

The Gospel of our Age

Hespeler, November 16, 2025 © Scott McAndless – Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

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

The gospel of our modern age, I sometimes think, could have been taken from our reading this morning from the Second Letter to the Thessalonians: **“Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.”**

It is the gospel preached, not by the church (or at least not by all churches), but by governments all over the world. As they cut their budgets and impose their austerity, the justification is often exactly that: **“Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.”**

Welfare Reform

It is part of our political history in Ontario and Canada. Many years ago, when people fell into a situation where they did not have sufficient income to live, they would be enrolled in programs such as Unemployment Insurance and Welfare, and the government would step in to support them.

But then governments all over the world found that those kinds of programs were getting too expensive and carried out major reforms. Here, as a result, Unemployment Insurance became “Employment Insurance.” Welfare became “Workfare.”

Those name changes were not just window dressing. The programs were reformed in ways that pushed people into work. You had to be actively engaging with the working world in order to qualify. You had to be actively searching or training or moving towards gainful employment in some way to access those benefits.

Putting up Barriers

And there is a lot to be said for that approach, to be sure. There is a lot of wisdom in that maxim of **“Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.”** But if you ever have to navigate such programs, you quickly learn that they don’t assist people towards work as well as you might hope.

They are often more about justifying denying somebody benefits because they fail to jump through hoops than actually helping them get work. It is enough to make you wonder whether the reforms were more concerned with cutting budgets than getting people working.

But, despite such problems, the campaign has continued ever since. It certainly has in the US. The system that covers Americans who simply can’t afford medical insurance there is called Medicaid. And the Medicaid system was designed to cover people, including children, who can’t afford insurance in any other way. Now, they may be working, but they do not have insurance offered by their employer, and they are not paid enough to afford it themselves.

Medicare Cuts

Recent legislation passed in the United States has cut funding to Medicaid. But the way they cut it is telling. In fact, the government argued that it reduced the budget without cutting coverage because they only introduced work requirements. So, rather than, **“Anyone unwilling to work should not eat,”** it has become “Anyone unwilling to work should not get health care.” That is how it has been sold.

But this is a little bit different from the creation of Workfare programs. In those programs, there is an



attempt to assist people in finding and preparing for work. They don't have any of that in the cuts to Medicare. It is simply a matter of them introducing all of these hurdles that you have to go over or through in order to prove that you are employed enough to get Medicaid.

These hurdles mean that, even if you are employed, you might be denied because you can't prove it. In some cases, people may not have the time to jump through the hoops of getting it because they work too many jobs. And the simple fact that they believe that the introduction of this work requirement will mean that they can spend less on it kind of gives away the game. They are simply using these requirements to create reasons to deny people the coverage they need.

So, while I do see wisdom in the teaching that **"Anyone unwilling to work should not eat,"** I find that there are a lot of problems with how it is turned into policy.

A Biblical Principle

But, of course, this connection between working and eating is not just some connection that politicians have come up with. It is an idea that comes from the Bible. So, as a good Christian who believes that the Bible is a gift given to us by God, I have to deal with this passage. I can't just throw it out because I see some problems with the way it has been implemented.

So, let's ask the question, what was going on in that church in Thessalonica that led to the imposition of the rule that **"Anyone unwilling to work should not eat"**?

Assumptions about Laziness

We may read it today with our modern assumptions about who is lazy. Whenever I hear people talking about those who are lazy these days, they always seem to be referring to those who are poor. If people are poor enough to need to access food banks or other support programs, the assumption that many people make is that they somehow lack initiative or a work ethic.

They will assume that, mind you, without knowing anything about such people. They may actually be working very hard. Perhaps they are caregivers, perhaps they work two or three part-time jobs because none of their employers give them enough hours. They may be doing vital work that just doesn't pay. But it's just easier to assume they're lazy than to examine any of that.

Those are the assumptions – often false assumptions – that we make in our society, driven by decades of political rhetoric. But did people in New Testament times make the same assumptions?

Ancient Assumptions

In the ancient world, they thought about work very differently. Work was something that was done by slaves and by poor labourers. But it was actually considered a shameful and embarrassing thing if you were upper class and you were caught working.

For example, in order to be in the Roman Senate, you could not work. Anyone who was involved in trade or manufacturing in any way was automatically excluded. The only way to get in was if you owned enough land that was worked and managed by slaves. But you didn't do any work yourself.

