

CHARITY IN THE CHURCH: AN ANALYSIS OF 2 THESSALONIANS 3:6–15

by
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Introduction

Opinions about charity for the poor are not in short supply. Debates arise around the role of government vs. the church, the level of importance given to relief ministries in relationship to evangelism, and the nature and function of those relief ministries—among other issues. Unfortunately, the debate is often devoid of clear Scriptural argumentation. Either the Bible is ignored altogether, having been replaced by demographics and statistics, or it is alluded to without a careful consideration of the context or intent of the passage. Those who desire for their ministries to be controlled by the Scripture are left to wonder whether or not the Bible provides any guidance for ministry to the poor.

A passage that is easily overlooked in these discussions is 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15, in which Paul provides instruction regarding those who were being supported by the church but refused to work. Since it directly addresses providing food to the poor, it is surprising that it does not appear more often when determining a strategy for charity. One reason for its absence in discussions is a misunderstanding of the problem it addresses. Some have assumed a faulty eschatology has led to the refusal to work, which would provide little parallel to contemporary situations. However, as will be demonstrated, the cause more likely arises from sociological rather than eschatological issues, allowing for a closer parallel to today.

Another possible cause for the neglect of this text in considering the church's work with the poor is the role the passage plays in other theological discussions. This passage is most commonly used among historically fundamentalist ministries in discussions of church discipline and

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separation, particularly “secondary” separation.² Though this article will briefly address Paul’s instruction for church discipline in the passage, an extensive evaluation and comparison of the instruction here with the instruction in other church discipline passages will not be attempted.

Another theological issue that could overshadow the instruction regarding charity in the church is Paul’s decision to give up his right for support and instead provide for his needs by working. Second Thessalonians 3:7–10 could be evaluated in light of other passages regarding Paul’s example and the right of gospel ministers to receive support to determine whether or not Paul’s choice in Thessalonica should be followed by today’s missionaries and pastors. However, that question cannot be fully addressed in the current study.³

Instead, the purpose of this article is to provide a proper understanding of the problem and instruction in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 in order to discover guidance for contemporary questions regarding charitable action within a congregation. To accomplish this purpose, the passage will be analyzed in its own context in order to determine the problem and Paul’s instruction for a solution. After this analysis, different theories for the identification of the problem will be discussed, and, finally, suggestions toward a contemporary application will be presented.

Analysis of the Passage

In order to ascertain the original intent of 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15, the historical context will be discussed, followed by the literary context of the passage, and then an exegetical study of the text.

Historical Context

The Apostle Paul founded the church in Thessalonica on his second missionary journey, detailed in Acts 17:1–9. Upon arriving in the city, Paul followed his normal custom of preaching in the Jewish synagogue. This original message provided the beginning of the church with the conversion of a small number of Jews and a larger number of God-fearing Greeks and several of the wives of prominent men in the city (Acts 17:4). The Jews in the city, out of jealousy over the loss of their

²E.g., R. Bruce Compton, “Church Discipline: The Correction of a Believer or the Excommunication of an Unbeliever? Harmonizing Matthew 18:5–17, 1 Corinthians 5:1–13, and 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 20 (2015): 21–43; Charles J. Bumgardner, “‘As a Brother’: 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 and Ecclesiastical Separation,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 14 (2009): 55–97.

³ For some examples of these discussions, see Ronald F. Hock, *The Social Context of Paul’s Ministry: Tentmaking and Apostleship* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); Patrick Lai, *Tentmaking: The Life and Work of Business as Missions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 76–83; Luther M. Dorr, *The Bivocational Pastor* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988), 7–17; Kevin Subra, “The Bivocational Pastor” in *The Pastor: A Guide for God’s Faithful Servant*, ed. Jim Vogel (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 2012), 250–53.

members, created a riot and started looking for Paul (Acts 17:5). When they were unable to find him, they instead took Jason, Paul's host in Thessalonica, and some other Christians to the leaders of the city and accused Paul and his companions of usurping the authority of Caesar (Acts 17:6–7). The city officials were upset by this accusation and forced Jason and the other believers to provide a security to guarantee the good behavior of Paul's company (Acts 17:8–9). In order to ensure no further incidents, Paul and his companions were forced to depart from Thessalonica to Berea (Acts 17:10).⁴

Because of his concern for this young congregation, Paul sent Timothy to provide encouragement and to ground the Thessalonians in their faith (1 Thess 3:1–2) while he journeyed from Athens to Corinth (Acts 18:1, 5). Timothy's report included the good news that the Thessalonians had experienced a genuine conversion (1 Thess 1:9–10; 3:6–10) as well as some troubling news regarding sinful behavior (4:3–12; 5:14), concerns about Paul's integrity (2:1–20), and doctrinal questions (4:13–5:11). In order to express his joy for the Thessalonians and to deal with these issues, Paul wrote 1 Thessalonians and sent it to the church.

Most likely while he was still at Corinth, Paul received further news about the church in Thessalonica. Though many of his concerns from the first letter had been addressed, there was now some confusion about the coming of the Day of the Lord (2:1–17) and a continued problem of the disorderly within the congregation (3:6–15). The news of these issues sparked the writing of 2 Thessalonians. If 2 Thessalonians was written while Paul was in Corinth, a probable date, based upon Paul's interaction with the proconsul Gallio in Corinth, would be A.D. 50, making 2 Thessalonians one of the earliest of Paul's letters.⁵

Literary Context

The second epistle to the Thessalonians was written in large part to address a faulty understanding of the Day of the Lord. After the greeting (1:1–2) and an opening prayer of thanksgiving designed to encourage the believers to persevere in the midst of persecution (1:3–12), Paul begins to correct their perception of the Day of the Lord (2:1–17) concluding the section with a prayer for his readers (2:13–17). In the immediate context of the passage under consideration, Paul has just given

⁴The length of Paul's stay in Thessalonica was likely longer than the three weeks mentioned by Luke in Acts 17:2, since he was able to receive two gifts from the Philipian believers during his stay (Phil 4:16) and was able to see the conversion of a number of Gentiles who were pagans rather than God-fearers (1 Thess 1:9). Though the total time of Paul's stay is difficult to determine with certainty, it was probably no more than a few months.

