural and Historical Setting for 2 Thessalonians 3:6-16." *Tyndale Bulletin* 40, no. 2 (1989): 306.

so that if they headed down to the Forum or to the baths, they would have a lot of people around them.

Now I know what you're thinking. How did anyone get anything done? Slavery. The entire Roman economy ran on slave labor. You had to be pretty desperately poor to not own a slave or two, because all you had to do was feed them, and you didn't have to feed them well. If you had any kind of manual work that needed to be done, it was done by slaves or by women, depending on what kind of manual work we were talking about.

Now there certainly were shop keepers and craftsmen in Rome and they were paid in cash for their work. But while their work was valued, they were not.² If you were a Roman parent, first you wanted your kid to not be a slave and then you wanted them to find a good patron. There was no real advancement socially with manual labor. There were many wealthy Romans who were not regarded very highly because they had earned the money through their own efforts and didn't really have a good patronage network set up.

So when Paul says *we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day* (2 Thessalonians 3:7-8), he is saying a lot more than everyone who can work, should. He is saying: opt out of the current economic system, which runs on patronage and relationship. He is saying: take on the manual work of slaves. Opt out of the current system, take on the work done by the lowest and the least regarded. Wow.

Paul is asking the members of the church in Thessalonika to opt out of the economic system of the Roman Empire. Not for a week or 10 days. He's asking them to opt out of it *forever*. Because that's how corrupting he believes it to be. He wants the vision of Isaiah to come to pass. That vision comes from the very last chapter of the book of Isaiah. The ancient Israelites have strayed away from God, they have been conquered and sent into exile. They are now being allowed to return to Israel and are finding the return they longed for hard. Just before this passage, they have admitted that they turned away from God, that they broke the covenant and they should be punished. But they are saying the punishment has gone on long enough.³ This beautiful view of the new creation is what they are longing to experience. It's why we use this passage as part of our Easter service every year.

Paul wants that vision too, not just for the church in Thessalonika, but for the whole world. He is so afraid that the patronage system that runs on top of a slave economy is going to take these new Christians away from what is true and right. The idleness he's worried about is what respectable, responsible parents have to do to get their kids a step up in the world; they have to wait around in the gardens of other, more powerful men. At least if they are being paid cash wages for their work and buying their own bread, they are in a position to remember that Jesus is the true Lord. And they are in a position to help others who have less than they do.

That's where I think the power of café owner's gesture to sell his business every year comes from. He is opting out of the business and economic system for 10 days. But he is using the system itself, the legal and financial institutions that make that system run, to let him out. The

²Megan T Wilson-Reitz and Sheila Elizabeth McGinn, "Welfare Wastrels or Swanky Socialites: 2 Thess 3:6-15 and the Problem of the Atakoi." *Conversations With The Biblical World* 32 (2012), 187-188.

³Richard Nysse, "Rebels from Beginning to End." *Word & World* 19, no. 2 (1999): 167.

system doesn't run him, he uses the tools and levers of the system to make it work for him. He can step outside that system at any point because he does it every year.

As we come to the end of this year in the Christian calendar, remember that within the church the new year starts on the first Sunday in Advent, which is November 27th this year. As we come to the end of this year in the Christian calendar, think about those systems that pull you away from the right relationship with God. One or two isolated events are probably manageable. But we live inside economic and social systems that constantly make it hard for us to remember that Jesus is the true Lord. What do we need to walk away from, possibly forever, so we can do our work quietly and earn our own living? Most importantly, what do we need to walk away from so we never weary of doing what is right?