

Working in Paradise

⁶ Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.

⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you,

⁸ nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.

⁹ It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.

¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

¹¹ For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies.

¹² Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-12

Two Questions

Utopia

TODAY I WANT TO CONTRAST the history of the interpretation of our passage with what I think Paul is actually talking about. May this be a lesson in the importance of context so that Christ might be glorified.

What do The [Garden of Eden](#) And [Marxism](#) have in common? The answer is that both are [utopias](#). Eden is probably the greatest picture of a human utopia known to man. Placed in a serene environment of lush plants, quiet waters, scenic mountains, no war, friendly animals, the man and woman are beautiful, live in peace, and walk with God in perfect fellowship. That's the definition of a utopia: [Everything is absolutely perfect](#).

This same Edenic utopia returns in the last two chapters of the Bible where it pictures a city of overwhelming beauty and riches and jewels and golden streets filled with people who never shed tears from toil or torment. All things are made new, including the Tree of Life which heals the nations which is situated by a river in the center of the City. This, we are told, is [what will be when Jesus Christ returns](#).

Communism is equally **utopian**. The difference is that this utopia has never been realized in the history of mankind, and its vision is utterly godless. As for the utopia, Marx and Engels foresaw no classes, no exploitation, no wages for labor, no profits from companies, no state power, no private ownership. It was to be a culture where each person “*works according to his ability and only takes according to his needs.*” In one way, Gene Roddenberry brought it to us in the form of Star Trek. In another way, John Lennon, through one of the great piano hooks of all time, brought it through music asking us to:

Imagine there's no heaven ...
No hell below us ...
Imagine all the people living for today
Imagine there's no countries ...
And no religion too
Imagine all the people living life in peace ...
And the world will be as one
Imagine no possessions
No need for greed or hunger ...
Imagine all the people sharing all the world

As for the **godlessness**, when Vladimir Lenin first came into power, he had a pamphlet made for his public-school

brainwashing experiment. In *ABC of Communism* the little children were taught, “The transition from the Society which makes an end of capitalism to the society which is completely freed from all traces of class division and class struggle, will bring about the natural death of all religion and all superstition.”¹ “Religion, they believed, could be liquidated ... by a stroke of the pen. The Society of Militant Atheists, under Stalin’s orders, issued on May 15th 1932, the ‘Five Year Plan of Atheism’ – by May 1st 1937, such as the ‘Plan’, ‘not a single house of prayer shall remain in the territory of the USSR, and the very concept of God must be banished from the Soviet Union as a survival of the Middle Ages and an instrument for the oppression of the working masses.’”²

While never making religion technically illegal, the declining number of churches tells you what was happening away from the propaganda of you read about in *Pravda*. The Russian Orthodox went from nearly 50,000 churches to less than 500 while Roman Catholicism went from 1,200 to 2.³

¹ J. I. Bukharin and E. Preobrazhensky, “§ 92. Struggle with the religious prejudice of the masses,” in *The ABC of Communism* (Penguin Books, 1922, 1969).

² Paul Dixon (Denzil Dean Harber), “Religion in the Soviet Union, Part I,” *Worker’s International News* (1945): 29-31.

³ Revelations from the Russian Archives,” *Library of Congress* (Aug 31, 2016), <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/archives/anti.html>.

Why? In 1937 alone, 85,000 clergy were shot or sent to camps. Explaining this and so many other atrocities they committed someone writes, “Terror ... was not invented by the Communists; they did, however, perfect it.”⁴

Now listen to how one historian puts this in apocalyptic terms by comparing it to the biblical end-of-days and the millennium. “Systematic amorality: ‘This religion—or science, as it was modestly called by its adepts—invests man with a godlike authority ... In the Twenties, a good many people drew a parallel to the victory of Christianity and thought this new religion would last a thousand years ... All were agreed on the superiority of the new creed that promised heaven on earth instead of other worldly rewards.’”⁵

Distopia

Second question. What do Stalin, Lennon, and 2 Thesalonians 3 have in common? Not much, except that these two Comrades often used our passage today to, of all things, try to prove the validity of socialism. Far from a utopia, this

⁴ Aurel Braun, “Before Stalin was a Monster, He was ... a Monster,” *The Globe and Mail* (April 12, 2008; updated May 2, 2018); <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/before-stalin-was-a-monster-he-was-a-monster/article4195154/>.