The vast army of slaves and labourers who kept the Empire running really had no choice but to work hard all the time. The people who *didn't* work were the rich and what's more, they were proud of not working.

Communal Meals

The context of the comments we read this morning from Second Thessalonians has to do with

communal meals. It was common in the Early Church for the people to gather on a regular basis for a meal to which all would contribute according to their means.

There were many slaves and poor folk in those churches who could contribute little to these meals, but it was not because they were lazy. Their status in society meant that their work was unpaid or poorly paid.

But there were at least a few in those churches who did have the means to contribute more. And their contributions probably meant that these communal meals were the best meals that the poor folk had all week. But these richer members were far more likely to be the people who did not work because they did not need to.

Labourers Get Priority

So, in that context, what does it mean to say that **“Anyone unwilling to work should not eat”**? It means that, when the communal meal is served, those who have spent their days labouring should get priority, while those who contributed so much of the food should hang back because they have not spent the day working.

The letter goes on to say, **“For we hear that some of you are living irresponsibly, mere busybodies, not doing any work.”** This is also directed at the wealthier members of the church. They are busybodies – that is to say that they think that they get to tell everyone else what to do. They figure that that is their privilege. Because they have leisure and because they provide so much to the church, they get to control what everybody else does. They are busybodies.

Paul’s Clashes

These are the people that apostles like Paul clashed with all the time – the wealthy supporters of the church who thought that, since they would often feed any visiting apostles and have them stay in their houses, they should be able to tell the apostles what they should preach and teach.

Paul resisted this and mentions his resistance often in his letters. And it was one of the reasons why he insisted on working and earning his own bread in order to remain independent. That’s what it means in this passage when it says, **“we did not eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labour we worked night and day.”**

Rich Busybodies

So to be clear, the problem in Thessalonica was not that there were too many poor people who were too lazy to work and earn their living. The problem was that there were some rich people who thought that, since they didn’t have to work for a living, they should be able to tell everyone else what to do.

And the rebuke that is given to those people is this: **“Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.”** But that is perhaps a deceptive translation. What it literally says in the original language is this: “We exhort them... to be quiet about what they do and eat their own bread.”

In other words, they should not be going on and on about all they do for the church and, since they have lots of their own bread at home, they need to let others go first for the communal meal.

Wisdom for Today

So, if you are taking this verse from 2 Thessalonians as a biblical justification for modern policies that seek to punish or limit benefits for poor people because they are assumed to be lazy, I do think you need

to have a closer look at the situation that the letter was addressing.

But that is not to say that this letter doesn't have anything to say about our modern poverty issues. When you look closely at what it is saying, it is trying to value and honour those who labour for their living.

We are not actually all that good at honouring those who work for a living. That is why, though productivity has risen greatly over the last decade, wages for those who labour have not kept pace.

Instead, we have seen that those who do not do the labour are able to benefit the most from the work that is done. CEOs in particular are the ones who have seen their compensation soar.

Modern Busybodies

And sure, I'll admit that the CEOs do work for that money. But on average they are paid 200 times as much as the average employee in Canada. 200 times! Do you really think they work 200 times harder? Is the average employee 200 times lazier? No! The CEO may bring other things to the company, like connections or strategies, but not multiple times more work. And so, the money paid has become unhinged from the amount of work that is done.

But even more disturbing, the overpaid wealthy have become busybodies. They have become the ones telling everyone else how they ought to live and setting the priorities of the entire system. A rebuke may be needed.

Isaiah's Vision

In our reading this morning from the Book of Isaiah, the prophet is imagining a perfect world – the coming of God's kingdom on Earth. **"For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;"** God says through the prophet, **"the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating, for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight."**

But note how he describes what it is like to live in such joy and delight. Does he say, "Nobody will have to work anymore, that we'll just receive a basic universal income and we can just laze around all day? No, he doesn't see it that way at all.

Instead, he says this: **"They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat, for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands. They shall not labour in vain or bear children for calamity."**

Working in the Kingdom of God

Wow! Isaiah's ideal of a perfect world is not one where nobody works, but it is of a world where those who do the work actually get to enjoy the fruit of their labour. And yes, now that I think of it, that does sound like a pretty amazing kind of world.

Too bad we seem to be working so hard at building a world where (to make an example of just one company) thousands upon thousands of Amazon employees work long hours and yet don't earn enough to own houses or have enough to eat. Too bad we are working on building a world where Jeff Bezos and folks like him are the ones who seem to enjoy most of the fruits of the labour of those who work long hours.