



The Sermon on the Mount Study
Bible Study Session 19
Matthew 6:24

Study By
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Greek NT

24 Οὐδείς δύναται
 δυοῖς κυρίοις δουλεύειν· ἢ
 γὰρ τὸν ἓνα μισήσει καὶ
 τὸν ἕτερον ἀγαπήσει, ἢ
 ἐνὸς ἀνθέξεται καὶ τοῦ
 ἑτέρου καταφρονήσει. οὐ
 δύνασθε θεῷ δουλεύειν
 καὶ μαμωνᾶ.

**La Biblia
 de las Américas**

24 Nadie puede servir
 a dos señores; porque o
 aborrecerá a uno y amará
 al otro, o se apegará a
 uno y despreciará al otro.
 No podéis servir a Dios y
 a las riquezas.

NRSV

24 No one can serve
 two masters; for a slave
 will either hate the one
 and love the other, or be
 devoted to the one and
 despise the other. You
 cannot serve God and
 wealth.

NLT

24 No one can serve
 two masters. For you will
 hate one and love the
 other, or be devoted to
 one and despise the other.
 You cannot serve both
 God and money.

The Outline of the Text:¹

This axiomatic saying of Jesus, ‘No one can serve two masters,’ is perhaps one of the better known sayings in the Sermon on the Mount. It seems simple enough in its logic at first glance, but in reality it is much more complicated. Slave owners in the ancient world, especially the less wealthy ones, often shared slaves with the result that many slaves in the first century world served multiple masters, despite the fact that official Roman law made such illegal. That experience of having multiple masters gave particular meaning to this saying of Jesus about loyalty and devotion.

Some attention also needs to be given to the parallel statement in Luke 16:13,

10 “Whoever is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much; and whoever is dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much. 11 If then you have not been faithful with the dishonest wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? 13 **No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.**”²

14 The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. 15 So he said to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.

Almost the identical saying is placed by Luke in a very different context in the teachings of Jesus. But the point of the saying in Luke remains essentially the same as in Matthew.

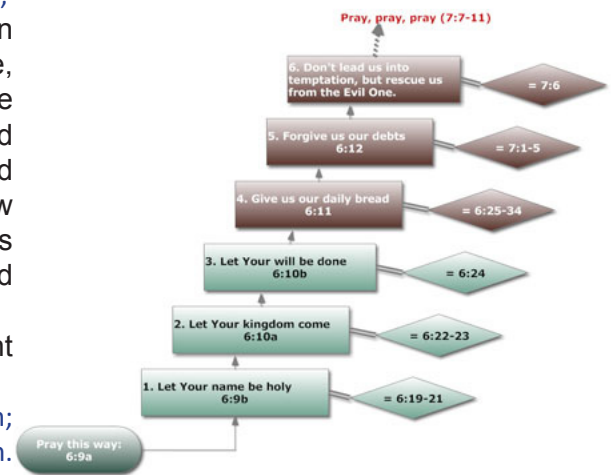
Also, one needs to pick up on the play on opposites that permeate the saying from God / mammon, love / hate, and devoted to / despise. The meaning of each plays off being the opposite of its counterpart.

Finally, 6:24 as an expansion of the third petition in the Model Prayer, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” (Mt. 6:10b) adds significant interpretive insight into the meaning of this saying. (See discussion below for details). Had many commentators picked up on this they would not have missed the mark in interpreting 6:24.

I. The Problem of divided loyalty, v. 24a

No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other,
 Οὐδείς δύναται δυοῖς κυρίοις δουλεύειν· ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἓνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἀγαπήσει,
 Clearly the point of this part of the saying is to emphasize devotion to a single priority, by avoiding split

Role of Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount



¹Serious study of the biblical text must look at the ‘then’ meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the ‘now’ meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

²Luke. 16:13 (GNT): Οὐδείς οἰκέτης δύναται δυοῖς κυρίοις δουλεύειν· ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἓνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἀγαπήσει, ἢ ἐνὸς ἀνθέξεται καὶ τοῦ ἑτέρου καταφρονήσει. οὐ δύνασθε θεῷ δουλεύειν καὶ μαμωνᾶ.

loyalties.