⁵This article proceeds on the assumption that 2 Thessalonians was written by the Apostle Paul. For a defense of Pauline authorship, see Gene L. Green, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 59–64; and Jeffrey A. D. Weima, *1–2 Thessalonians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 40–54.

an exhortation to the Thessalonians to pray for his missionary team (3:1–5). Paul then transitions to two matters of concern: the conduct of certain disorderly believers and the need for church discipline of these disorderly brothers (3:6–15). Immediately following Paul's exhortation concerning the Thessalonians' conduct, Paul concludes the book with a prayer, greeting, and benediction (3:16–17).

The postpositive δὲ and Paul's use of ἀδελφοί in 3:6 mark the transition between the exhortation regarding prayer and his exhortation regarding the disorderly brothers in 3:6–15.⁶ The δὲ in 3:16 reveals another transition from Paul's exhortation to his closing prayer. In between 3:5 and 3:16 he gives the believers a command for how they are to respond to those in the church who are disorderly.

Exegetical Study

Now that the context has been established, a closer analysis of the passage itself can be performed. Verse six provides the opening command for the section. In verses seven to nine, Paul provides the first reason for his command—his example of laboring to provide for his own needs, even though he had the right to be supported by the congregation at Thessalonica. He provides the second reason for the command in verse 10, emphasizing his previous instruction that those who refuse to work should not eat. Paul explains his reason for addressing this issue in verse eleven. He had received information that there were believers in the church at Thessalonica who failed to work but rather meddled in the affairs of others. In verse twelve, Paul gives his command for these disorderly brothers to “work quietly and to earn their own living.”⁷ He then provides exhortations for the obedient Thessalonians to continue to do well in verse thirteen. He concludes by reiterating and expanding on how to discipline the disorderly brothers in verses fourteen and fifteen.

The Introduction of the Command: Verse 6

Παραγγέλλομεν δὲ ὑμῖν, ἀδελφοί, ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου [ἡμῶν] Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ στέλλεσθαι ὑμᾶς ἀπὸ παντὸς ἀδελφοῦ ἀτάκτως περιπατοῦντος καὶ μὴ κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν ἣν παρελάβοσαν παρ' ἡμῶν.

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.

Paul had prepared his readers for this command when he mentioned his confidence in the Thessalonians' obedience to his commands

⁶Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (London: Billing & Sons, 1972), 332.

⁷All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *English Standard Version* (2016).

in verse four, but he makes the command explicit here in verse six.⁸ Though Paul addresses this exhortation to those he calls “brothers,” he still utilizes strong language to emphasize that he is issuing a command and not merely giving a suggestion.⁹ Παραγγέλλομεν was also used in reference to military orders.¹⁰

Some have raised the possibility that Paul is not addressing all of the Thessalonians in this section but is instead, by his use of ἀδελφοί, addressing a particular sub-group of the Thessalonians—the Christian workers in the church.¹¹ These Christian workers would be the ones primarily responsible for handling the discipline of the church and would also be the ones who could follow Paul’s example of working to support himself rather than living off of the support of others (3:7–9).¹² However, the term itself is often used to refer to all believers, and there is no indication here that Paul is using it in a more limited sense. Thus, Paul’s instructions appear to be intended for the entire community and, ultimately, would be ineffective unless the whole congregation followed Paul’s command.¹³

The addition of ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου [ἡμῶν] Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ accentuates the high level of concern Paul had in regard to this matter. Paul elsewhere utilizes this phrase in conjunction with strong commands regarding the conduct of the community (cf. 1 Cor 5:4).¹⁴ The phrase also invokes the authority of the one named, reiterating that those who disobey this command are not simply ignoring what Paul thinks but are ignoring Jesus Christ Himself. Paul may have emphasized that disobeying him was the same as disobeying the Lord because he recognized that the Thessalonians might be hesitant to enact discipline against the disorderly brothers, perhaps even considering the offense to be insignificant.¹⁵ Clearly Paul does not take this matter of

⁸Abraham J. Malherbe, *The Letters to the Thessalonians*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 449.

⁹Ibid., 448.

¹⁰Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*, rev. ed., New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 252.

¹¹E. Ellis, “Paul and His Co-Workers,” *New Testament Studies* 17 (1970–71): 450–51.

¹²F. F. Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 204.

¹³D. Michael Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 272.

¹⁴Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 281.

¹⁵Colin R. Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica: Situating 1 and 2 Thessalonians*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 167.

disobedience lightly but instead utilizes one of the strongest forms of appeal available to him.