⁵ Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 86.

became as dystopian as it gets. *Terminator* and *Max Max* don't hold a candle to it. To understand this, I'll first give you **the text** and then **the context** of its communist appropriation.

The specific passage is **2 Thessalonians 3:10**. The NIV probably puts it most familiarly, “**If a man will not work, he shall not eat.**” You may be thinking to yourself, how or why would Stalin and Lennon use this verse to promote their communist agenda, especially given how godless they were? If you are thinking that question, it may be because you have a different understanding of this rather famous verse.

Perhaps your understanding was captured by **Margaret Thatcher** who, back in 1988 in a wonderful little address to the Church of Scotland said,

We are told we must work and use our talents to create wealth. “**If a man will not work, he shall not eat,**” wrote St. Paul to the Thessalonians. Indeed, abundance rather than poverty has a legitimacy which derives from the very nature of **Creation**. Nevertheless, the Tenth Commandment—Thou shalt not covet—

recognizes that making money and owning things could become selfish activities. But it is not the creation of wealth that is wrong but love of money for its own sake.⁶

Or perhaps **Richard Baxter** the famous Puritan represents your view as he applies it less socially and more personally,

Innocent Adam was put into the garden of Eden to work it: and fallen man must “eat his bread in the sweat of his brow” (**Gen 3:19**): and he that “will not work must be forbidden to eat” (**1Th 3:10**). And indeed, it is necessary, for the health of our bodies, which grow diseased with idleness; and for the help of our souls, which will fail if the body fails. Fleshy man must have work for his body as well as for his soul. And the man who will do nothing but pray and meditate, will be disabled (by sickness or melancholy) before long either to pray or meditate, unless he has a strong body.⁷

Finally, maybe **Thomas Boston**, another Puritan (they were known for their “work ethic” of course), who takes it a bit more legally scratches where you itch:

⁶ **Margaret Thatcher**, “Speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (dubbed ‘The Sermon on the Mound’), *Margaret Thatcher Foundation* (May 21, 1988), <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/107246>.

⁷ **Richard Baxter** and William Orme, *The Practical Works of the Rev. Richard Baxter*, vol. 2 (London: James Duncan, 1830), 334. I’ve smoothed over the older English.

By the idleness and sloth of those that are not able otherwise to maintain themselves. Everyone is bound by this command to have a calling, and be diligent in it, if they be able. Therefore, it is a sin for such to give themselves up to idleness, and live without a calling, or to be lazy in it (**Eph 4:28; 2Th 3:10-11**). Hence it is evident that sturdy beggars are not to be tolerated; and no person being able to work for their maintenance can with a good conscience make a trade of begging. They that are able to work, but are not willing, ought to be compelled to it; and it is the sin and shame of the government that it is not so. For they directly set themselves in opposition to God's ordinance in **Gen 3:19**.⁸

All three of these represent in their own ways how most people I know have often interpreted this verse. And I want you to notice how in each of these quotes, references to creation are very close by, for **we will return to this idea later**.

Stalin and Lennon **did not read the verse the same way at all**. As communists, they read it as talking not about the lazy poor and beggars, but the rich, the old aristocracy and bourgeoisie. They make all their money off the backs of the poor, get exponentially wealthier, and don't actually *do* any

⁸ **Thomas Boston**, *The Whole Works of Thomas Boston: An Illustration of the Doctrines of the Christian Religion, Part 2*, ed. Samuel M'Millan, vol. 2 (Aberdeen: George and Robert King, 1848), 296.

work at all, because “work” is defined as physical sweat, toil with your hands, “*Workers of the world, unite*”! So, as early as 1918, Lennon has this verse turned into a slogan a plastered throughout cities, towns, and villages during the dire situation of the civil war and its food shortages.⁹ The verse actually made its way into the 1936 Constitution of the USSR, in Chapter 1 the 12th Article: “In the U.S.S.R. work is a duty and a matter of honor for every able-bodied citizen, in accordance with the principle: ‘*He who does not work, neither shall he eat.*’ The principle applied in the U.S.S.R. is that of socialism: ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his work.’”¹⁰

It is already ironic that godless atheists like Stalin and Lennon would so heavily lean on a passage like this. But I want to give you a little more information that adds to irony because of the context of the Revolution, the ushering in of the communist utopia, and, strangely, the parallel context of our verse in 2 Thessalonians 3.

