

NO WORK, NO FOOD: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF 2 THESSALONIANS 3:10b

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Abstract

The work examines no work, no food, study of 2 Thessalonians 3:10b. Paul considered work as an inevitable phenomenon in human existence. This is apparently because work is what can guarantee the provision of food. A man who decides not to work would not have anything to eat. The position of Paul regarding this postulation of his is to encourage every Tom, Dick and Harry to be assiduous always. Certainly, man was created to work. This is ascertained from the creation story, when God created Adam, He instructed him to work on the garden so as to eke subsistence. It is in line with this that man, of necessity, embarks on work. It is true that vocation differs from one man to the other, however, the obvious is that one must be engaged in a vocation that will guarantee his daily existence in life. Work is not optional, rather it is a matter of compulsion to everyman who desires to eat. This is apparently because it is from the work that is done that one would be able to bring out what is to be eaten.

Introduction

Work is defined by the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of current English edited by Hornby as "to do something that involves physical or mental effort, especially as part of a job,"¹ it is employment, labour, occupation and job, it is effort expended on a particular task.² Work is a universal experience for all rational human beings. It is an opportunity to make meaningful contribution towards the positive development of the society; man cannot exist without work, man must work. It is work that guarantees human existence. Hence, there is joy at work. However, many people in the contemporary days embrace laxity and idleness instead of work. Rather than

working, it has been observed rather painfully that, such people give spirituality much priority that makes them neglect the place of work, that they are expected to do in order to eke a living.

They spend many hours of the day on prayer mountains, fasting and praying for miraculous and supernatural provision of food on their tables, while they themselves fail to find a legitimate work to do. Others, however, show much triviality at work and exhibit all kinds of laxity such as unpunctuality, laziness, and malingering. Work as a phenomenon, was commenced by God Himself. Gen. 2:2 gives a very interesting account of the scenario thus: *By the seventh day, God had finished the work He had been doing...* With this submission, it behoves on man to diligently embark on work. The author of the book of Genesis did not argue that God had to work in order for Him to eat. However, He worked. This study shall therefore exegetically examine the *no work, no food* issue as postulated in 2 Thessalonians 3:10b by Paul and draw some implications for the contemporary society.

EXEGETICAL STUDY 2 THESSALONIANS 3:10B

ὅτι εἴ τις οὐ θέλει ἐργάζεσθαι μηδὲ ἐσθιέτω.³

TRANSLATION

... If anyone will not work, let him not eat.

Syntactical Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 3:10b

The clause “If anyone is not willing to work, neither should he eat” which is the content of the command given in 2 Thessalonians 3:10b by Paul is composed of the following: (**ὅτι εἴ τις οὐ θέλει ἐργάζεσθαι μηδὲ ἐσθιέτω**), are lexically analyzed as follows:

The Greek word **εἴ** means *if* in English. The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of current English edited by Hornby defines *if* as “used to say that one thing can, will, or might happen or be true, depending on another thing happening or being true”.⁴ It is conditional particle (adverbial clause of condition). From the aforementioned text, it is a conditional statement and not affirmative. The Greek word **τις** means *anyone* in English, *it is any person or people*,⁵ it is nominative masculine singular form of the indefinite pronoun. While the Greek word **οὐ** means *not* in English, *it is used to form the negative*.⁶ It is an emphatic negative adverb from the text. The Greek word **θέλω** means *is willing* in English, it connotes *ready, eager, or prepared to do something*.⁷ It is the third person singular present active

indicative conjugation of the verb. Also the word **μηδέ** means *neither* in English. It is third person singular, present active imperative conjugation of the verb **ἔσθίω** (*esthiō*), *should he eat?* The conjunction **ὅτι** is employed with the indicative mood of the **θέλω** (*thelō*), which means, *is willing* in English, it is to be ready, prepared, agreeable, and pleased, whose meaning is negated by the negative adverb **οὐ**, which means *not* in English.

