

Thriving as Stewards

Cunningham, Richard B. 2007. “The Purpose of Stewardship.” In *Leadership Handbook of Management and Administration*, edited by James D. Berkley, Revised and Expanded Edition, 451-54. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

LUKE 16:1 – 13 (NKJV)

¹ He also said to His disciples: “There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods.

² So he called him and said to him, ‘What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward.’

³ “Then the steward said within himself, ‘What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg.

⁴ I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.’

⁵ “So he called every one of his master’s debtors to him, and said to the first, ‘How much do you owe my master?’ (2)

⁶ And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' So he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.'

⁷ Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' So he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill, and write eighty.'

⁸ So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light.

⁹ "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by unrighteous mammon, that when you fail, they may receive you into an everlasting home.

¹⁰ He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much.

¹¹ Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?

¹² And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?

¹³ “No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.”



Christian stewardship concerns our responsibility to live wholly for God, managing our resources to give him glory and benefit humanity. Stewardship touches every area of life and involves both individual and corporate commitments.

It encompasses far more than giving to the church:

- Stewardship includes the use and care of our natural resources;
- It includes what we do with our abilities and talents;
- It involves the way we manage our time.

Though stewardship has often been applied strictly to finances or is seen to be synonymous with giving or tithing to the church, financial stewardship can be understood best within the broader framework of biblical stewardship.

Though we will primarily focus on financial stewardship here, we should remember that biblical stewardship includes the management of all God's gifts to humanity.

We will not grasp the full implications of financial stewardship until we know what it means to surrender every part of our lives to God. With that in mind, let's explore biblical teaching on stewardship and its applications throughout church history. We'll also draw several implications about stewardship for us today.

Stewardship in the Old Testament

The Old Testament view of stewardship grows from the Hebrew view of life. However, the actual usage of words translated into English as steward is limited.

The primary Hebrew terms corresponding to the New Testament idea of *oikonomos* (steward) focus on the idea of “one who is over a house.”

Yet the idea of stewardship can be found throughout the Old Testament, wrapped up in an understanding of God, nature, and humanity.

Stewardship in the Old Testament Begins with God

On one level, based upon the idea of Creation, the Old Testament applies stewardship to all humanity.

On a higher level, stewardship is applied to the elect — the covenant people of God.

Stewardship in the Old Testament begins with God. As Creator, He holds the right of ownership to everything.

Psalm 24:1 – 2 (NKJV)

¹ The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell therein.

² For He has founded it upon the seas, And established it upon the waters.

Psalm 50:10 – 12 (NKJV)

¹⁰ For every beast of the forest is Mine, And the cattle on a thousand hills.

¹¹ I know all the birds of the mountains, And the wild beasts of the field are Mine.

¹² “If I were hungry, I would not tell you; For the world is Mine, and all its fullness.



Everything we see, or have in our possession belongs to the Lord.

The Hebrews enjoyed life in all proportions and triumphed in natural and cultural goods “of earthly possessions, many children, long life, friendship and love, as well as wisdom, beauty, honor, and political freedom”.

Eichrodt 1951, 33)

They knew they had been given authority over God's good creation.

PSALM 8:3 – 6 (NKJV)

³ When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, The moon and the stars, which You have ordained,

⁴ What is man that You are mindful of him, And the son of man that You visit him?

⁵ For You have made him a little lower than the angels, And You have crowned him with glory and honor.

⁶ You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet,

In Genesis 1 – 2, people are given dominion over all the animals, and God instructs the people to fill the earth — to till the ground and subdue it.

But God also gave people the freedom to follow or reject his command, setting up the essential components of our stewardship responsibility.

As the elect, covenant people of God, we are obligated to do God's will.

The Hebrews were called to be faithful with everything God had given them.

For example, they knew that God had given them the Promised Land.

DEUTERONOMY 25:19 (NKJV)

Therefore it shall be, when the Lord your God has given you rest from your enemies all around, in the land which the Lord your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance, that you will blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven. You shall not forget.

They were to use the land according to God's will.

