
The Welfare State Vs. the Apostle Paul

The world of the twenty-first is vastly different from the world that Jesus and the Apostles experienced during their earthly ministry in the first century. These changes and innovations are seen in the increased efficiency of industry and technology. They have improved healthcare and made life more convenient for many. Yet, not all the changes have been positive. Just as much of the world has moved away from the traditional agriculture based economy, personal attitudes have also moved away from the traditional Biblical teachings. Indeed, much of contemporary culture seems not to support personal responsibility despite the Biblical teachings on the value of work, the danger of idleness, and the virtue of not unnecessarily being a burden to others.

First, the European experiment with socialism, the American history of socialistic practices, and the changing trends in opinion about socialism reflect the worldview of the modern culture. Much of the world has embraced the socialist idea from a ethical motivation. John Bowman argues, "Of all the reasons for socialism, the moral obligation to help those in need is the most compelling" (Bowman). As a result of this, he asserts, "Socialists tend to focus on such things as the disparity of wealth, the need to eliminate poverty, misery, oppression and economic inequality" (Bowman). It is with a similar worldview that John Misachi describes the modern Welfare State as including France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Sweden, and Finland. Misachi, a freelancejournalist specializing in finance and economics, notes, "The Welfare state is based on the principle of equal opportunity, equitable distribution of resources, and public participation for all. It involves the utilization of funds from the government or state to the service provided including education, healthcare, and pension plan" (Misachi). The shift away from personal responsibility is seen in the source of these utilized resources. "The funds are derived from taxation of large income tax to reduce the income disparities in the country" (Misachi). The result of this redistribution of wealth is the elevation of individuals above the poverty classification. "The official poverty rate in each of these nations is calculated after taxes and transfers. This means that with larger pensions, fewer elderly residents fall under the poverty threshold; with more help from a country's generous welfare program, financial constraints are less likely to push individuals into poverty. As a consequence, the countries with the largest social nets tend to have relatively low poverty rates" (Frohlich, Sauter and Comen).

The trend toward the Welfare State worldview is not limited to European nations. In the United States, this outlook and its corresponding willingness for dependence on governmental financial assistance is present as well. Jordan Weissmann, senior editor with the Atlantic, investigated the responses of the fifteen million people that lived under the poverty line but did not work in 2012. He reports that of these fifteen million, just under five million self-identified as ill or disabled and about 1.3 million additional people were retired. The remaining 9.6 million people

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(about 60%) chose not to work for other reasons, such as home, family, school, or the inability to find a job (Weissmann). This willingness to purposefully avoid work demonstrates the changing opinion on socialism and the Welfare State in the United States. In August 2018, Gallup released a poll which demonstrated a clear shift in the generational views of socialism. Among those asked if they had a positive view of socialism: 28% of those over the age sixty-five agreed; 30% of those between the ages of 50 and 64 agreed; 41% of those between the ages of 30 and 49 agreed; and 51% of those between the ages of 18 and 29 agreed (Newport).

Second, contrary to the modern worldview that promotes reliance of government, the Apostle Paul taught that able individuals should work to meet their needs. In the third chapter of the Second Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul deals with a common problem of the human condition.

Paul writes: 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 (Holy Bible: ESV). Some of the people of Thessalonica misapplied his message on the return of Jesus Christ. As a result, Holmes Rolston explains, "The natural tendency of all men to get out of work if they can was accentuated in Thessalonica by a distortion of Paul's emphasis on the return of Christ in the near future" (Rolston 50). Rather than work, they waited for Christ's return and received their livelihood from others. Henry H. Halley describes these people as "lazy people who, taking advantage of the charitable disposition of the church and, making their expectation of the immediate appearance of the Lord an excuse for abandoning their ordinary occupations, were claiming the right to be supported by the brethren who had means (Halley 565)." Rolston further explains Paul's response to this socialistic attitude, "The members of the Thessalonian church who were able to work were not to be permitted to live off the common funds of the church, unless they by their own labor were contributing to the resources of the Christian community" (Rolston 50). In fact, Rolston stresses the urgency of this view, declaring, "Such a principle is absolutely essential if genuine community life is to be maintained (Rolston 50)."

This view, much like the contemporary view, had some basis in the culture of the day. William Barclay notes, "The Jews believed in the dignity of honest toil; and they were sure that a scholar lost something when he became so academic and so withdrawn from life that he forgot how to work with his hands. It is the refusal to work that is important" (Barclay). Benjamin Chapman echoes, "It should be noted that Paul does not say that if they could not work they should not

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"be allowed" to eat, but rather that if anyone did not want to continue working he should decide to stop eating also" (Chapman 599). And David Hubbard notes, "this is willful inactivity" (Hubbard 1366). So, Paul's teaching was not an instruction not to assist the needy. In fact, Barclay asserts, "This has nothing to do with the unfortunate man who, through no fault of his own, can find no work to do" (Barclay 218).

The Bible teaches that individuals should work as they are able and therefore avoid being an unnecessary burden to others in contrast to the modern cultural trend of avoiding personal responsibility in order to gain governmental support or assistance. This shift in perspective is among the many changes that can be seen when comparing the two time periods. Indeed, the world and culture that exist today is very different from the world and culture during the days of Jesus and Paul.

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