The Greek word **ἐργάζομαι** means *work* in English. It is a verb which connotes *employment, labour, occupation, and job*. It is opposite to inactivity or idleness. It is to engage in an activity involving considerable expenditure of effort, energy and diligence, thus to labour, to work hard to accomplish something.⁸ Work, from a sociological perspective, is anything that a person undertakes with a goal of being productive in a way that meets human needs. Work includes mental and/or physical exertion but does not always have to include an exchange of money.⁹ Work, in social sciences, is defined as “the carrying out of tasks, which involves the expenditure of mental and physical effort and its objective, is the production of goods and services that cater for human needs. An occupation, or job, is work that is done in exchange for a regular wage or salary.”¹⁰ Work done by human beings is purposive action guided by intelligence; work that is repetitive or arduous is often called labour. Both purpose and intelligence ...¹¹ Work and labour can be used interchangeably. Wallace postulates that:

The English translation of a variety of Hebrew and Greek words used to indicate an even greater variety of functions (physical, mental, spiritual). All are somehow related to the regular activity (both in the sense of maintenance and productivity) of fulfilling the purpose of one's being. The emphasis is not on activity which is difficult, burdensome or necessary, but on that which is real, productive and worthwhile. The Biblical concept of man's labour in the world is predicated on the statement of God's labour in creating and sustaining the world...¹²

Again, the word **ἐργάζομαι** is expressing the idea of an unidentified member of the Thessalonian Christian community absolutely refusing to engage in activities in order to provide food for themselves. It is expressing the idea that they absolutely refused to work to provide a living for themselves. Most evangelical commentators have concluded that the issue Paul was addressing

in 2 Thessalonians 3:10b was a problem of *idleness* within the church which was the direct result of confusion concerning the doctrine of the imminent return of Christ at the resurrection of Church-age saints that is, the Rapture. The traditional interpretation is that because of the Thessalonians' expectation of the imminent coming of Christ; they gave up working and sponged off others.¹³ However, the scripture is silent on what they were eating in spite of the fact that they were not working.

Albert Barnes pontificates thus:

The law here laid down by the Apostle extends to all who are able to work for a living, and who will not do it, and binds us not to contribute to their support if they will not labour for it. It should be regarded as extending to the members of a church - who, though poor, should not be supported by their brethren, unless they are willing to work in any way they can for their own maintenance and to those who beg from door to door, who should never be assisted unless they are willing to do all they can do for their own support. No one can be justified in assisting a lazy man. In no possible circumstances are we to contribute to foster indolence. A man might as properly help to maintain open vice.¹⁴

One must keep in mind that when Paul reminds the Thessalonian Christian community of the prohibition here in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, which he, Silvanus and Timothy regularly communicated to them while living in their midst, it only applies to those who are able to work but refuse to do so. It does not apply to those who were suffering from some mental or physical handicap, which prevented them from working. The Thessalonians were to perform acts of divine good on behalf of such individuals inside and outside their community. F. F. Bruce notes in his comment on the text as follows:

This may have been a proverbial saying based on Gen 3:19 *in the sweat of your face you shall eat bread*; it has become a proverbial saying from its occurrence here. This charge to their converts would have been less persuasive if the missionaries had not confirmed it by their own practice. It is refusal to work that is reprobated here ... Comparable sayings are quoted from

Jewish and early Christian literature. Rabbi Abbahu is cited as saying, ‘If I do not work, I do not eat’ (Gen. 2.2 on Gen 1:2). In a non-Pauline area of the early Christian world, the Didache instructs its readers how to deal with visitors who come to them in the Lord’s name: ‘If he who comes is a traveler, help him as much as you can, however, he shall not stay with you more than two days or, if necessary, three. If he wishes to settle down with you and has a craft, let him work for his bread (τεχνίτης ὢν, ἐργαζέσθω καὶ φαγέτω). But if he has no craft, make such provision for him as your intelligence approves, so that no one shall live with you in idleness as a Christian. If he refuses (οὐ θέλει) to do so, he is making merchandise of Christ (χριστέμπορος ἔστι); beware of such people (12:2–5).¹⁵

Gene Green opines that “The necessity of working formed part of the ethical tradition of the church (cf. Eph. 4:28; 1 Thess. 4:11–12), which finds its origins also in the Old Testament (cf. Gen. 3:17–19; Ps. 128:2; Prov. 10:4; 12:11; 19:15).”¹⁶ Russell has argued succinctly that the cause of the issue was the condition of the urban poor who were unable to find satisfactory work in the cities.¹⁷ But the situation in this church was, however, that the *idle* were unwilling and did not want to work at all. The Apostles, in the text, re-emphasized to the church that they were not under any responsibility or obligation to sustain such members of the church, and even commanded them not to feed them.