⁹ Roland Boer, *Stalin: From Theology to the Philosophy of Socialism in Power* (Singapore: Springer, 2017), 31.

¹⁰ 1936 Constitution of the USSR: Adopted December 1936. Ch. 1, Art. 12. <https://www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/const/36cons01.html>.

Apocalypse First

Let's start with **the background** of our passage. In the previous chapter, and about half of the first chapter, the Apostle has addressed the question of **the Second Coming**. Specifically, some were shaken and alarmed by false teachers, claiming to speak for Paul, that “**the day of the Lord has come**” (2Th 2:2), meaning, “**that Christ had already returned on earth and was already performing his task or was on the point of doing so.**”¹¹ After setting their thinking straight (2:3-15), and offering up prayers that they would not follow in the ways of the wicked generation of Psalm 78 (2:16-3:5), he gives several thoughts about what is translated as “**idleness**” and work (3:6-12), and then concludes with a couple more thoughts and a benediction (13-18).

Curiously, we find the same thing happening in the previous letter. “**Work with your hands, as we instructed you**” (1Th 4:11) and “**Esteem them very highly in love because of their work ... admonish the idle**” (5:13-14) are two verses that are bookends of his discussion of **the Second Coming** in that letter (4:13-5:10). This is not a coincidence, and what it

¹¹ M. J. J. Menken, “Paradise Regained or Still Lost? Eschatology and Disorderly Behavior in 2 Thessalonians,” *New Testament Studies* 38: 285. <https://www.ctsfw.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Menken-ParadiseRegainedOrLost.pdf>

points strongly towards is that a faulty view of the Second Coming and what the end of all things will look like is leading directly to some bad habits about work.

What's so strange is that a parallel situation with the very same verse was happening in the Soviet Union. This has to do with what I said earlier, that communism has never happened in this world. In fact, it can never happen. It isn't possible in a world filled with wicked, selfish, power-hungry, lazy men, no matter how many of them you murder to get the rest to get in line with the program (and Stalin murdered just about every person close to him, not to mention the clergy and millions and millions of his own citizens, including masses of the "good guys," the Proletariat). And thus, one historian talks about how, "The world's first socialist revolution soon experienced a delay in the expected achievement of communism" [emphasis mine].¹² And, "The delay of the Parousia [in 2 Thess] is translatable with the delay of communism. The interim created by the delay, the time in between, was to be for those who put in an honest day's work. [more stuff after]."¹³

¹² Boer, xix.

¹³ Boer, 24.

While the goal of communists was the utopia, they understood that **in order to get there**, you had to completely **dismantle** everything about that civilization. Marx admitted that “**in the beginning [communism] cannot be affected except by means of despotic inroads**” and “**can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions.**”¹⁴ He said, “**Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience.**”¹⁵ That must of necessity therefore include freedom, personal possessions, family, religion, and, of course, **economics**. The state must, of necessity, “re-imagine” all of these things. Hence, everywhere this philosophy has gone, its arrival has been truly **apocalyptic**. Death, murder, mayhem has followed like a ghoulish specter hanging over everything. I digress here, though only a little, because I do want you to hear even in this language how closely the **parallel is with the Day of the LORD**. Except, this isn't the judgment of God upon the world; it is the judgment of corrupt, power-hungry atheists upon it.

¹⁴ **Karl Marx** and **Frederick Engels**, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Peking, Foreign Languages Press, 1970), 57, 76.

¹⁵ Marx, 56.

As far as the economic system goes, this “delay” means you need a mediating phase between that deep corruption known as **capitalism** and the Garden of Eden (minus God) known as **communism**. This is the role of **socialism**. Stalin said socialism would “**set the stage**” for the realization of global communism.¹⁶ Lenin said, it was the “**lower phase**” of communist society.¹⁷ Our passage becomes “**a key marker for the delay of communism**”¹⁸ in this way.