Two masters: *δυσὶ κυρίοις*. One point of exegesis is the parallelism of Luke 16:13, *Οὐδεὶς οἰκέτης δύναται δυσὶ κυρίοις δουλεύειν· ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἓνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἀγαπήσει*. Even without understanding Koine Greek one can see how closely the wording is between the two texts in Matthew and Luke. The single difference is Luke's addition of *οἰκέτης* to the maxim. The translation differences are then simply, "no one can . . ." (Matthew) and "no household slave can . . ." (Luke). The legal tone of the maxim in Luke is more explicit than in Matthew, which is not surprising given the targeted initial readership of both gospels.

As Betz and Collins observe,³ the maxim, "No one can serve two masters," is stated as a legal principle largely of Roman law in the ancient world.⁴ As a general legal principle the maxim accurately reflects ancient Roman law, although numerous exceptions of shared ownership of slaves can be documented in the Roman empire. Matthew's omission of "household slave" (*οἰκέτης*) seems to suggest a de-emphasis on the legal principle in favor of the theological emphasis of the text. The thrust of Matthew's wording strongly points toward the experientially and ethically impossible situation of trying to serve two masters.

Hate / Love: *μισήσει / ἀγαπήσει*. The alternative verbal expressions of "hate" / "love" (*μισήσει / ἀγαπήσει*) clearly express opposite ideas. This pair of verbal expressions reflect contrary attitudes, more precisely, postures, of the slave to two masters, while in the next set "be devoted to" / "despise" (*ἀνθέξεται / καταφρονήσει*) focus on contrary behaviors. Thus a slave with two masters faces a psychological dilemma of major proportions in both attitude and behavior. The legal principle of one master requires unconditional loyalty to the single master. But placed in the impossible situation of having two masters, the slave faces a crisis in both attitude and behavior. Jesus simply states the obvious from human experience in the slave possessing culture of that time.

We live today in a culture that prides itself on 'multi-tasking,' i.e., doing many activities at the same time. But in the delusion of succeeding at this, our culture has one of the shortest attention spans of any culture in history. Lack of concentration and unwillingness to make long term commitments plague modern western society. Just study the traffic accident reports of most any western country in order to get a clear picture of the consequences of this tendency. People long ago realized that one must build his or her life around a primary commitment / loyalty if the rest of life is to fall into proper order. Otherwise, chaos envelopes one's life. Jesus reflects here that ancient wisdom, and uses it to make the point that primary loyalty must be to God.

II. God must have priority over mammon, v. 24b

or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth

ἢ ἐνὸς ἀνθέξεται καὶ τοῦ ἕτερου καταφρονήσει. οὐ δύνασθε θεῷ δουλεύειν καὶ μαμωνᾶ.

In the second half of this saying the emphasis shifts from the purely human experience to the spiritual application of the principle of undivided loyalty.

Devoted to / Despise: *ἀνθέξεται / καταφρονήσει*. To be sure hyperbole comes to play here with the playing of these two behavior oriented verbs against each other as opposites. "The Greek verb translated be devoted to occurs only three other times in the New Testament. It is found in the Lukan parallel (Luke 16:13), where the meaning is the same. In 1 Thessalonians 5:14 it is rendered 'help (the weak)' by TEV, and in Titus 1:9 TEV translates 'hold firmly to (the message).' Here NEB renders 'be devoted to' (so Brc and NIV), while Mft and AT have 'stand by.' Other than in the Lukan parallel at 16:13, the verb translated despise is found in seven other New Testament passages: Matthew 18:10; Romans 2:4; 1 Corinthians 11:22; 1 Timothy 4:12; 6:2; Hebrews 12:2; 2 Peter 2:10. One standard Greek lexicon gives the primary meanings as 'look down on, despise, scorn, treat with contempt.'"⁵ We are facing the impossible dilemma of a split loyalty which leads to an impossible commitment level.

God / Mammon: *θεῷ / μαμωνᾶ*. The true religious intent of the saying of Jesus comes out in this section. In

³"The saying is introduced by what appears to be a proverb: "No one can be a servant [or: slave] of two masters" (*Οὐδεὶς δύναται δυσὶ κυρίοις δουλεύειν*). Proverbial as the statement sounds, it is really a legal provision pertaining to slave law. The two masters envisioned are slave lords. The rule that a slave can be owned by only one owner has been questioned, and there may have been exceptions of co-ownership, but the general rule as stated was no doubt followed most of the time. The omission of "slave" (*οἰκέτης*) in vs. 24a (as compared with the Lukan Q-parallel) indicates that for the SM the statement serves as a theological principle, so that the terms no longer function legally but theologically. Therefore, the phrase "no one can" operates at two levels: the level of the experientially impossible, and the level of the ethically impermissible. The latter is restated unconditionally in vs. 24d. The term *δουλεύειν* ("serve") vacillates between "being a slave to" and "being a servant of." At the theological level, there are no masters, except the one God. The other, Mammon, is not a master in the same sense, so that one may sum up vs. 24 by saying, 'No one can serve two masters because there is only one.'" [Hans Dieter Betz and Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)*, Hermeneia -- a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 456]