The infinitive *στέλλεσθαι* follows a verb of communication and is an infinitive of indirect discourse. It provides the specific command that Paul issues in this verse. The command is directed toward the obedient community, not the disorderly brothers. Its only other use in the New Testament is in 1 Corinthians 8:20, but its usage there is not parallel to this passage. The word appears to convey the idea of withdrawal, avoidance, or keeping away. In light of 3:14 and 15, Paul is not instructing the Thessalonians to avoid all interaction, for the obedient Thessalonians were to admonish these disorderly brothers. Rather, Paul calls on the Thessalonians to withhold intimate fellowship. His concern is that the others in the community would not be contaminated by the disobedient brother's actions and that this erring brother would recognize that the level of fellowship among believers is linked to the level of harmony they enjoy.¹⁶ Paul wanted to emphasize that the action of the disorderly created tension between them and God and between them and the rest of the church.¹⁷

Paul identifies those from whom the Thessalonians are to withdraw fellowship with two descriptions at the end of the verse. His use of *παντὸς ἀδελφοῦ* emphasizes that he is referring to fellow believers and also makes his statement inclusive. Paul describes the actions of these brothers with the phrase *ἀτάκτως περιπατοῦντος*. The exact meaning of *ἀτάκτως* can be difficult to ascertain. It primarily carries the sense of disorderliness or a failure to fulfill one's duties. Had Paul simply wanted to refer to idle people, he could have used the word *ἀργέω*.¹⁸ The following context reveals that the disorderly are those who do not follow the apostle's tradition, specifically by refusing to meet their obligation to work.¹⁹ The use of *περιπατοῦντος* in the present tense indicates that this is not simply an occasional fault but an ongoing practice.²⁰

Paul continues to describe the conduct of these disorderly brothers by the phrase *μὴ κατὰ τὴν παράδοσιν ἣν παρελάβοσαν παρ' ἡμῶν*.²¹

¹⁶Morris, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 253.

¹⁷The nature of Paul's instruction regarding church discipline will be handled more fully below under the discussion of verses fourteen and fifteen.

¹⁸Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*, 167–68.

¹⁹M. J. J. Menken, "Paradise Regained or Still Lost? Eschatology and Disorderly Behaviour in 2 Thessalonians," *New Testament Studies* 38 (1992): 276.

²⁰Morris, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 253.

²¹There is a textual variant related to *παρελάβοσαν*. The external support falls in favor of the second person plural *παρελάβετε*, while the third person singular *παρέλαβον* also occurs in some manuscripts. However, the internal evidence seems to support the third person plural *παρελάβοσαν* since it is the more difficult reading and, thus, better explains the other readings. Ultimately, the meaning is not greatly affected by the variants.

The κατὰ introduces the standard of conduct that these brothers were failing to obey, the apostolic tradition. This tradition was given orally (2 Thess 3:10) and in writing (1 Thess 4:9–12; 2 Thess 2:15) and covered matters of faith and conduct. Here, the primary emphasis seems to be on conduct. The singular of παράδοσιν appears to be a collective singular, with more than one teaching in view. Thus, in verse six, Paul issues a strong command for the entire community of believers to withdraw fellowship from the professing believers among them who were being disorderly by not following the apostolic tradition regarding work.

The First Reason for the Command: Verses 7–9

⁷αὐτοὶ γὰρ οἶδατε πῶς δεῖ μιμεῖσθαι ἡμᾶς, ὅτι οὐκ ἡτακτήσαμεν ἐν ὑμῖν ⁸οὐδὲ δωρεὰν ἄρτον ἐφάγομεν παρά τινος, ἀλλ' ἐν κόπῳ καὶ μόχθῳ νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας ἐργαζόμενοι πρὸς τὸ μὴ ἐπιβαρῆσαι τίνα ὑμῶν. ⁹οὐχ ὅτι οὐκ ἔχομεν ἐξουσίαν, ἀλλ' ἵνα ἑαυτοὺς τύπον δῶμεν ὑμῖν εἰς τὸ μιμεῖσθαι ἡμᾶς.

⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, ⁸nor 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. ⁹It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.

The γὰρ at the beginning of verse seven introduces the first reason for the command to withdraw from the disorderly. Paul appeals to the readers' first-hand knowledge of what he is about to write by utilizing the emphatic pronoun αὐτοὶ and οἶδατε. They had personally observed him and his missionary party and knew they had provided an example which the Thessalonian believers were obligated to follow. Paul's use of ἡτακτήσαμεν to describe their work is a clear contrast to the disorderly brothers mentioned in verse 6.

Paul clarifies how his company was not disorderly by reminding the Thessalonians that his party had labored in order to provide for their needs. The phrase ἄρτον ἐφάγομεν is an idiom that refers to eating food in general and does not necessarily include every aspect of a person's life.²² However, in this context, it most likely refers to the supply of needs in general. The LXX uses the same words in Genesis 3:19 to indicate man's need to work hard in order to provide for his necessities.²³ Paul's language here is almost identical to his statement in 1 Thessalonians 2:9. While one of his main reasons for mentioning his labor there is as a demonstration of his love for the Thessalonians, here his purpose is to point to his action as an example the believers were to follow.

²²Robert L. Thomas, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 334.

²³Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, 278.

Paul emphasizes that he did not work out of necessity but rather gave up his right for support in order to be an example to the Thessalonians. The grammatical construction of the beginning of verse nine is elliptical, with the ESV supplying “it was” in order to give the proper sense in English. Paul first clarifies his purpose in working to support himself in Thessalonica with a denial. The phrase οὐχ ὅτι οὐκ ἔχομεν ἐξουσίαν reflects Jesus’s teaching in Matthew 10:9–10 and Luke 10:7–8 as well as Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 9:14.²⁴ As a minister of the gospel, Paul had a right to be supported by the Thessalonians for his spiritual service to them. However, Paul gave up that right in order to provide the Thessalonians with an example of hard work.²⁵ Paul utilizes a strong adversative, ἀλλ’ ἵνα, in order to contrast his right with his practice. The implication is clear: if Paul, who had a right to receive support, chose to labor diligently in order to supply for his own needs, then the Thessalonians, who did not have a right to receive support, have even more of a reason to work to supply their own needs.