While **communism never has to force anyone to work** because everyone just happily does it out of the kindness of their heart for the sake of someone else, it isn't the same with socialism. Socialism lives in the real world. Remember, you have to start over with people in socialism.¹⁹ Those who have not worked (because they have only “worked” for themselves) have to be “taught” to learn how to work for the state. Many people do not want to do this, and so they need “motivation.” Besides **gulag camps** that forced labor, and **rifles** or **banishment to Siberia** that intimidated people

¹⁶ Stalin, in Boer, 26.

¹⁷ Boer, 29.

¹⁸ Boer, 24.

¹⁹ For Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, Mao, and countless others, this meant violent Revolution. Beginning in the 1930s, and especially after the atrocities in Russia and China had become known by the early 60s, the communists figured out that this wasn't working, and so they realized there had to be a better way. So, they systematically infiltrated the educational, entertainment, and media centers of the West, because that's how you change minds. This was the deliberate genius of the Frankfurt School of neo-Marxists.

to work, this very religious people could also have the Scripture used against them, because *religion is the opiate of the masses* after all. So, you might as well use every tool at your disposal. And frankly, the tool of **2 Thessalonians 3:10** surrounded by these other more brutal contexts became the driving force that turned the U.S.S.R. into a world-machine in a relatively short period of time.

Thus, **in the same way that the delay of Christ** in the future utopia who had not returned yet meant teaching the Thessalonians the necessity of work, so also **the delay of communism** and its future utopian promises meant “teaching” the Russian people the necessity of working for the state. That’s the parallel.

But this whole sad story of the Revolution in Russia is interesting to me, not merely because of this parallel, and not merely because history seems close to repeating itself (albeit in the disguised form of postmodernism), but also because there are actually some real-life applications that I think we can learn, not only from their atrocious mistakes, but also from some insights that may in fact have parallels in some places a little too close to home. To see this, I want to now look at our actual passage.

Our Passage in Context

2 Thessalonians 3:10 comes in the larger context of **3:6-12**. In these verses you have “brothers” (that is professing Christians) “walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us” (6). Rather than imitating them, which seems to have been what was going on (11), he says that you should be imitating us—the Apostles—because “we were not idle when we were with you” (7). A couple more verses fleshing this out (8-9) leads to the verse we have been talking about (10). This in turn becomes an admonishment (11) with a series of corrections (12, 13, 14, 15).

That basically raps up the letter, save for a benediction (16), a note about the letter’s authenticity (17), and a final greeting (18). Each of these points, while customary ways of ending letters, also serve the larger purpose of finishing the argument about idleness, we will not do them all together today due to time constraints.

As I said last time, our passage has another chiasm in it. Importantly, the verse we have given all the attention to is *not* its center. Rather, vs. 8 is the center, and amazingly, this verse actually becomes the key to properly interpreting the meaning of vs. 10!

- A. ⁶ Now we **command** you, brothers, **in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ**,
- B. that you keep away from any brother who is **walking in idleness**
- C. and not in accord with **the tradition that you received from us**.
- D. ⁷ For you yourselves know how you ought to **imitate us**,
- E. because **we** were not idle when we were with **you**,
- F. ⁸ nor did we eat anyone's **bread** without paying for it,
- F¹. but with **toil and labor** we worked night and day,
- E¹. that **we** might not be a burden to any of **you**.
- D¹. ⁹ It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to **imitate**.
- C¹. ¹⁰ For even when we were with you, **we would give you this command**:
If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.
- B¹. ¹¹ For we hear that some among you **walk in idleness**, not busy at work, but busybodies.
- A¹. ¹² Now such persons we **command** and encourage **in the Lord Jesus Christ** to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.²⁰

Because the chiasm is vv. 6-12, these are the verses we will look at today. What I'm most interested in helping you understand is **Paul's actual meaning** of our slogan, "**If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.**" We've seen lots of different applications already, but **what did Paul mean by it?** Who is he talking about? Given **vs. 11**, which says, "**For we hear that some among you walk in idleness,**" it is clear

²⁰ This particular version is from the Biblical Chiasm Exchange. <https://www.chiasmusexchange.com/2014/12/16/2-thessalonians-36-12/>. One similar **Charles J. Bumgardner**, "As a Brother": 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15 and Ecclesiastical Separation, Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal 14 (2009): 56. <http://docplayer.net/59993360-As-a-brother-2-thessalonians-3-6-15-and-ecclesiastical-separation.html>.

that at least some of the people were just the everyday Thessalonian Christians. That's the easy part of the answer. Where it gets harder is figuring out *why* they were walking in "idleness." What would tempt them to do this?

