



Biblical Ethics:

Selected Resources from the ESV Study Bible

Stewardship and the Poor

The Concept of Stewardship

The entire earth belongs to God, for he created it: “The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein” ([Ps. 24:1](#); cf. [Gen. 1:1](#); [Lev. 25:23](#); [Ps. 50:10–12](#); [Hag. 2:8](#)). But while God made animals simply to dwell on the earth and eat the food they found on it ([Gen. 1:30](#)), he made man (as male and female) to rule over all the earth and develop its resources in wise and useful ways: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and *subdue it* and *have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” ([Gen. 1:28](#)). To “subdue” the earth meant to exercise wise control over it in such a way that it will produce useful goods for the people who “subdued” it. This command therefore implied an expectation that Adam and Eve, and their descendants, as God’s image-bearers, would investigate, understand, develop, and enjoy the resources of the earth, with thanksgiving to God who had entrusted such a responsibility to them. This implied not merely harvesting food from the vines and fruit trees in the garden of Eden but also domesticating animals (cf. note on [Gen. 2:20](#)), developing the mineral resources of the earth (cf. [Gen. 2:11–12](#)), and eventually developing dwelling places and means of transportation, learning artistry and craftsmanship, and so forth. The ability to develop and enjoy the resources of the earth in this way is an ability unique to human beings, one that is shared neither by animals nor by angels. Therefore the innate human desire to develop the resources of the earth and produce useful goods for human beings should not be immediately dismissed as sinful or greedy, but is an essential aspect of how God created human beings to function on the earth.

Stewardship and the Environment

The responsibility to be stewards of God’s creation does not mean that humans have a right to *abuse or destroy* his material creation, for wisdom dictates that they should take appropriate steps to protect this gift of God from unwarranted defilement and inappropriate use. Nor does stewardship mean that people are to *ignore* God’s material creation, either through passive neglect or through a philosophical decision to leave nature in its “natural state.” After the fall, “the creation was subjected to futility” ([Rom. 8:20](#); cf. [Gen. 3:17–18](#)) in such a way that nature now includes floods, forest fires, hurricanes, weeds, insects that can destroy crops, etc. Wise stewardship involves active steps to “subdue” and “have dominion” over such factors, with thoughtful development of the world’s resources, in gratitude to God and in accord with his moral laws.

Stewardship in All of Life

Whatever a person “owns,” he or she is to manage as a steward who is responsible to God. Stewardship responsibilities extend not only to the creation, material possessions, and natural resources, but also to other things such as talents or skills that have been given by God ([1 Cor. 4:7](#)), time and opportunities ([Eph. 5:15–16](#)), the wonderful responsibility of bearing and raising children ([Eph. 6:4](#)), and spiritual gifts and ministries ([1 Cor. 4:1–2](#); [Eph. 3:2](#); [1 Pet. 4:10](#)).

Stewardship and Ownership of Property

The idea of private stewardship or ownership of property is implicit in the Ten Commandments, for when God says, “You shall not *steal*” ([Ex. 20:15](#)), it implies that one should not steal his neighbor’s ox or donkey because it belongs to the neighbor. It is, in a sense, “private property.” This becomes more explicit when

the tenth commandment focuses on the desires of one's heart: "You shall not *covet* your neighbor's house ... or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's" ([Ex. 20:17](#)). The neighbor's ownership of his house and his donkey gives him control over those things and also provides the basis on which God will hold him responsible for faithfully discharging his stewardship responsibilities. Therefore the Bible does not view the ownership of property as something that is wrong or evil in itself, but rather as a solemn responsibility that God entrusts to human beings created in his image. (Regarding the statement in [Acts 2:44](#) that believers in the early church "had all things in common," see notes on [Acts 2:44](#); [4:34](#); and [5:4](#).)

Stewardship and Various Uses of Possessions

The concept of responsible stewardship before God requires that believers use all their property and possessions in ways that are pleasing to God and faithful to his teachings in Scripture.

