

EMMAUS EQUIPPING COLLEGE

Grasping God's Word - Assignment 11

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Levels of Meaning

Deuteronomy 25:4 ESV

"You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.

1 Corinthians 9:7-14 ESV

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? (8) Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? (9) For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? (10) Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the ploughman should plough in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. (11) If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? (12) If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. (13) Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? (14) In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

1 Timothy 5:17-18 ESV

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching. (18) For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The labourer deserves his wages."

In the light of the above scriptures;

A) do you think Paul is over-using his imagination to give a far-fetch interpretation of Deuteronomy 25:4?

When Paul looks at an ancient farming law about oxen and concludes, "This means you need to pay your pastor," it may seem to be a stretch of the imagination to give a far-fetched interpretation of Deut. 25:4.

However, when we look at the context of the underlying logic Paul is using, his interpretation isn't a stretch of the imagination. Instead, he is applying a standard, highly disciplined method of ancient legal reasoning.

Paul was trained as a Pharisee under the famous Rabbi Gamaliel. In Jewish legal interpretation, there is a standard rule of logic called **Kal V'Chomer** (literally "light and heavy," or "from the lesser to the greater").

The logic goes like this: If something is true in a minor, less important case, it must be even truer in a major, more important case.

When Paul asks, "*Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake?*" he isn't saying God doesn't care about animals. Rather, he is using Kal V'Chomer:

- **Lesser case:** An animal that labours to provide food has a right to eat from that food.
- **Greater case:** A human being who labours to provide spiritual life-giving truth has an even greater right to be sustained by that labour.

To an ancient Jewish audience, this wasn't far-fetched; it was a legally airtight argument.

Paul takes this obscure agricultural law and applies it directly to the Christian ministry. He argues that if God cares enough to protect a working animal, the underlying principle applies even more intensely to human beings—specifically, apostles and ministers.

Paul uses a number of rhetorical questions and common-sense analogies to prove his point:

- The Soldier doesn't pay for his own rations, weapons, etc.
- The Vineyard Planter expects to taste the grapes from the vineyard he planted.
- The Shepherd drinks the milk from the flock he tends.
- The Priest eats the meat offered at the temple alter.

By using these examples, Paul proves that Deuteronomy 25:4 isn't a weird, isolated rule. It is a specific application of a universal law of justice: **The person doing the work should benefit from the work.** Paul is pointing to the **spirit of the law**—the timeless divine principle behind the specific command. If we say Deuteronomy 25:4 only applies to four-legged oxen treading grain, then the law becomes totally useless the moment a tractor is invented.

But if we extract the underlying principle, **fair compensation for labour**, the law remains alive, relevant, and applicable both then and today. Because he extracted the core moral principle—that labour deserves its reward—and applied it to the highest form of labour (spiritual ministry), his

interpretation honours the original heart of the Old Testament law. Even Jesus agreed with this underlying logic, which is why Paul is able to comfortably pair the "**ox**" verse right next to Jesus' words in 1 Timothy 5:18; "**The labourer deserves his wages**". At the centre of it all is a simple agricultural commandment from Deuteronomy, which the Apostle Paul uses to establish a profound principle: those who dedicate their lives to spiritual leadership and teaching should be financially supported by the communities they serve. By placing the words of Moses and the words of Jesus on the exact same level, Paul cements the idea that compensating spiritual leaders isn't just a nice gesture—it is a divine mandate.

B) Does Paul misinterpret this passage to suit his financial situation? If not, then why?

We know that the Bible strictly condemns financial exploitation in the name of religion. It warns that false teachers who monetize faith are driven by greed, exploiting followers with fabricated stories. Scripture emphasizes that these actions face God's severe judgment and urges believers to be wary of those who treat godliness as a means of financial gain. However, looking closely at the historical context, the text itself, and Paul's actual lifestyle, it becomes clear that **Paul is not misinterpreting the passage to suit his financial situation**. In fact, the reality is quite the opposite.

The strongest evidence that Paul wasn't manipulating scripture to suit his financial position is that **he refused to take the money**. Right after arguing that he has every legal and spiritual right to financial support, he explicitly states in 1 Corinthians 9:12: "**Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.**"

Paul chose to work as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3) to support himself. He intentionally gave up the very financial privileges he was arguing for so that no one could accuse him of preaching for profit. If he were twisting scripture to get rich, he would have insisted on being paid and taken the money.

When Paul writes about the "**ox**" in 1 Timothy 5, he isn't talking about himself. He is giving instructions to his young protégé, Timothy, on how to run the church in Ephesus. He tells Timothy to make sure that local elders who work hard at preaching and teaching are duly paid, "**double honour**". Paul is advocating for the local ministry workforce. He is ensuring that the pastors who stayed in one place to shepherd a community weren't starving while doing so.

