

Captain John Smith Saved Jamestown from Extinction by Implementing an Important Biblical Principle

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Did you know that in North America even before Karl Marx, two specific attempts to live under communal arrangements for production and allocation of goods and services failed completely? They occurred a decade apart and several hundred miles apart — at Jamestown and Plymouth — with amazingly similar results. You can find out what happened at Plymouth in the early 1620s by visiting <https://bit.ly/3RRFEEXE>. Here I want to explore briefly some of the things that happened at Jamestown a little more than a decade earlier.

In the early 1600s, Europeans could hear the call of the New World. It wasn't just adventure that compelled men to dream and to plan, either; it was profits. London's Virginia Company pulled together the investors and the resources it needed to launch a voyage across the Atlantic in late 1606¹ — with the hope of a financial return as the planned settlements in America would take root and grow. Commanded by Captain Christopher Newport, 120 men in three ships — *Susan Constant*, *Godspeed*, and *Discovery* — ventured forth from

England toward America, even as they faced the onslaught of winter.²

“They made land,” writes historian William Bennett,

but the start was inauspicious. Naming their first settlement after their king, in the spring of 1607 the Jamestown settlers began building a village that could be defended against both Spanish raiders and Indians. Few of the first settlers in this stronghold on the James River had any knowledge of farming, and the first attempts at communal sharing of all food and supplies resulted in near starvation. Diseases — malaria, typhoid, dysentery, and yellow fever — were the direct result of locating the settlement on marshy, swampy land. With many deaths and with discipline breaking down, it seemed this attempt, too, would fail.³ These early years were known as the Jamestown colony's “Starving Time.”

Then came Captain John Smith. He quickly imposed firm discipline on the colony,

¹ <https://bit.ly/2GHLp9T>

² William J. Bennett, *America, the Last Best Hope— Volume 1: From the Age of Discovery to a World at War*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2006), 33.

³ Douglas Binkley, *American Heritage History of the United States*, Viking Penguin, New York: 1998, p. 30. — cited by William Bennett (see footnote #2).

discarding the ineffectual sharing system and replacing it with incentives for hard work.⁴

Many more difficult days lay ahead for the residents of Jamestown, but when Smith enforced the biblical principle the apostle Paul upheld in 2 Thessalonians 3:10, the colony turned a corner. Smith's bold leadership saved it from almost certain extinction.

In this verse, Paul reminded his fellow believers in Thessalonica, "[E]ven when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat." Second Thessalonians 3:6-12 provides the context:

² Thessalonians 3:6 But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us. ⁷For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; ⁸nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, ⁹not because we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow us.

¹⁰For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat. ¹¹For we hear that there are some who walk among you in a disorderly manner, not working at all, but

are busybodies. ¹²Now those who are such we command and exhort through our Lord Jesus Christ that they work in quietness and eat their own bread.

**If anyone will not work,
neither shall he eat.
—2 Thessalonians 3:10—**

What Did John Smith Tell the Colonists?

Capitan Smith was Jamestown's council president.⁵ He took the reins of leadership at the settlement on September 10, 1608.⁶ He "simply assumed control....[He] imposed military discipline and order and issued the famous biblical edict, 'He who will not work will not eat.'"⁷

Here's what Captain Smith told the Jamestown settlers:

Countrymen, the long experience of our late miseries, I hope is sufficient to persuade everyone to a present correction of himself, and think not that either my pains, nor the Adventurers' purses, will ever maintain you in idleness and sloth. I speak not this to you all, for diverse of you I know deserve both honor and reward, better than is yet here to be had; but the greater part must be more industrious, or starve. However you have been heretofore tolerated by the authority of the Council, from that I have often commanded you. You see now that power

⁴ William Bennett.

⁵ Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen, *A Patriot's History of the United States: From Columbus's Great Discovery to the War on Terror*, (New York: Sentinel, 2004), 17.

⁶ Robert Morgan, *100 Bible Verses that Made America: Defining Moments that Shaped Our Enduring Foundation of Faith*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2020), 8.

⁷ Schweikart and Allen.

resteth wholly in myself: you must obey this now for a Law, that he that will not work shall not eat (except by sickness he be disabled). For the labors of thirty or forty honest and industrious men shall not be consumed to maintain an hundred and fifty idle loiterers. And though you presume the authority here is but a shadow, and that I dare not touch the lives of any but my own must answer it: the Letters patents shall each week be read to you, whose Contents will tell you the contrary. I would wish you therefore without contempt seek to observe these orders set down, for there are now no more Councilors to protect you, nor curb my endeavors. Therefore he that offendeth, let him assuredly expect his due punishment.⁸

This, of course, is 17th-century English, and you might not understand all Captain Smith said. Let me paraphrase it for you. Imagine Captain Smith bellowing out these orders at a community meeting at which all the colonists were present.