Old Testament laws acknowledged God's ownership in such practices as offering the first fruits of the crops and the firstborn of the animals (Exod. 22:28–30; 23:19; 34:26).

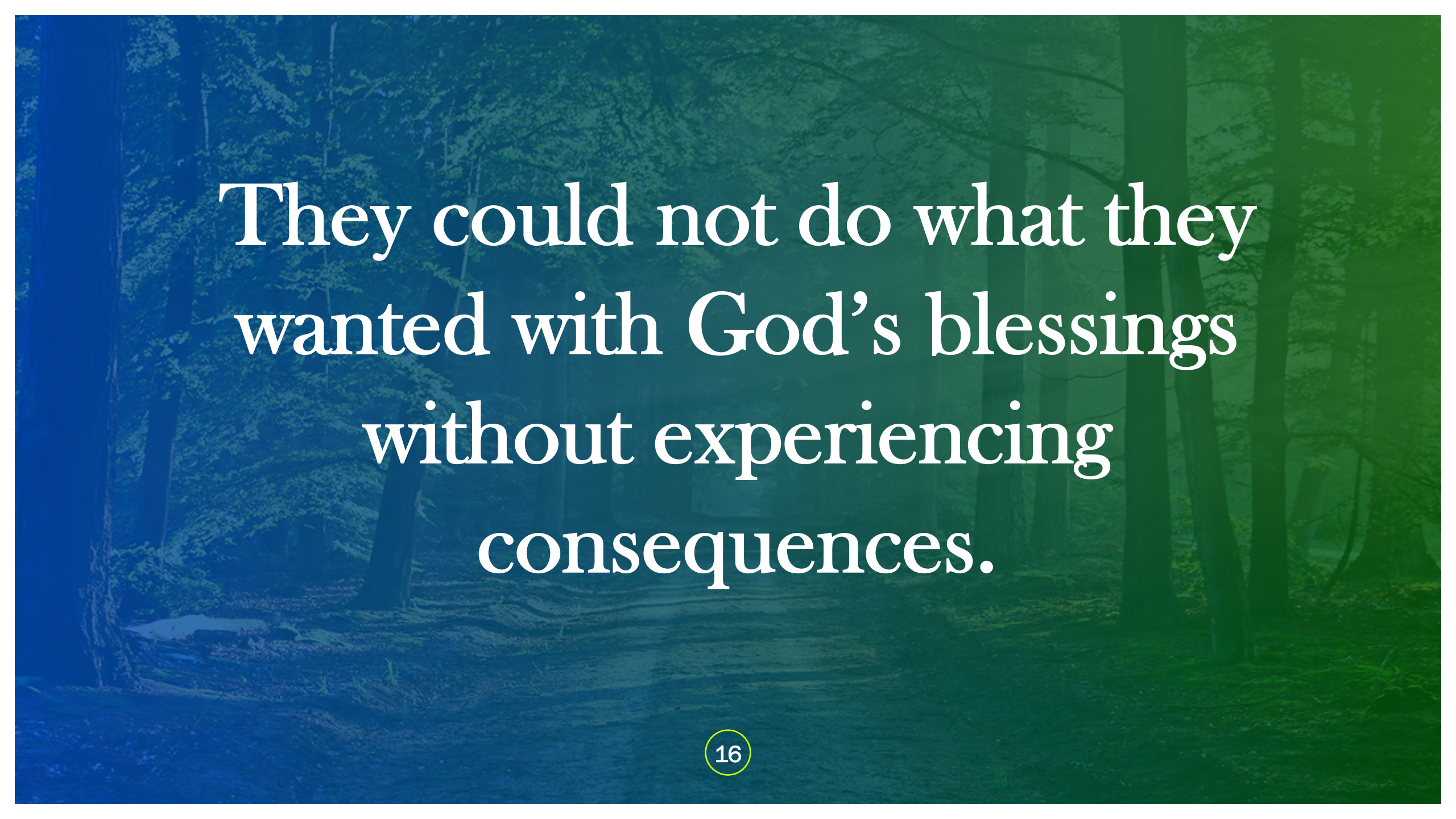
The commandments shaped Hebrew views on obtaining and positioning property.