The Second Reason for the Command: Verse 10

καὶ γὰρ ὅτε ἦμεν πρὸς ὑμᾶς, τοῦτο παρηγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν, ὅτι εἴ τις οὐ θέλει ἐργάζεσθαι μηδὲ ἐσθιέτω.

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

Paul introduces the second reason for his command to withdraw from the disorderly brothers with another γὰρ in verse ten.²⁶ Paul taught the necessity of working not only through his example but also through a specific command. The ὅτε introduces a temporal clause showing that the command was given during Paul’s time in Thessalonica. The verb παρηγγέλλομεν is imperfect, indicating that the command was given on more than one occasion. Thus, the disorderly were not simply ignorant but were willfully disobedient.²⁷

The command itself, εἴ τις οὐ θέλει ἐργάζεσθαι μηδὲ ἐσθιέτω, is similar to other idioms of the day. However, its emphasis on a person’s unwillingness to work and not simply whether or not a person does work seems to be unique to Paul.²⁸ It is likely that Paul formed this command from the teaching in Genesis 2:15–16 and 3:17–19 that emphasizes the necessity of working in order to provide for one’s needs.²⁹

²⁴Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 206.

²⁵Since the Thessalonians did not have a right to receive support, Paul’s example here is not that of giving up his right to support but rather that of working to provide for his own needs.

²⁶Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*, 169.

²⁷Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 349.

²⁸Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*, 169.

²⁹Menken, “Paradise Regained or Still Lost?” 276–77.

Although refusing food to the willfully unemployed may seem like an overly harsh punishment, the underlying purpose is less punitive and more motivational in nature. It was intended to be an incentive for believers to work.³⁰ Paul's second reason for commanding the believers to separate from the disorderly is that he had specifically commanded that those who refused to work should not have their needs supplied by others.

Third Reason for the Command: Verse 11

ἀκούομεν γάρ τινες περιπατοῦντας ἐν ὑμῖν ἀτάκτως μηδὲν ἐργαζομένους ἀλλὰ περιεργαζομένους·

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

The third reason for the command is introduced by another γάρ at the beginning of verse eleven.³¹ Paul had received a report, perhaps from the bearer of 1 Thessalonians, that there were members of the Thessalonian congregation who were disorderly, indicated by his phrase ἐν ὑμῖν. Therefore, Paul is not providing general instruction but is addressing a specific problem within the church. Paul further identifies those who περιπατοῦντας ἀτάκτως as μηδὲν ἐργαζομένους ἀλλὰ περιεργαζομένους. The ESV tries to capture the play on words with its translation “not busy at work, but busybodies.” These disorderly brothers were not merely refusing to work but were also wrongfully interfering in the lives of others.³² The nature of this interference will be discussed more fully below in relationship to the identification of the problem. For now, it may be sufficient to note that these disorderly Christians were disrupting the community, whether by placing an undue burden on the church for support, utilizing their free time to spread gossip, meddling in the affairs of others, or arguing for their own doctrinal views or the political ideas of their patrons. Paul calls for the church to separate from these disorderly believers because they were not willing to work but instead were creating a disturbance within the church.

³⁰Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, 281.

³¹Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 450.

³²Gary Shogren shows that the word περιεργαζομένους does not necessarily speak of meddling in the lives of others but could speak of meddling outside of a person's realm of concern, specifically meddling in the divine realm. He suggests if that understanding is meant here then Paul could refer to believers who were wrongly trying to determine the Day of the Lord. As will be discussed below, the link between this section and eschatological concerns is not strong, and since the word was often used to describe meddling in the lives of others, there seems to be no compelling reason to take it a different way here (Gary S. Shogren, “Were the Thessalonians ‘Meddling in Divine Matters’? A Rereading of 2 Thessalonians 3:11,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 63 [2020]: 703–20).

Instruction for the Disorderly: Verse 12

τοῖς δὲ τοιοῦτοις παραγγέλλομεν καὶ παρακαλοῦμεν ἐν κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ, ἵνα μετὰ ἡσυχίας ἐργαζόμενοι τὸν ἑαυτῶν ἄρτον ἐσθίωσιν.

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

Paul moves from the explanation for his command to his exhortation for the disorderly believers. The δὲ marks this transition and introduces his first instruction for those who were disorderly. The compounding of verbs with both παραγγέλλομεν and παρακαλοῦμεν is likely used to emphasize the importance of what Paul is saying. Rather than issuing this instruction ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου [ἡμῶν] Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ as he did in verse 6, Paul states his command ἐν κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ. Thus, Paul points to the union they share in Jesus Christ instead of simply pushing his own apostolic authority on them.³³ He reminds these disorderly individuals that they stand together as brothers in the Lord.³⁴

The ἵνα introduces the command itself, which is similar to Paul's exhortation in 1 Thessalonians 4:11, "to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands." Paul answers both their failure to work and their meddling in the affairs of others with the instruction μετὰ ἡσυχίας ἐργαζόμενοι. The phrase τὸν ἑαυτῶν ἄρτον ἐσθίωσιν, as in verse eight, is an idiom that refers to supplying one's own needs, with the reflexive pronoun emphasizing that they should not be receiving these supplies as a gift. Based on their union with Christ, Paul instructs the disorderly to work to supply their own needs.

Instruction for the Rest of the Church: Verse 13

Ὑμεῖς δέ, ἀδελφοί, μὴ ἐγκακήσητε καλοποιοῦντες.

As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good.

With the adversative δέ, emphatic pronoun Ὑμεῖς, and the vocative ἀδελφοί, Paul moves from his instruction for the disorderly to the rest of the church. Specifically, the orderly believers were to continue καλοποιοῦντες, a word that appears nowhere else in the New Testament.³⁵ What Paul meant by this participle is debated among commentators. The varying proposals fall into two broad categories: (1) doing what is right or correct and (2) doing acts of charity.³⁶ Under the first category, Paul's instruction may be a general call to act in an exemplary

³³Thomas, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 335.