Also, Paul's interpretation aligned perfectly with Jesus' teachings. Paul didn't invent the idea that spiritual labourers should be fed. He was aligning his theology with instructions already laid out by Jesus. When Jesus sent out the seventy-two disciples in Luke 10, he told them not to bring money or extra supplies, saying in Luke 10:7; "**Remain in the same house, eating and drinking what they provide, for the labourer deserves his wages.**"

When Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 "**Don't muzzle the ox**" side-by-side **with "The labourer deserves his wages"** in 1 Timothy 5:18, he is showing that the Old Testament law, Jesus' teachings, and his own instructions all say the exact same thing. Ultimately, Paul's interpretation of Deuteronomy wasn't a financial scam; it was a defence of **ministry sustainability**. He wanted to ensure that the people building and feeding the early Church were taken care of, even though he personally chose the harder path of self-support.

C) Is the typology of an ox eating threshing grain suitably applied to Paul's situation?

In ancient agriculture, threshing was the process of separating the valuable grain from the worthless chaff. When we compare the ox eating threshing grain (the farming rule) in Deuteronomy to Paul's work in the church, we see the typological parallels come together;

- **The Grain/Harvest:** This represents the Gospel and the spiritual fruits of salvation, community, and mature faith within the church.
- **The Threshing Floor:** This is the local church community, like the one in Corinth, where the heavy, messy work of spiritual growth and labour takes place.
- **The Ox:** This is Paul and other apostles/ministers/church leaders. He is the beast of burden doing the heavy lifting—traveling, preaching, enduring persecution, and working to "produce" the harvest.
- **The Muzzle:** This represents financial neglect or a church withholding material support, refusing to pay or take care of the apostles/ministers/church leaders, leaving them to struggle forcing this minister to look elsewhere for survival.
- **Eating the Grain:** This represents the apostles/ministers/church being sustained, housed, fed and financially supported by the very people who are benefiting from their spiritual labour.

Even though Paul chose to work as a tentmaker and not take money from the Corinthians, the typology still applies to him perfectly as it **validates his authority and "right"**.

By establishing that he is the working ox, Paul's decision to refuse their money becomes deeply profound. An ox naturally wants to eat while it works. By voluntarily "muzzling" himself so he wouldn't burden a young, fractured church, Paul demonstrates incredible pastoral love. He relies on the generosity of other churches like the Philippians or his own manual labour so that the Corinthian "grain" can be preserved without cost to them.

The typology of an ox eating threshing grain is suitably applied to Paul's situation because it captures the core spiritual reality: **Ministry is hard, exhausting, crushing work—much like an ox treading grain.** He is a spiritual labourer stomping out the grain of the Gospel so that others can eat. The law in Deuteronomy ensures that the labourer is tied to the harvest, making Paul's application both logically sound and spiritually profound.

D) Is he adding an extra layer of meaning and intent that wasn't in the original text?

If you were to take a time machine back to the moment Moses wrote Deuteronomy 25:4, Moses was thinking about animal welfare and agricultural ethics. He was not secretly hiding a prophetic code about first-century church payroll. By claiming that God wasn't primarily concerned with oxen, but rather spoke **"certainly for our sake,"** Paul is undeniably adding a brand-new layer of meaning and intent that is not present in the literal, historical text of the Old Testament.

To understand exactly what Paul was doing, it helps to look at the difference between **the author's intent** and **the divine principle**.

Exegesis—drawing out what the original author meant to his original audience. Literally, Deuteronomy 25:4 is about an ox.

Paul, however, believes that because God inspired the scriptures, the specific laws given to Israel contain universal, timeless principles reflecting God's character.

- **Moses' Literal Law:** Don't starve the ox while it treads grain.
- **The Underlying Principle:** It is fundamentally unjust to profit from a labourer's work while denying them the basic means to survive.
- **Paul's New Application:** Apply that exact same principle of justice to the people preaching the Gospel.

Paul isn't changing the moral essence of the verse; he is just changing the subject from a four-legged worker to a two-legged worker.

It seems that Paul operated under the conviction that the Old Testament had a "fuller meaning" intended by God but not fully understood by the original human author and which could only be fully unlocked after the coming of Jesus Christ.

To the early Christians, the entire Old Testament was a shadow pointing to a greater reality.

- The Passover Lamb pointed to Jesus.
- The Temple pointed to the Church.
- **The Working Ox pointed to the Gospel Labourer.**

When Paul says, "***It was written for our sake,***" he is speaking from this apostolic perspective. He believes the Holy Spirit originally inspired that law in Deuteronomy precisely so it could be applied centuries later to sustain the Christian movement.

Whether you think Paul "over-interpreted" the text depends on how you view scriptural authority:

- **From a strictly historical-critical view:** Yes, Paul is ripping a verse out of its original context and forcing it to do a job it was never meant to do.
- **From a theological, Christ-centred view:** No, Paul is masterfully showing that God's standards of justice are cohesive. If God cares about the stomach of a beast of burden, how much more does He care about the livelihood of those spreading eternal truths?

So yes, Paul is adding a layer of meaning—one that Moses likely never anticipated but Paul does so by anchoring it to the universal heart of the law. He didn't invent a new meaning out of thin air; he extracted a divine principle of fairness from the farm and brought it straight into the church.

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