The laws regulated proper land use:

- Crops were left for the poor (Lev. 19:9 – 10).
- Fields were to lie unplanted in sabbatical years (Exod. 23:10 – 11).

Other Old Testament Stewardship Laws

- Other land laws referred to the Jubilee year (Lev. 25:8–17, 23–55),
- Tithes and sacrifices (Lev. 27:30–32; Num. 18:21–32; Deut. 14:22–27),
- And inheritances (Num. 26:52–27:11).



They could not do what they
wanted with God's blessings
without experiencing
consequences.



Tithing was a significant aspect of Old Testament stewardship.

At its roots, tithing was intended to honor God as the owner of the land and the giver of its produce. Tithing also supported the temple, the priesthood, and various charitable causes.

There are three different tithes in the Old Testament:

- A Celebration Tithe of agricultural products (Deut. 12:6 –7; 14:22–26),
- A Charity Tithe (Deut. 14:28 – 29),
- And a tithe for the Levites (num. 18:21 – 24).

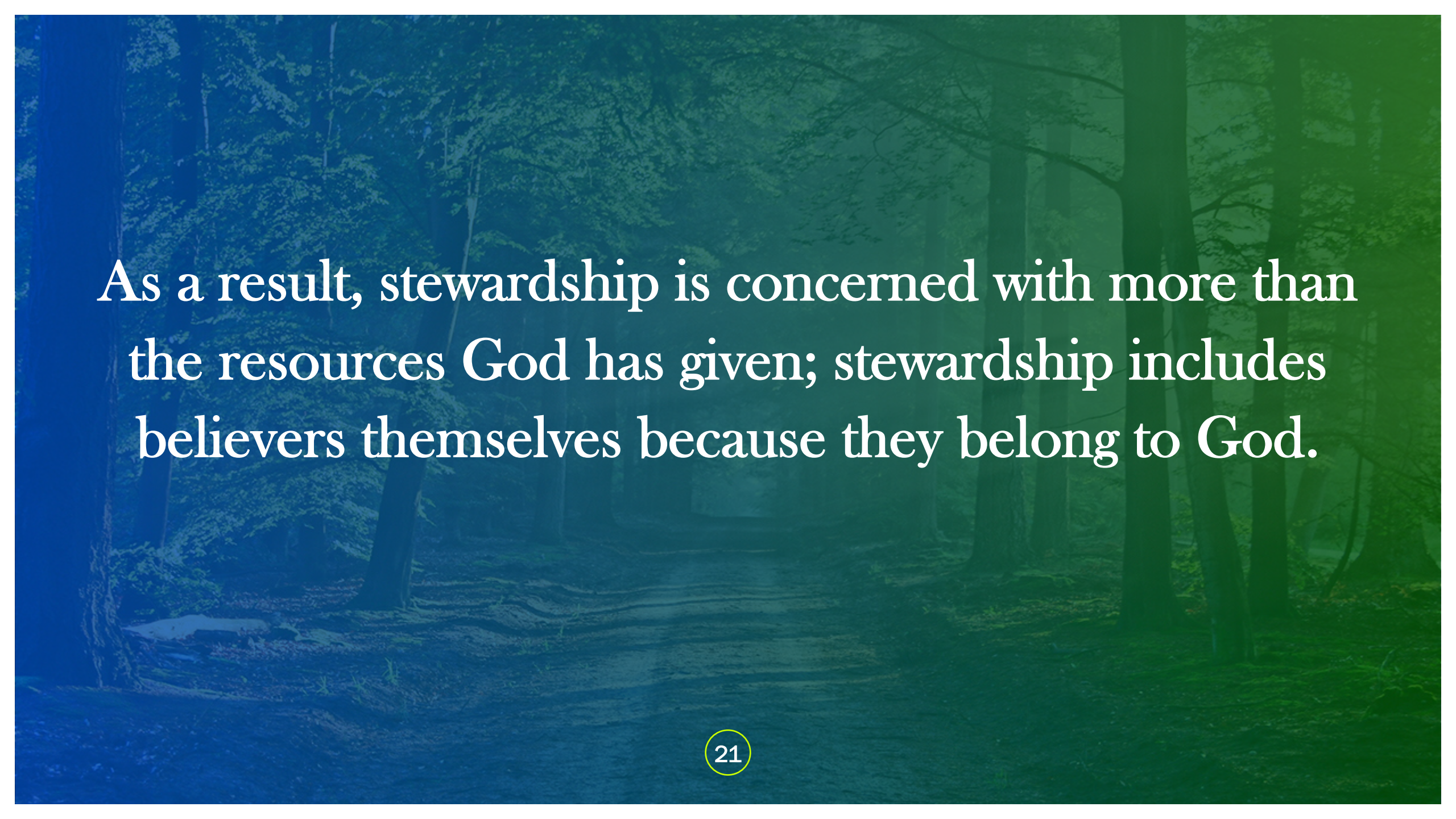
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- These were harmonized into three distinct tithes in Rabbinic Judaism.
- A devout Jew during the Rabbinic period would have given either 10 – 23.5 percent of his agricultural income.

