



Willing to Work

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For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: anyone unwilling to work should not eat. For we hear that some of you are living irresponsibly, mere busybodies, not doing any work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. Brothers and sisters, do not be weary in doing what is right. – 2 Thessalonians 3:10-13

“Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” I have heard this verse repeated often in recent days. Those who have been quoting it have been doing so as a justification for the withholding of funds for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), a federal government program that provides food-purchasing assistance for approximately 40 million people in the United States.

In few cases, those who use this verse to bolster their opinion do so without knowing its origin. It has simply made its way into popular vernacular enough that they have adopted it as a slogan for their cause.

In the vast majority of cases, however, the sharer knows full well where this saying comes from. Because said sharer claims the Christian faith as part of their identity. And their particular flavor of Christianity considers any verse fair game for justifying certain thoughts and behaviors regardless of context, and despite the possibility that it conflicts with the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

This same Jesus Christ often fed the of



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hungry without expectation of reimbursement, without checking people's credentials, without complaining that his tax dollars to Rome were paying to give free stuff to lazy people, without questioning what they would do with the food after receiving it. And this same Jesus Christ often gave commands to his followers to feed the hungry without placing these same burdens and restrictions on others.

So then, what is this verse doing here?

The writer of 2 Thessalonians is re-sharing this command for a particular purpose: there were members of this faith community who apparently were not adhering to their calling to contribute to their fellow believers' needs. The "irresponsibility" mentioned numerous times in this chapter is a reference to individuals abdicating their role in building up the common good of the church, only partaking of its benefits without working to contribute those same benefits for others.

In other words, those with the means and ability to help meet the needs of others in their community were refusing to do so.

Still, the narrative may persist that those who receive SNAP benefits are the irresponsible ones, able to contribute to the common good but content to benefit from this program without doing so. Some quick statistics dispels this narrative:¹

- 92% of SNAP participants earn incomes at or below the federal poverty line
- 39% of SNAP participants are children
- 20% of SNAP participants are older adults
- 10% of SNAP participants are non-elderly disabled
- 86% of SNAP benefits go to households that include at least one of the three preceding participants

It is not that these participants refuse to work. It's either that they are working, but are not able to earn enough to meet basic needs for their households, or they cannot work due to age or ability.

For the writer of 2 Thessalonians (let alone Jesus himself), those identifying as believers are called to provide adequate support for members of their faith community, each working on behalf of others, including and especially for those who could not work for themselves. Then, as now, that surely would have included children, the elderly, and the disabled, among others. Such a call is still relevant to disciples of Jesus Christ today, certainly within their faith communities.

And if some wish to apply scriptural ideas to the needs of our wider society, such as those who lift this verse out of its context to rationalize a refusal to help others, then the verse in context turns things back on those who are doing the rationalizing. In that case, the passage ends up filling the same function as when the disciples saw more than 5000 people in need of food, Jesus replied to their observation by saying, “*You* give them something to eat.” (Matthew 14:16)

In the face of so much need, and in response to Jesus’ command, are we willing to work?

¹Statistics taken from <https://www.propel.app/snap/food-stamp-statistics-who-benefits-the-most-from-snap/>

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