1. Some resources should be used to support oneself and one's family. Paul instructed the Thessalonians "to work with your hands ... so that you may walk properly ... and be dependent on no one" ([1 Thess. 4:11–12](#)), and to tell those "walking in idleness" "to do their work quietly and to earn their own living" ([2 Thess. 3:6, 12](#); cf. [1 Tim. 5:8](#)). The NT does not command Christians to follow rigid asceticism (see [1 Tim. 4:1–5](#)) but encourages believers to enjoy the resources of the earth "with thanksgiving" ([1 Tim. 4:4](#)) to God, "who richly provides us with everything to enjoy" ([1 Tim. 6:17](#); cf. [Eccles. 6:1–2](#)). Yet there are also strong warnings against the love of money, the temptations of wealth, and spending that is wasteful, selfish, or self-indulgent: "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have" ([Heb. 13:5](#)). "If riches increase, set not your heart on them" ([Ps. 62:10](#); cf. [Eccles. 5:10](#); [Matt. 6:19–21](#); [Luke 12:15–21](#); [15:11–13](#); [James 5:5](#); [1 John 2:16](#); [3:17](#)). Jesus gave a number of warnings about wealth: "You cannot serve God and money" ([Matt. 6:24](#)). "The deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in and choke the word, and it proves unfruitful" ([Mark 4:19](#)). "Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" ([Luke 6:24](#)).

2. Another morally good use of some resources is to save for future needs. Because "you do not know what tomorrow will bring" ([James 4:14](#)), it is wise, for those who are able to do so, to save some of what they have for a time when they will not be able to work (due to age, weakness, sickness, or loss of employment). A person who assumes that he will need no savings to depend on in the future is very likely deciding to impose a later financial burden on his children or relatives. However, accumulating savings also provides significant temptations to sin: Jesus says, "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth ... but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven. ... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" ([Matt. 6:19–21](#); cf. [Ps. 62:10](#); [Matt. 6:24](#); [Luke 12:15–21](#); [Heb. 13:5](#)). And Christians should continually realize that whatever amount they save, that amount is not being given to the needs of others or to the building up of the church or to the spread of the gospel throughout the world.

3. A third use of resources, one repeatedly emphasized in Scripture, is giving money to those in need, or to the Lord's work in the church and in missions. In the OT, God required his people to give a "tithe" (that is, 10 percent) of their grain (see [Lev. 27:30](#)) and of their "herds and flocks, every tenth animal" ([Lev. 27:32](#); see also [Gen. 14:20](#); [28:22](#); [Num. 18:21, 26](#); [Deut. 12:17](#); [14:22](#); [26:12–13](#)). But while Jesus spoke about the tithing of the scribes and Pharisees ([Matt. 23:23](#)) during his earthly ministry, after his resurrection and the establishment of the NT church at Pentecost ([Acts 2](#)) the requirement to give a "tithe" or a tenth of one's income is never explicitly imposed on Christians. Rather than stipulating a fixed amount, the NT places emphasis on generous, abundant, cheerful giving: "God loves a cheerful giver" who "sows bountifully" ([2 Cor. 9:6–7](#)), and promises that "you will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way" ([2 Cor. 9:11](#)). So, while Christians are not obligated to give a fixed amount, it is hard to imagine that God expects people of the new covenant to give any *less* than the 10-percent tithe in the old covenant.

The NT specifically encourages giving to assist others in need: “If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” ([1 John 3:17](#); cf. [James 2:14–17](#)). Jesus even encourages active imitation of God in doing good for “the ungrateful and the evil” ([Luke 6:32–36](#)). Paul devoted a significant portion of his third missionary journey to collecting funds for the needs of poor Christians in Jerusalem (see [Acts 21:17; 24:17](#); [Rom. 15:25–28, 31](#); [1 Cor. 16:1–4](#); [2 Cor. 8:1–4; 9:1–5](#); cf. [chart](#)). Though it is right to give to the material needs of all people, both believers and unbelievers, the NT prioritizes giving to the needs of Christian brothers and sisters: “So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” ([Gal. 6:10](#); cf. “brother” in [1 John 3:17](#)).