Stewardship in the New Testament

The New Testament introduces a striking new note into the pattern. Christian stewardship depends upon the will of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The New Testament teaches that God has claimed as His own those who surrender to Him through Christ.

A photograph of a forest path, slightly misty, with a blue-to-green gradient overlay. The path leads into the distance, flanked by trees. The text is centered in a white serif font.

As a result, stewardship is concerned with more than the resources God has given; stewardship includes believers themselves because they belong to God.

1 CORINTHIANS 6: 19 – 20 (NKJV)

¹⁹ Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?

²⁰ For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

THE STEWARDSHIP CONCEPT

The New Testament Greek word translated as stewardship is *oikonomia*, a combination of two words: *oikos*, “house,” and *nemein*, “to divide, distribute, or apportion” (Michel 1967, 119–59).

In classical Greek, the *oikonomos* (steward), found only twenty times in the New Testament, was responsible for the business affairs of a household.

Often *oikonomos* referred to an enslaved person overseeing the master’s money, property, goods, and other enslaved people.



Jesus used the term *oikonomos* on two occasions:

- The Parable of the Servants (Luke 12:42 – 48)
- The Parable of the Shrewd Manager (Luke 16:1–13).

The concept of stewardship is found in many other parables:

- The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19 – 31);
- The Rich Fool (Luke 12:16 – 21);
- The servants who kill the master's son (Matt. 21:33 – 46);
- The Unworthy Servant (Luke 17:7 – 10)
- The Unmerciful Servant (Matt. 18:21 – 35);
- The Workers in the Vineyard (Matt. 20:1 – 16)
- The Two Sons (Matt. 21:28 – 32),
- The Talents (Matt. 25:14 – 30),
- The Minas (Luke 19:11 – 27)

THE TWO PARABLES...

The two critical parables of the servants and the shrewd manager illustrate the primary rationale.


- Each focuses on an owner who entrusts his estate to a steward (or manager in the NIV).
- The steward's task is to be faithful and accountable to the master, increasing the assets.

THE MAJOR THEMES OF THE PARABLES

Several themes stand out:

- God is Lord over all the earth.
- We are stewards because God entrusts us with things.
- Though free to act as we see fit, we're expected to make wise decisions consistent with God's will.
- Finally, we will one day be held accountable.

Stewardship calls us to responsibly manage our lives and God's gifts of creation and redemption.



The New Testament portrays
believers as partners with God to
accomplish His purposes
in the world.

EPHESIANS 1:7 – 10 (NKJV)

⁷ In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace

⁸ which He made to abound toward us in all wisdom and prudence,

⁹ having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself,

¹⁰ that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him.

A photograph of a misty forest path, overlaid with a blue-to-green gradient. The path is narrow and leads into the distance, flanked by tall trees. The text "Thriving as Stewards" is centered in a white serif font.

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