³⁴David J. Williams, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 147.

³⁵Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 353.

³⁶Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*, 171.

manner as a rebuke to those who are disorderly.³⁷ However, in the context one would expect to find more specific instruction rather than a general exhortation to do what is good.³⁸ Paul could be referring specifically to treating the disorderly people well,³⁹ but the surrounding context, especially the commands in verses 14–15, do not make as much sense with this interpretation. Why would Paul instruct the church to treat the believers well right before calling on them to enact church discipline? In the second category, Paul could be referring to being charitable to all people in need, including the disorderly,⁴⁰ but it would be strange for Paul to urge continued charity toward the disorderly when he has just repeated his command that those who refuse to work should not eat. A more likely interpretation would be that Paul is encouraging the believers to continue to help those in need who are deserving rather than being discouraged because of the exploitation of the disorderly.⁴¹ It may even be that Paul did not want the Thessalonians to misunderstand his teaching in verses six to twelve and stop providing help to those in the church who had genuine need.⁴² The only problem with this interpretation is that Paul could have used *αγαθοποιούντες* if he wanted to refer to works of benefaction.⁴³ Perhaps the best explanation of the participle is that it refers to doing what is correct (cf. Gal 6:9; 3 John 6), which “in this context the correct or noble thing would be to help those who had true need by means of benefaction.”⁴⁴

Command Reiterated and Expounded: Verses 14–15

¹⁴εἰ δέ τις οὐχ ὑπακούει τῷ λόγῳ ἡμῶν διὰ τῆς ἐπιστολῆς, τοῦτον σημειοῦσθε μὴ συναναμίγνυσθαι αὐτῷ, ἵνα ἐντραπή· ¹⁵καὶ μὴ ὡς ἐχθρὸν ἡγήσθε, ἀλλὰ νοουετέιτε ὡς ἀδελφόν.

¹⁴If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. ¹⁵Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

The δέ marks the transition from Paul's instruction to the church in relationship to doing good, specifically helping those with genuine

³⁷Thomas, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 336. Thomas includes the idea of giving to those in need under the general idea of doing what is right but does not believe that is the primary emphasis.

³⁸Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*, 171.

³⁹Best, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 342.

⁴⁰I. Howard Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 226.

⁴¹Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*, 171.

⁴²Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 458.

⁴³Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 353.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

need, to his instruction to the church in relationship to the disorderly. The command is σημειοῦσθε, which, in the context, would imply that the congregation marks out these individuals in a public gathering (cf. Rom 16:17, where a similar command is issued).⁴⁵ The purpose infinitive συναναμίγνυσθαι functions as an imperative, which is why the ESV translates it as coordinate with σημειοῦσθε.

The recipients of this public marking and disassociation are those who οὐχ ὑπακούει τῷ λόγῳ ἡμῶν διὰ τῆς ἐπιστολῆς τοῦτον. Some limit those who are disobedient to those who still refuse to work even after receiving this letter, specifically disobeying the instruction given in verse twelve.⁴⁶ Though 3:14–15 are clearly tied to Paul's preceding instruction regarding the disorderly, it does not seem necessary to exclude the rest of the letter, including the exhortations in 2:15 and 3:6.⁴⁷ Paul's "words are general enough to cover disobedience to anything he has said throughout the letter."⁴⁸

The purpose for Paul's commands to mark and withdraw fellowship is introduced by the ἵνα clause. The culture of that time placed a strong emphasis on honor and shame within the community. To be removed from the fellowship of the church would have had a powerful effect upon the disorderly, especially since the believers had already become outcasts within the society at large (cf. 1:4).⁴⁹

Paul clarifies his command in verse fifteen by emphasizing the necessary attitude for the believers as they carry out this discipline. The καὶ is mildly adversative, introducing an additional responsibility in order to avoid a faulty application of the previous instruction.⁵⁰ The disobedient were not to be treated as someone hostile or viewed with anger. The disobedient Thessalonians should be admonished, but they must still be viewed as fellow believers.

The command to admonish these disobedient brothers must be reconciled with the command to withdraw fellowship from them, and several options have been proposed. (1) One suggestion is that the admonition occurred at the time of separation; from that time on, there

⁴⁵Malherbe, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 458.

⁴⁶E.g., Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, 285. Martin bases his argument in part on the assertion that Paul only calls for church discipline in relation to ethical and not doctrinal issues. However, Paul calls for separation from false teachers in Romans 16:17–18, which would imply that church discipline is concerned with doctrine as well.

⁴⁷It is logical to assume that Paul's instruction in verse six would be included in the instruction in verse fourteen. In other words, those who failed to withdraw fellowship from these disorderly brothers would be disobedient to Paul's letter and therefore deserving of discipline as well.

⁴⁸Morris, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 259.

⁴⁹Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 345.