OK, everyone! Listen up! We've had a tough time as of late, but I hope our hardships will help you correct your ways so our situation will improve. I'm putting you on notice today! If I have anything to do with it, from this point forward, things *are* going to change, and change for the better! And you're going to help me! Jamestown still can succeed, and each one of us is going to work together make that happen! Be forewarned, though — we still have some hard days ahead.

No longer will anyone be able to opt out of doing his share of the work. If you think either I or those who've invested in our effort to settle here will put up with laziness

any longer, think again! Not everyone has been lazy — I want to make that crystal clear. Everyone who has done his part deserves credit. The few who *are* doing their duty, however, can't produce enough food and other resources for everyone. It's that simple. If we have 30 or 40 workers and 150 shirkers, that won't cut it! Most of you, to your shame, have shunned your responsibilities to this settlement and are loitering while less than a quarter of the group are putting forth their best efforts!

So, here's what's going to happen from this point forward. You'll either work or starve — take your pick! Your laziness has been tolerated long enough by the Council, and it will be tolerated no longer. I'm in charge now, and I assure you, I'm no pushover. This is now a law by which we will operate: *If you do not work, you will not eat*. Again, let me be clear so no one misunderstands. I'm not talking about you who *can't* work. If you're sick or for some other legitimate reason are unable to till the ground or plant, we will understand that. Otherwise, excuses not to work will be seen for what they are — lame excuses.

I conclude with a warning. If you think I don't mean what I say or that I don't really have the authority to follow through on what I'm telling you will happen if you continue to shun your responsibilities, stop kidding yourself. Work or starve! That's your choice! If you're smart, you'll choose to work, and you'll work with a good attitude. If, on the other hand, you choose not to work, then be assured you are making the choice not to eat. No exceptions!

Thanks to Smith's strong leadership, Jamestown survived: "He stabilized the colony, and in the

⁸ <https://bit.ly/3MjOiwV>

second winter, less than 15 percent of the population died, compared to the more than 60 percent who died just a year earlier.”⁹

When Captain Smith laid down the law that only those who worked would eat, Jamestown began to jettison a communal system in favor of one more closely aligned with the free enterprise economic model upheld in Scripture.¹⁰ Jamestown would transition to free enterprise through a process,¹¹ not instantaneously overnight. Governor Thomas Dale¹² would implement additional reforms,¹³ including the introduction of property rights. With regard to prosperity, property and property rights are linchpin issues.¹⁴ Their importance cannot be overstated.

Fast Forward to the 21st Century

Today we’re told by social justice advocates that redistributing wealth is “compassionate” and a matter of “justice.” These are lies. Tell me: What is just or even compassionate about a policy that compensates everyone in a group of “workers” the same for their labors, regardless of the amount of work performed? Everyone knows the amount of work he does — whether much or little — will make no difference in his compensation. What’s fair about *that*? No

wonder there were far more shirkers than workers at Jamestown before John Smith imposed an if-you-don’t-work-you-don’t-get-to-eat policy on the settlers.

Today we’re also told that people aren’t as interested in being devoted to *what’s true* as they are in following *what works*. I have news for people like that. If something isn’t true, it won’t work in life or in society. Oh, it may *appear* to work for a while, but sooner or later reality will hit and things will fall apart.

For centuries, people who’ve incorporated biblical principles into their lives and advocated for them in society have realized not only that they are true, but that they also work. And their experiences have validated their convictions.

Socialism and the tenets of the social justice movement are neither true nor valid, nor do they work. Nor are they just.¹⁵ History provides proof. For starters, just look at what happened at Jamestown — then look at other places socialism has been tried.¹⁶ Wherever it’s been tried, it has failed.

Let’s learn from history. And let’s learn from Captain John Smith, who saved a settlement in the New World by implementing a biblical principle.

⁹ Schweikart and Allen.

¹⁰ <https://bit.ly/3T1qoIY>

¹¹ <https://bit.ly/3ehdAPH>

¹² <https://bit.ly/3RQjAwu>

¹³ <https://bit.ly/3ehdAPH>

¹⁴ <https://bit.ly/3CLdLwk>

¹⁵ <https://www.wordfoundations.com/inherently-unjust/>

¹⁶ <https://washex.am/3eewcA1>