The Greek word ἐσθίω (*esthiō*) means *let him not eat* is an imperative that embraces the obligation of the church not to feed the person who is not desirous to work. *Let him not eat!* – which can be put in a simple modern parlance: *don’t let him eat*. Eat is defined as “to take into the mouth, chew and swallow as food; to have a meal; to consume; to destroy bit by bit... to corrode, to consume completely...”¹⁸ It is what is eaten that nourishes the body. Whoever eats well will look good and healthy. However, the one that does not eat well will look famished and haggard. The second and more noteworthy way in which Paul differs from these parallels is that he does not speak broadly of those members who do not work, but strictly of those who refuse to work and a dichotomy can be drawn, if anyone is not willing to work. The main

problem of those rebellious idlers is their deliberate refusal to work, and not their lack of employment. Paul was not focused on church members who were unable to find work, or were unable to work as a result of injury, illness, or old age. Rather, he was writing on those who deliberately chose to be idle and probably wanted to be mere busy-bodies and also gossipers of probably garrulous mouth.

It is Paul's expectation that the broader church community is not discouraged in doing good, which means that they are to minister to believers who are genuinely in need, in a compassionate way (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 4:28; 1 Tim. 5:3–8; Titus 3:14; Gal. 2:10; 1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8–9; Rom. 15:25–27). However, Paul commands the church membership at large not to provide for believers who obstinately or vehemently refuse to work, even when they have the opportunity and means to do so.¹⁹ According to J. Hampton Keathley:

The Apostle reinforced their example by reminding them of their previous instruction as it pertained to working and supporting oneself and family. As mentioned previously, the instruction here is aimed at those who are 'unwilling to work.' Also, this instruction was not just a matter of some cultural tendency they may have noted in the Thessalonians, but of a fundamental biblical principle. God is Himself a worker. After all, He is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. As such, He designed a working vocation as a necessary part of life even before the fall and He expects each of us to be involved in some form of vocation that we might support ourselves, find a sense of significance and destiny in our labour, and be a productive member of society. Thus, denying support to those who are unwilling to work is not cruel, but becomes a basic form of discipline to force idlers into reality and into the responsibility of becoming productive people. This kind of discipline is tough love and provides a protection to both the individual and to the society.²⁰

Adeyemo states that the rule Paul gives is similar to the African proverb, "the hen eats where she scratches the earth and the sleeping hawk catches no fish".²¹ According to the teaching of the Bible, begging is wrong. If a man has

the strength to work, then he must work. If a man, strong enough to work, refuses to do so, then let him not eat... let all Christians remember that to be lazy is a sin.²² D. M. Martin opines, however, that “The rather harsh sounding remedy to the situation, *he shall not eat*, should not be understood punitively but as an incentive to work. The intent of church discipline in the Pauline letters is consistently redemptive and constructive. The actions recommended are always designed as a corrective to improper behaviour. The hope is that this ‘brother’ will heed the *warning*, correct his lifestyle, and be restored to the full fellowship of the Church”.²³ Therefore, it is imperative for every man to work.

Thomas Constable affirms in tandem with Martin that “The individuals in view were not those who could not work but those who would not work. They were not to be supported by other Christians out of a sense of charity. The loving thing to do for those drones was to let them go hungry so that they would be forced to do right and go to work. No Christian who is able but unwilling to work should be maintained by others who labour on his behalf.”²⁴ According to Matthew Henry, Paul commands and directs those that live idle lives to reform and set themselves to their business.²⁵ He had given commandments to this, as well as a good example of this, when he was among them: *Even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any man would not work, neither should he eat*, (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

Tokunboh Adeyemo states that, Paul encourages those who are already working to work hard because work allows us to meet our own needs and to contribute meaningfully to the development of individuals and of the community. Work is not a curse but a task that God has assigned us.²⁶

In congruence with the foregoing, John Gill notes that the phrase *he who refuses to work, let him not eat* was a sort of a proverb with the Jews, and is frequently used by them... Not that he could not work through weakness, bodily diseases, or old age, the necessities of such are to be distributed to and they are to be taken care of, and provided with the necessities of life by the officers of the church; but those that can work, and will not, ought to starve, for any assistance that should be given them by the members of the church, or the officers of it.²⁷

In sum, the text reveals that those whom the missionaries were referring to in the command are those who have the ability to work, but refused to do so. This excludes those who are handicapped by illness, injury and/or old age. It is also commanded that members of the Thessalonian Christian community are not to, in no wise, give food or any form of basic amenities to such persons. The command is issued as a form of disciplinary

measure against idleness and laziness, and also a motivation to the rebellious idlers to desist from laziness and get to work. Essentially, the command of Paul was quite germane then, and relevant in the contemporary days.