The short answer seems to be that they were listening to false teachers, and that false teaching has something to do with badly misreading the signs of the times and the Second Coming of Jesus. But how might those two things be related? What would the second coming of Jesus have to do with what we are reading here? This demands a longer answer.

We begin with looking at the word for "idle" (*ataktos*). The NAS translates it as "unruly." The YLT has it as "disorderly walking." In fact, as we saw when the word appeared in 1Th 5:14, "idle" or "lazy" is more of an interpretation based on the context. The word really means "in a disorderly way" or "without order" and it is up to the context to tell us what is out of order.²¹

Beale is not far off the bulls-eye when he says it refers to Christians "who are out of order and need to be admonished

²¹ Menken, 275-76.

to walk according to the order God has commanded.”²² The word commanded is key here. Somehow, Paul says, this walking in disorder is directly related to something “not in accord with the tradition that you received from us” (2Th 3:6). We saw this word “tradition” in 2:15 and saw that it referred to both doctrinal teaching and ethical teaching, particular those which came from Jesus. However, two more things can be added now. First, Jesus didn’t just make up his teachings, though he did clarify things a lot. Rather, his teachings are rooted in the Scripture—the OT. Second, the word “tradition” itself is related to this idea of a “command,” in that it often originates in the commands and traditions of the OT.

Now, it is clear from the context, especially our slogan-verse, that this disorder has something to do with not working. Paul makes this clear with an example when he explains that these Christians were to imitate him because he was not “idle” because we did not “eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you” (8).

²² G. K. Beale, *1–2 Thessalonians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 164. His solution is not exactly the same as the one I will give.

This was Paul's consistent practice wherever he went somewhere where receiving money for the Gospel could have been misconstrued.

- We labor, working with our own hands. (1Co 4:12)
- And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. (2Co 11:9)
- Because he was of the same trade he stayed with them and worked, for they were tentmakers by trade. (Acts 18:3)

It wasn't his practice all the time, because he says of ministers of the gospel, "The laborer deserves his wages" (1Ti 5:18; 1Co 9:9). Curiously, this was a "tradition" he taught the people, and this tradition comes from Dt 25:4, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." He asks the Corinthians, "Is it for oxen that God is concerned?" The answer is, of course, no. This is why he makes this parenthetical remark in 2Th 3:9, "It was not because we do not have the right." They had every right. But instead, he worked among them "to give you an example to imitate" (9). Present circumstances would not allow him to use that right.

At this moment, he brings up the “**tradition**” he taught them. It was in the form of a command, “**For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: *If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat***” (10). Where might this tradition have come from? One scholar has studied this passage²³ and concluded, because of the context, because of where traditions originate (i.e. in the OT),²⁴ and, especially because of the language used in this passage—particularly the language of vs. 8, which “happens” to be the center of the chiasm, that it originates in **Genesis 3:19**. Curiously, we have already seen two Puritans citing this very verse as they also quote **2Th 3:10**!

This is no accident. Paul wants us to see this, and many have. Throughout the passage, but especially in vs. 8, there are some direct and unmistakable word parallels:

2Th 3:6-12	Gen 3:17-19
We did not eat bread (8)	You shall eat bread (19)
With toil and labor we worked	Cursed is the ground ... in pain you shall eat ... By the sweat of your face (17, 19)

²³ This is the article by **Menken**.

²⁴ In fact, in 1Co 11:2-16, the “traditions” also originate from Gen 1-3. See Menken, 277. I thought it was interesting that he says, “The *paradosis* (tradition) and *paradidonai* (to transmit) and *paralambanein* (to receive) are largely determined by Gen 1-3. Why is that interesting? Because Gen 1-3 is about paradeisos (Paradise).”