⁵⁰Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar: Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 671–72.

was to be no further interaction until the believer repented.⁵¹ Yet one is left to wonder why Paul would command the church to regard the person as a brother if they are to have no further interaction with him.⁵² (2) Another attempt at reconciliation argues that the use of *καὶ* rather than a strong adversative may indicate that, once the person is shamed, he is then to be treated again as a member.⁵³ However, shame does not necessarily lead to repentance, and it is improbable that Paul would have encouraged the church to welcome back an unrepentant brother. This view also fails to explain why Paul would call on the church to admonish this brother if he is to be treated as a regular member. (3) Another proposal is that the disobedient brothers were not actually to be put out of the church. When Paul called for the expulsion of the sinning brother in 1 Corinthians 5, the offense was so great that it hurt the testimony of the church in the community at large, but in Thessalonica the problem had not become that great. Therefore, the disobedient would be excluded from the love feast and the Lord's Supper but would still attend the worship service⁵⁴ and continue in the status of a brother.⁵⁵ (4) A final alternative is that Paul was calling for the disobedient to be temporarily excommunicated from the life of the church, but the members of the church would admonish them when they would see them, either at the worship service⁵⁶ or in the community.⁵⁷ Either of the last two alternatives appears plausible, and it may be impossible to definitively choose between them. It does seem that Paul's instruction here is less harsh than in 1 Corinthians 5, which may indicate that he is arguing for something less than actual excommunication.⁵⁸ A possible reason for this difference is that the goal of the discipline given here is not as focused on the purity of the community as it is on the repentance of the disobedient.⁵⁹ Since Paul is not as concerned that the disorderly will corrupt the behavior of others, his instruction for separation

⁵¹Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, 286.

⁵²Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*, 167.

⁵³Bruce, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 210.

⁵⁴A slight variation of this view includes the argument that the admonition would not be on an individual basis but from the community in a gathered setting (Best, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 343–44).

⁵⁵Thomas, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 336.

⁵⁶The disobedient likely would have been allowed to attend the worship service, since even unbelievers could come to the service (1 Cor 14:23–25). However, they would simply be observers and would not be allowed to participate.

⁵⁷Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*, 167.

⁵⁸I do not think it is necessary to conclude, as Best does, that the difficulty of reconciling this passage with others on church discipline shows that 2 Thessalonians presents an early and undeveloped form of church discipline. It may certainly be early, but it is not earlier than Jesus's instruction which was later recorded in Matthew 18 (*Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 345).

⁵⁹Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 354–55.

may not be as harsh. However, it is clearly not a minor matter in Paul's mind either, and he is urging the Thessalonians to implement some form of church discipline. Perhaps the best one can do is to agree with I. Howard Marshall that "it may be adequate to say that the members of the church were to avoid making social contacts, but that when contacts arose they were to make use of them for admonition."⁶⁰

Paul commands the Thessalonian believers to withdraw from those who were not following the apostolic tradition by refusing to work. Some within the congregation had ignored Paul's example and verbal instruction to labor in order to supply for their own needs. They were not doing any work at all but were a disruption in the church. Paul again urges them to work quietly and supply their own needs. He encourages the rest of the church to continue to help meet the genuine needs of fellow believers and to discipline those who disobeyed Paul's instruction. The church must publicly identify and withdraw fellowship from the disobedient members while admonishing them as brothers.

Identification of the Problem

An issue that often arises in studying 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 is the reason the disorderly are refusing to work. In order to determine the validity and application of this passage for a contemporary audience it is important to understand the underlying problem in Thessalonica. Explanations for the cause tend to be either eschatological or sociological in nature.⁶¹

Eschatological Explanations

A common explanation is that the Thessalonians' refusal to work stemmed from their faulty eschatology. There are only two main issues addressed in 2 Thessalonians, and it would be logical to assume that the two issues are connected with each other.⁶² These believers incorrectly assumed that the Day of the Lord had already come, or was about to come at any time, which meant work was unnecessary.⁶³ Since Greeks considered labor to be degrading anyway, the coming of Christ provided an excellent opportunity for some of the Thessalonian believers to stop working.⁶⁴ These disorderly brothers were meddling in the lives of others by either seeking support from fellow Christians or trying to convince them to adopt this faulty eschatology and quit working as

⁶⁰Marshall, *1 and 2 Thessalonians*, 288.

⁶¹The Gnostic explanation, which argues in part that the disorderly considered themselves too spiritual to work, is both unlikely and uncommon and, thus, not discussed here. For a brief explanation and rebuttal, see Menken, "Paradise Regained or Still Lost?" 274.

⁶²Ibid., 271.

⁶³Best, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 331, 334–35.

⁶⁴Morris, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 253.

well.⁶⁵ When Paul urges them to work μετὰ ἡσυχίας he is seeking to counter the excitement that had arisen by the supposed nearness of the coming of Christ.⁶⁶

M. J. J. Menken provides a slight twist to the eschatological explanation. Paul's use of ἀτάκτως indicates that these people were violating a specified "order." This idea of "order" has ties to an Old Testament concept, so Paul was basing the passage on an Old Testament concept, most likely Genesis 3:17–19.⁶⁷ The believers in Thessalonica thought that Jesus had come and had either already begun or was about to begin his work in creating a new paradise. This paradise would reverse the curse and remove the need to labor for food.⁶⁸ Paul combats this false idea of the coming of the Day of the Lord by reminding the Thessalonians that certain events must occur before the Day of the Lord (2:3–12) and that he is still following the order of Genesis 3:17–19.⁶⁹

The eschatological explanations for the problem in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 are inadequate in several areas. The biggest weakness is that there is no explicit link, in either 1 or 2 Thessalonians, between the wrong eschatology and the failure to work.⁷⁰ In fact, the problem related to work appears even before the wrong eschatology. Paul had instructed the Thessalonians to work to supply for their needs on multiple occasions while he was with them (3:10), while the false eschatology only arose after he left the city (cf. 2:2).⁷¹ Further, Paul seems to address a potential lack of hope in 1 Thessalonians, not an overly enthusiastic understanding of Christ's return (cf. 1 Thess 1:3; 3:6; 4:13; 5:9–11).⁷² Also, the eschatological problem, introduced in 2:1, appears to have affected a majority of the Thessalonians, while the problem in 3:6–15 is only a minority.⁷³

Menken's proposal is intriguing but ultimately unconvincing. Not only does it share the weaknesses of the eschatological view in general, but it also overlooks key factors within its argumentation. The "order" in the curse of Genesis 3:17–19 is not that people must now work to provide for themselves but rather that this work will now be difficult. God had instituted the necessity of work before the fall in Genesis 2:15–16, which may indicate that work will not be removed in the

⁶⁵Ibid., 257.