WORK AS A MEANS OF LIVELIHOOD IN THE CONTEMPORARY DAYS

Several reasons abound why one indeed needs to work and be quite assiduous in all ramifications. Work allows us to meet our own basic needs and to contribute tremendously to the development of individuals and community. Work gives a sense of responsibility. Many people, especially in African culture, regard those who refuse to work as irresponsible. Working, however, changes the story! Work gives dignity and respect. A person who does not work is bound to be subject to some elements of reproach and lack of respect and becomes a liability to others. Many a time, such people are despised and disdained in the society and treated disdainfully. Work gives purpose. If treated the right way, work is the source of purpose in human lives. It allows one to lead a purposeful and meaningful life. One of the most important ways happiness is derived is by doing meaningful work.

Work provides a steady income, which can help one cover living expenses and save money for the future. This is also valuable if one has financial obligations, such as a mortgage or car payments. For example, employment can provide the financial stability to care for children and the entire family. With a steady income, it is up to an individual whether you want to save, spend, or invest the money you earn. Work enables one to earn a living and even saves for the raining days, especially at retirement. In the past, gratuities were paid, however in the contemporary days we have contributory pension scheme because the era of the payment of gratuity is gone. If one had not worked, he or she would not be entitled to anything, whatsoever.

Work, of certitude, guarantees feeding. Anyone who engages in hard work will have assurance of his daily existence without begging. How assiduous man is matters a great deal and can determine how satisfied a man is in his role and in his personal life. This can be a powerful motivator, especially if man is in a position that helps other people, such as a teacher, medical doctor, or nurse. Work helps one to make money to meet necessities and fulfill their dreams in the training of children and to get valuable things in life. If one would not want to get basic needs through begging, then such a person needs to work. Getting one's needs and dreams usually requires money, and money is paid to the one who works. Working hard makes man being productive and this can give one a great sense of accomplishment and

belonging in the society. Work can obviously help one feel he/she is doing something meaningful and contributing to the society meaningfully because one is assured of using his skills and talents. It can also give one a sense of pride and satisfaction to see that one has worked hard to accomplish one's goals.

To become financially independent and self-sufficient, one must work hard, because work provides financial independence that is required to do other activities that one enjoys. Knowing one can support oneself and family by working, work provides one with the necessary confidence, empowerment, and more control of one's life. One may also feel more independent in his role as one develops his skills and advance throughout his career.

Furthermore, Work is the only productive way to live a worthy life. How can one be productive when work is not in place? Doing work makes one to be productive, no matter how little or much it may be. Besides, living idle and lazy yields no positive result to one's or others' lives. Work helps in leaving a legacy. Legacies are laid as a result of what people do in their lifetime. Hence, when no work is done in one's lifetime, then no legacy is left behind for the coming generation.

Again, work changes one's status in the society. The work one does tells people the type of person they are. A medical doctor, a carpenter, a trader, etc. are so - called and identified with their occupation. Work is a means of learning and growth. When one works, it gives the opportunity to learn new thing and develop in the work one does, and even beyond the scope of the work, sometimes.

Besides, Work improves human life. When meaningful work is done, value is added to the society and lives are improved enormously. The works of some great men are what contemporary generations enjoy. Work enhances creativity. It makes one think of ways to do things in better ways than previously done, thus strengthening and enhancing their creativity. God worked. Human beings and the entire universe are works of God.

Work can make man's life more structured, making one feel more settled and balanced. It also offers a sense of discipline and can help one accomplish more. For example, when you have a job, you might wake up early and get ready for work, which can help you prepare for the day. A job allows you to meet new people and interact with others. Work makes one to have access to the community. It connects one to others and can help one feel important, socially engaged and fulfilled in the society.

Conclusion

Anointing does not guarantee prosperity. It is true that we have prosperity gospel in the contemporary days, however, that does not mean that prosperity gospel will sustain man. Therefore, work is an essential activity for all humans. Excuses to avoid work are to be abolished by all. The text under study has revealed that those who have the ability to work, but refuse to do so must not be catered for. This excludes those who are somewhat handicapped to work by the reason of illness, injury and/or old age. Enough of the excuses of many people that, *there is no work/job*. Anyone with the mentality of laziness and idleness in the contemporary days needs to be enjoined to engage in meaningful work. Starting a work might require deciding on what work to do and stepping out to do it. The society in general and the Christian church in particular must rise against over - spiritualization of issues and be more real concerning the issue of unwillingness to work, engaging youths in productive activities and sensitizing them against the get-rich-quick syndrome.

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