Through these, “we can conclude that the order at stake in 2 Thess 3:6-12 is probably that of Gen 3:17-19.”²⁵ So how does this relate to the misunderstanding of Christ’s return?

There was an expectation in Jewish and Christian apocalypticism that the absence of hunger, and labor belongs to the blessings of the Advent of Messiah (for Jews, the First Coming; for Christians, the Second). Everyone will have plenty to eat and drink and will enjoy freedom from labor.²⁶ Paradise is restored, and the curse is reversed. In other words, they may have refused to work because they believed that when Christ had returned, the restoration of Paradise

²⁵ Original note reads, “Several commentators have considered 2 Thess 3:1-c as a Jewish proverb dependent upon Gen 3:19. See G. Milligan, *Saint Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Macmillan, 1908), 115; [a German von Dobschutz]; Argell, *Work*, 120-5; Ps. Ignatius 9:3 (longer version). “Let us therefore no longer keep the Sabbath after the Jewish manner, and rejoice in days of idleness; for “he that does not work, let him not eat.” For say the [holy] oracles, “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat thy bread.”

²⁶ **Menken**, 285-86. See 1En 10:17-11:2; 2Bar 29; SibOr 3.619-23; Luke 14:15-24; Rev 7:16; 21-22; Isa 49:10; 58:11; Ezek 34:29. With abundant food: 1 Enoch 24.4- 25.7; T. Levi 18.10-11; T. Dan 5.12; Sib. Or., fragm. 3.46-9; Apoc. Mos. 13.4; 28.4; 4 Ezra 2.12; 7.36, 123; 2 Baruch 4.3-7; 51.11; Apoc. Abr. 21.6; 2 Enoch 8-9; 42.3-5; 65.9-10; Apoc. Elijah 5.6, and, of course, Rev 2.7; 22.2, 14, 19). 2 Baruch 73-4: “And it will happen that after he [Messiah] has brought down everything which is in the world, and has sat down in eternal peace on the throne of the kingdom, then joy will be revealed and rest will appear. And then health will descend in dew, and illness will vanish ... And nobody will again die untimely, nor will any adversity take place suddenly ... And the wild beasts will come from the wood and serve men, and the asps and dragons will come out of their holes to subject themselves to a child. And women will no longer have pain when they bear, nor will they be tormented when they yield the fruits of their womb. And it will happen in those days that the reapers will not become tired, and the farmers will not wear themselves out, because the products of themselves will shoot out speedily, during the time that they work on them in full tranquillity.”

and the annulment of the curse of **Gen 3:17-19** will be realized; therefore, there is no need to work anymore, in toil and trouble for a living.²⁷

This took hold because some people had become “**busy-bodies.**” “**We hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies**” (**2Th 2:11**). Beale rightly comments that:

In Thessalonica the *ataktōs* people are disorderly not merely by being lazy and not working but also by being *busybodies*, involving themselves in things they should not by spreading their new false teaching. Paul’s only other use of the Greek word group for being a busybody (*periergazomai*) is also in reference to false teachers. He writes that some in Ephesus are “going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers [a different Greek word here], but also [maligners of the truth] and *busy-bodies*, saying things they ought not to” (1 Tim 5:13). ... Against this background, it is natural to see that a significant

²⁷ Menken, 287; Nijay Gupta, “An Apocalyptic Reading of Psalm 78 in 2 Thessalonians 3,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31:2 (2008): 186 [179-94]. **Going Deeper.** Gupta continues his observation from our last study that Paul may still have the wicked generation in mind from Psalm 78 (see esp 183-185). My own thought that he does not develop is wondering if perhaps the Israelites themselves may have had some kind of over-realized eschatology going on, just like the people in Thessalonica. After all, their tests are often about food. They want the leeks and melons of Egypt; they demand manna; they demand quail; etc. “God, if you really have come, then give us food in this desert.” And since God had come, why would they have any need to go outside and “work” to collect it. This is a major theme of Ps 78:18-31 (see also Ex 16). If so, then the overlap between the wicked generation of Psalm 78 and the confusion about the Coming of Christ is even stronger.

group among those in Thessalonica whom Paul calls disorderly are passing on false teaching in one form or another. This is one reason Paul commands the same group “to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your own hands ... (1 Thess 4:11–12).”²⁸

He says the same thing here in **vs. 12** where our passage concludes, “**Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.**” Stop being nosey about the latest wind of doctrine blowing through town. Mind your own business, put your hand to the plow, and work!