⁶⁶Best, *Epistles to the Thessalonians*, 341.

⁶⁷Menken, "Paradise Regained or Still Lost?" 276–77.

⁶⁸Ibid., 287.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*, 158.

⁷¹Ronald Russell, "The Idle in 2 Thess 3:6–12: An Eschatological or a Social Problem?" *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988): 108.

⁷²John W. Taylor, "Labor of Love: The Theology of Work in First and Second Thessalonians," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 59 (Spring 2017): 202.

⁷³Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*, 162.

kingdom but that it will no longer be a burden.⁷⁴ Further, Paul's example would not be an adequate remedy to the problem. He points to his work while he was among them, but the Thessalonians believed that the Day of the Lord had come in between Paul's departure and the writing of 2 Thessalonians. Thus, Paul would need to show that he was currently following the "order" of Genesis 3, not that he had followed it while he was with them.

Sociological Explanations

Since the eschatological proposals fail to provide a reasonable explanation for the Thessalonians' behavior, many commentators have looked towards sociological factors. Robert Jewett suggests that 2 Thessalonians 3 is often misinterpreted because of the assumption that all of the Pauline churches were house churches with a wealthy benefactor or patron supporting the community.⁷⁵ He argues that, along with the house churches, there were also "tenement" churches composed of lower class Christians that would meet in shared or open spaces rather than in a patron's home.⁷⁶ Since these churches lacked a patron, the resources for the love feasts would have come from the community as a whole rather than an individual patron.⁷⁷ The problem in the Thessalonian church was that there were certain individuals who were failing to contribute to the common meals. Paul's command in 3:10, *μηδὲ ἐσθιέτω*, is in the absolute, which shows that it does not refer to a specific meal, and the command must be enforceable, which means the community must have power over the eating of the individuals. Both of these ideas point to a regular common meal among the community.⁷⁸ Paul's repetition of the command shows that he believed it was essential for the life of the community and to ignore it would cause the community to collapse in on itself.⁷⁹ Thus, Paul is commanding that those who do not work or contribute to the meal be denied the privilege of sharing in it.

The main problem with Jewett's argument is that it does not seem to take into consideration the historical account of the church's founding in Acts 17:1–9. Luke indicates the presence of some more well-to-do citizens in Thessalonica, including certain Greek women of high

⁷⁴Even if the Thessalonians believed that the Day of the Lord would remove the need to work, it should not take them long to realize that their thinking was flawed. Clearly, the necessity to work in order to gain food had not been removed since the food the disorderly were eating was the product of the work of their fellow Christians.

⁷⁵Robert Jewett, "Tenement Churches and Communal Meals in the Early Church: The Implications of a Form-Critical Analysis of 2 Thessalonians 3:10," *Biblical Research* 38 (1993): 23.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 32.

⁷⁷*Ibid.*, 33.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, 39.

standing and Jason, who had a house and apparently a measure of wealth.⁸⁰ Aristarchus, mentioned in Acts 19:29 and 20:4, may have also been a wealthy individual who could have supported a church in his home.⁸¹ Furthermore, Paul's language in 3:8 points to individuals being burdened with the support of Paul rather than the community as a whole.⁸²

Ronald Russell traces the problem to the situation of the urban poor in a Hellenistic city.⁸³ The low wages combined with scarce employment had led some of the Christian poor to seek a wealthy benefactor or patron. Since these would appear to be beggars to the outside world, Paul commands them to cease those relationships.⁸⁴ If this were the problem, Paul's instruction is both unfair and unrealistic, since these believers who could not find employment would not be allowed to eat.⁸⁵ The scarcity of jobs does not appear to be the issue, since Paul's rebuke is directed toward those who are unwilling to work, not those who are unable to find a job (3:10).

Bruce W. Winter argues that a famine in A.D. 51 had forced some of the Thessalonian believers back into a client/patron relationship.⁸⁶ S. C. Mott explains that this client/patron relationship was based upon the idea of reciprocity in giving and receiving, in which a benefactor or patron would provide a gift and the beneficiary or client would then be obligated to respond with profuse gratitude, which in turn would place the patron under obligation to provide further gifts.⁸⁷ Paul sought to remove the Christian clients in Thessalonica from this client/patron relationship when he urged them in 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12 to "be dependent on no one" but instead to "work with your hands" in order to "live properly before outsiders."⁸⁸ Because of the famine, which occurred between the writing of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, some of the Thessalonians reverted back to being clients in order to survive. However, after the famine had passed, some individuals who had no desire to work continued the client/patron cycle of giving and receiving by their

⁸⁰Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (London: Yale University Press, 1983), 61–63.

⁸¹Bruce W. Winter, "'If a Man Does Not Work...' A Cultural and Historical Setting for 2 Thessalonians 3:6–16," *Tyndale Bulletin* 40 (1989): 306–7.

⁸²Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*, 172–73.

⁸³Russell, "The Idle in 2 Thess 3:6–12," 112.

⁸⁴*Ibid.*, 112–13.

⁸⁵Winter, "'If a Man Does Not Work,'" 303–4.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 309–12.

⁸⁷S. C. Mott, "The Power of Giving and Receiving: Reciprocity in Hellenistic Benevolence," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C. Tenney*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 61–62.