The NT also encourages Christians to support the needs of the church and of those who do the work of evangelism. Paul received financial support from the church at Philippi (cf. [Phil. 4:15–19](#)), and he told churches to support their elders, “especially those who labor in preaching and teaching,” for “the laborer deserves his wages” ([1 Tim. 5:17–18](#); cf. [1 Cor. 9:6–14](#); [Gal. 6:6](#)). This would require that those who are part of a church should regularly give to support the ministry of the church.

NT Guidelines for Giving

Giving Should Be	References
• willing and cheerful	“Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7 ; cf. 8:2–3).
• a regular pattern of life	“On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up” (1 Cor. 16:2).
• proportionate to one’s ability	“Each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper” (1 Cor. 16:2).
• generous	“In a severe test of affliction, [the Macedonians’] abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave ... beyond their means” (2 Cor. 8:2–3 ; cf. Prov. 14:21, 31; 19:17 ; 2 Cor. 9:6 ; 1 Tim. 6:18).
• sacrificial	The poor widow with “two small copper coins” is commended by Jesus for putting into the offering “everything she had, all she had to live on” (Mark 12:42–44 ; cf. Acts 4:32–33 ; 2 Cor. 8:3).

Stewardship and the Poor

The Bible clearly and repeatedly emphasizes the need for Christians to care for the poor as one of the fundamental requirements of the gospel message. Jesus himself was born to poor parents (cf. [Luke 2:24](#) and [note](#)) and had few possessions during his public ministry ([Matt. 8:20](#)). Jesus says that as his followers do, or do not do, to “the least of these” (i.e., those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked), so they either do it, or do not do it, to him ([Matt. 25:35–45](#); cf. the teaching in Proverbs that connects one’s attitude to the poor with his or her relationship to God: [Prov. 14:31; 19:17; 21:13](#)). Paul and the early church took Jesus’ teaching seriously and were “eager” “to remember the poor” ([Gal. 2:10](#)). In fact, Paul anchored his appeal to care for the poor in Jerusalem in the cross, that is, in Jesus’ own atoning self-sacrifice: “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor” ([2 Cor. 8:9](#)). The generosity of the church both within and outside the family of faith eventually led the anti-Christian Roman emperor, Julian the Apostate (4th century A.D.), to complain, “Nothing has contributed to the progress of the superstition of the Christians as their charity to strangers. ... The impious Galileans provide not only for their own poor, but for ours as well” (Julian, *Epistles* 84). Such care for the poor often takes the form of meeting

immediate needs for food, clothing, and other essentials (cf. [Luke 10:25–36](#); [James 2:15–17](#); [1 John 3:17–18](#)).

Meeting the needs of the poor will also mean seeking to bring about long-term solutions. These solutions, which can often require greater time and energy to implement, enable those who are poor to obtain jobs by which they can support themselves and be able to “earn their own living” ([2 Thess. 3:12](#)), as Paul commands. Useful in this regard are programs that provide job training, related educational programs, microloans to begin small businesses, and changes in any governmental policies or cultural traditions that hinder long-term economic growth.

While nearly all Christian ethicists believe that civil government should take *some* role in assuring that everyone has access to the most basic human needs, they differ over the degree to which civil government (as distinguished from nongovernment entities such as relatives, neighbors, churches, and charitable organizations) should assume responsibility or authority for meeting those needs. Points of difference often arise with regard to government programs to rehabilitate and train individuals, create new jobs, change social and economic structures, and/or redistribute wealth. Questions raised by these differences do not fall into categories of clearly defined biblical right or wrong, but tend rather to entail philosophical differences in economic or social theory.



Source: <https://www.esv.org/resources/esv-study-bible/article-ethics/>

English Standard Version Study Bible. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008.