Paul has to say this repeatedly and forcefully because there is a vicious circle here. The circle is that **the teaching originated with busybodies who taught false doctrine, failed to work, convinced others** through this false doctrine not to work, and they in turn were **becoming busybodies** passing this doctrine on to others, and if not stopped, the vicious circle destroys the church.

²⁸ Beale, 252.

Applications

I want to conclude with some applications. First, [returning to Stalin and Lenin](#), we've seen that they take the whole proverb as applying to the rich who, in their mind, never worked a day in their life. Certainly, there were some, especially in the aristocracy, who didn't. They were born into money and never needed to do a thing. They did get wealthier off the backs of others. It's foolish to deny this. I've seen enough Victorian BBC movies to know how that works.

But something I haven't spoken about is the deep hypocrisy in this. I find this fascinating in light of our whole discussion. One Critical Theorist has said he thinks that [“The Thessalonian community was a tenement church composed entirely of marginalized people who were particularly vulnerable to economic crises in the late first century Roman Empire; \[and were in a stage of\] what Marx and Lenin would later call first-phase communism.”](#)²⁹ Nonsense. As we've seen, our passage is not about the rich *or the poor for that matter*. [It is about false teachers who are going around](#)

²⁹ [Joseph Bartlett](#), “Bourgeois Right and the Limits of First Phase Communism in the Rhetoric of 2 Thessalonians 3: 6–15.” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 8:2 (2012): Abstract [36–56].

telling people that Paradise has come and therefore, there's no need to work.

The hypocrisy is that Stalin went around as a modern day busybody, preaching this passage in light of his own false teaching about a false paradise and a very man-made apocalypse he and others brought upon the Russian people.³⁰ He then, ironically, twisted and perverted the meaning of the verse in order to put not only the aristocracy and bourgeoisie, but also the proletariat (the working man,

³⁰ **Going Deeper.** In the course of this study, I learned some very interesting things about Joseph Stalin and religion. First, he was “*the only world communist leader who had studied theology extensively,*” studying for five years (1894-1899) at the Tiflis Spiritual Seminary in the Russian Orthodox Church. (Boer, xii). “*He knew the history of the church back to front; he could sing [the liturgies]; he read Greek and Latin; and he knew intimately how the church itself worked ... Above all, he knew the Bible ... It is not for nothing that Stalin later was known for having memorized long stretches of text and quoting from the Bible at will*” (Boer xiii). During his reign of terror, he would do things like employ the Reformation and Martin Luther saying, “*Undoubtedly, our path is not of the easiest; but, just as undoubtedly, we are not to be frightened by difficulties. Paraphrasing the well-known words of Luther, Russia might say: Here I stand on the border line between the old, capitalist world and the new, socialist world. Here, on this border line, I unite the efforts of the proletarians of the West and of the peasants of the East in order to shatter the old world. May the god of history be my aid!*” (Boer, 1). Then there is his complete reimagining of the Holy Scripture itself, seeing not Christ but Communism as its main thread. In what I can only describe as a fascinatingly warped, twisted, and deeply disturbing patch-work (Boer calls it a pastiche, and he seems quite happy with it!) assimilation of what he calls “the Stalin Bible,” Boer strings together page after page of biblical allusions that form to create Stalin’s own personal manifesto from Genesis - Revelation. Here’s a sample that culminates in our passage”
In the past, it may have been the case that Christianity was regarded as an “anchor” or “rock of salvation,” but we are reaching the point where “socialism may serve (and is already beginning to serve!) as the banner of liberation for the millions who inhabit the vast colonial states of imperialism.” To achieve such moments of “sacramental significance,” we need to go through the “baptism” of tribulation while avoiding any “foolish rapture” as we await the “advent” of socialism. As we do so, we must live by the commandment of 2 Thess 3:10: “He who does not work, neither shall he eat”—those not working being, of course, the old aristocracy and bourgeoisie ... We seek to go beyond Paul, for we wish to unite “progressive forces” of all countries, “regardless of Party or religious faith, into a single camp of national liberation. (Boer, 3-12).

whom he killed mercilessly by the millions too) to hard forced labor, all while he accumulated massive wealth, never worked again with his hands (which in his own thought is supposedly the only “true” form of work), and ended up becoming the new aristocracy and bourgeoisie that he forced to learn to “work” using this Bible verse as leverage. It’s disgusting, but sadly, it is the norm when it comes to pretty much all communists.