⁸⁸Winter, "'If a Man Does Not Work,'" 308–9.

profuse thanks, obligating their patrons to continue to support them.⁸⁹

The client/patron relationship was not only helpful for the client but was also beneficial for the patron. He or she would gain prestige for having a large number of clients.⁹⁰ It was also common for the client to “repay” the patron by lobbying for his or her patron’s causes within the political arena. Thus, when Paul states that the disorderly were being busybodies, he does not mean that they were simply interrupting the work of others or causing unnecessary disturbance by giving advice or spreading false teaching. Instead, they were causing a disturbance through their involvement in the public assembly in support of their patrons.⁹¹

The client/patron relationship is a plausible explanation, though not without some problems. Winter’s dependence on the famine creates some difficulties for the view. There is no evidence that the famine affected Thessalonica, and in order for the famine to occur, for the dependence on patrons to be re-established, and for this dependence to become evident, more time must be inserted between 1 and 2 Thessalonians.⁹² The proposal of the client/patron relationship seems to make the wealthy Christians who are serving as patrons equally as guilty as the clients because of the honor they gained from having multiple clients.⁹³ There is also no evidence that patrons provided enough for their clients to allow them to avoid work altogether.⁹⁴ Finally, if the client/patron relationship was commonly practiced, one wonders why Paul would have mentioned the need to gain the respect of outsiders by working to support oneself.⁹⁵

Most likely the problem in Thessalonica was that some of the manual laborers had stopped working and had begun to take advantage of the generosity of the wealthier members of the church. Paul’s instruction could not be directed to slaves, since they had no choice about their work, nor would he be dealing with the rich, since they would be able to support themselves without working.⁹⁶ When the gospel transformed individuals, it also transformed their relationship to one another. Those who had wealth were expected to use it to minister to the needs of their fellow believers (e.g., 3:13). However, some of the poor within the church were abusing this new relationship by refusing to support themselves when they had the ability to do so. Paul command-

⁸⁹Ibid., 312.

⁹⁰Green, *Letters to the Thessalonians*, 342.

⁹¹Ibid., 351. Green also views the problem as stemming from the client/patron relationship though he does not include the famine as part of the cause (342).

⁹²Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*, 164–65.

⁹³Ibid., 165.

⁹⁴Ibid.

⁹⁵Martin, *1, 2 Thessalonians*, 276.

⁹⁶Nicholl, *From Hope to Despair in Thessalonica*, 171–72.

ed these disorderly believers to begin working to provide for their needs while encouraging all of the believers to use their resources to meet the needs of others.⁹⁷

Suggestions Toward Contemporary Application

Having analyzed the passage and identified the underlying problem in Thessalonica, a few suggestions to help in applying this teaching in today's society may be set forth.⁹⁸ First, it should be common for charity to occur within a church. Paul does not forbid charity, nor does he encourage everyone to simply look out for themselves. Rather, he commands the Thessalonians to continue to do good by meeting the needs of other believers.⁹⁹ It is not uncommon for needs to arise within a congregation, and since other members of the church are obligated to help meet those needs, it should not be uncommon for charity to occur within a church.

Second, charity should not be provided indiscriminately. Supporting believers who refuse to work violates Scriptural teaching. Believers must use discernment in determining whether or not individuals are unwilling to work or simply unable to work before they provide for the needs of others.¹⁰⁰

Third, church leaders must emphasize the necessity of work. Paul was obviously concerned that his converts labor in order to meet their own needs. Though the church is called to show love to one another in meeting needs, this gracious provision must not and cannot replace the individual's responsibility to provide for his or her own needs. Paul emphasized this necessity through his teaching, his epistles, and his own example. He even called for church discipline against those who refused to work. Pastors today should be willing to follow that example, especially in areas where people are more likely to avoid working. Not only should they provide strong instruction in their teaching and preaching, but they may also need to consider working to support themselves as an

⁹⁷The advantage of this explanation over the client/patron explanation is that it avoids some of the problems with the more formal client/patron relationship and still allows for Paul's emphasis to point towards all believers becoming benefactors of those in need. See Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 149–50.

⁹⁸These suggestions are intended to be illustrative, not exhaustive.

⁹⁹Since Paul's instruction is centered around the life of the community, his command to do good would most likely fall within the life of the community and would be specifically concerned with the needs of other believers.

¹⁰⁰The question of whether or not this principle would apply to unbelievers is not simple. On one hand, it would be foolish to expect unbelievers to obey Scriptural teaching since they are unregenerate. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that unbelievers would try to abuse the generosity of others while refusing to work themselves. On the other hand, the fact that unbelievers are likely to break or ignore biblical instruction does not necessarily excuse them from that instruction (e.g., an unbelieving child is still expected to obey his or her parents). It may be best to apply this principle as a general guideline when dealing with unbelievers but not necessarily as a hard rule.

example to their flock.¹⁰¹

Finally, the entire church has an obligation to encourage work and enforce discipline. Paul's instruction would have been pointless if the entire congregation had not obeyed. In order for the disobedient to be ashamed, the church as a whole must separate. Churches that encourage slothfulness or a sense of entitlement are hurting rather than helping their members. The best and most loving thing they can do is to stop supporting those who refuse to work and begin enacting church discipline on those who persist in disobedience.

Conclusion

Paul's instructions in 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 deal with charitable work within the church. Paul is writing to those in Thessalonica who were abusing the generosity of wealthier members of the church by refusing to work to provide for their own needs. They were ignoring both the commands and the example of self-support that the apostle presented. Paul commanded these disorderly brothers to start working and commanded the rest of the church to continue meeting genuine needs and to separate from these disobedient brothers. Since Paul's instruction is addressing benevolent work within a congregation, the passage can and should be considered when making decisions about Christian charity (John 16:20–22).

¹⁰¹Another possibility would be raising support from other churches, since Paul also utilized the gifts from the Philippian church while he was in Thessalonica (Phil 4:16).