The entire sad story, unfortunately, is probably doomed to be repeated by people who misapply the Scriptures and are busybodies like Stalin, especially in their acquiescence to the same degenerate philosophy. It wasn’t this way in [the early church’s interpretation of this](#). They didn’t take it as basically economic, but rather as referring, I think rightly, first and foremost [to preachers](#), which is what Paul first and foremost does, and only later applies it to those who listen to them.

We find it as early as perhaps 50 A.D. in [the Didache](#), which applies it to travelling preachers who come into town and mooch off unsuspecting Christians, exactly what Paul said he would never do. [The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles](#) applies it to young ministers who are prone to sloth and laziness and being busybodies. [Augustine](#) applies to “[some](#)

monks who justify not only laziness but even arrogance.” Cyril applies to men “pretending only to devote themselves to prayer and doing no work, making piety a pretext for cowardice...”³¹

Here, I do want to make an application that I think is probably more similar to the (true) insights of Marx and Lenin and Stalin than to others who apply it differently. Their take that the rich often do not work, can sometimes have an all too real parallel in the churches of Christ. That’s the point the Fathers are making. In Stalin’s way of looking at work for a moment, think about Health and Wealth Prosperity preachers who really do nothing but steal the money from the hand of the poor through conmanship, smooth-talk, and **promises of glory**. They are the classic definition of a busybody. These men are not working (though they are very busy). They are not visiting the sick, giving The Supper to the infirmed, sitting in hospitals, meeting with individuals in need, spending time exegeting the Scripture, doing all of the things that made someone like **Richard Baxter** become consumed with our passage and use it to train new pastors to keep themselves working. These hucksters are the

³¹ **Peter Gorday**, *Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture NT 9. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 122-25.

definition, in some ways, of what Paul is talking about: Preachers with, as the saying goes, “idle hands that become the devil’s workshop.”

Closer to home, I had a discussion this week with a friend of mine who is doing his Ph.D. on social justice and postmodernism and critical theory—which are really just modern incarnations of the old Marxism of Lenin and Stalin. We were talking about what can only be called the breathtaking speed of the influx of this stuff into the Evangelical and “New Calvinist” circles in the last couple of years. He wondered, what could be causing this?

Having this passage on my mind, I wondered if maybe this model of turning the church into a corporation with pastors who become celebrities and do pretty much nothing but go on speaking tours while everyone else “takes care of business back home,” might not have something to do with it. They have too much time on their hands. They aren’t working as they are supposed to be. They become busybodies, and in this case, end up latching on to the very same Marxist principles dressed up in the Emperor’s new clothes that we’ve seen discussing all morning. Does this say anything about how so many are “doing church” and about how

they are interpreting Scripture and dealing with “the traditions?” I mean, when you have preachers saying that the OT is the last thing in the world that matters, “Houston, we have a problem.”

There’s obviously a lot more to be said by way of application regarding work, and since we are not finished with the entire context or the letter, we will pick it up there again next week. Until then, I want you to think about how important it is to try to figure out **what the Scripture actually means** rather than what we or anyone else, good motive or bad, good economics or bad, might want it to mean. When we do, time and again what we see is that this actual meaning has things to teach us today, not only in application of the text, but in the importance of paying attention to the whole council of God in the context of whatever we are thinking about.

Indeed, what does it say when someone comes to the conclusion founded upon a misunderstanding or bad interpretation of the Second Coming that the commands set in place by God concerning work in this world no longer need apply. How many other mischievous teachings, often with terrible, even bloody consequences are there that we could put an end to if we only cared about believing God’s Word,

doing what it says, and encouraging others “in the Lord Jesus Christ” (2Th 2:12) to do the same. That’s the ultimate application given by Paul from our passage today.

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