⁴See Schulz, *Principles of Roman Law*, 78 (with examples); Elon, *Principles of Jewish Law*, 158. See, e.g., Cicero *Balbo* 11.28: "No one of our citizens can be a citizen of two states" ("duarum civitatum civis noster esse nemo potest").

⁵Barclay Moon Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, UBS helps for translators; UBS handbook series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 184.

Jesus' application of the legal principle against two masters, His point was to stress the impossibility of serving God and mammon.

To serve is defined in both 24a and 24a' as *δουλεύειν*. The Greek verb ranges in meaning inside the New Testament from serving to be subservient to.⁶ With the first use the object of the service is *δυσὶ κυρίοις* "two masters". With the second use the object of the service is *θεῷ δουλεύειν καὶ μαμωνᾷ* "God and wealth". The tones of the service are spelled out by the positive traits of *ἀγαπήσει* "love" and *ἀνθέξεται* "be devoted to". Service means commitment, proper attitude, and performance.

The idea of mammon (*μαμωνᾷ*) needs explanation. Betz and Collins offer helpful insight here:⁷

On the other hand, then, is the opposite, "serving Mammon," a pseudo-religious captivation by materialism. The term "mammon" (*μαμμωνᾶς*) is interesting for a number of reasons. Originally an Aramaic term, *ממון*,⁸ in its Greek form it designates "wealth" and "property" as a personified and demonic force.⁹ The name recognizes the religious structure of materialism. Antiquity had long before recognized that the relentless pursuit of money and possessions is tantamount to the worship of a pseudo-deity. Naming this pseudo-deity by a foreign name indicates its demonic and even magical character. Serving this Mammon results in self-enslavement; one has lost control. To many of those who are in the service of this pseudo-deity, the worship of the true God may appear to be compatible.¹⁰ Things could be neatly arranged: serving materialistic goals in the secular world, and serving God in the religious world. Such a combination, popular as it may be, however, renders the service of the true God impossible.¹¹ Once Mammon is granted power, the demands by this pseudo-god crowd out everything else, and the worship of God becomes an empty gesture. The problem is not, therefore, spending money or owning property, but becoming possessed by Mammon's demonic powers.

Thus the tendency of modern Bible translators to use terms like 'wealth' is accurate, if the term is understood in broad, inclusive categories.¹² The use of the term 'money' is not incorrect, but is too limiting since the Greek term is inclusive of more than just money.¹³

Two literary contextual aspects are important to consider for the meaning of this text. **First** is the triplicate nature of the sayings of Jesus in Matt. 6:19-21, 22-23, and 24. All three sayings are closely connected to a generally common theme of focusing on God rather than on the world. Many commentators miss this point and see the theme as a negative teaching against worldliness. Had they have understood the **second** aspect of literary connection -- the link to the third prayer petition in the Model Prayer -- they would have picked up on the positive thrust of the sayings focusing attention on God as the basic point of all three sayings.

In the six petitions of the Model Prayer in 6:9-13, the first three emphasize the vertical relationship of the

⁶*δουλεύω*: a be a slave: 87.79; b be controlled by: 37.25; c serve: 35.27 [Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, vol. 2, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996), 66-67.]

⁷Hans Dieter Betz and Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, Including the Sermon on the Plain (Matthew 5:3-7:27 and Luke 6:20-49)*, Hermeneia -- a critical and historical commentary on the Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 458.

⁸Emphatic state, *ממון*, Greek *μαμωνᾶς*, Latin *Mam(m)ona*. The term is rare in the NT (see also Luke 16:9*, 11*; cf. 2 Clem. 6.1). In Jewish literature it is attested in Sir 31(34):8*; 1QS 6.2 (cf. 6.24-25); 1Q27.1, 2, 5; CD 14.20; 'Abot 2.17, and so on. The occurrence in the SM says nothing about being a translation from the Aramaic; the loanword was already current in the Greek by the time of the NT. For discussion and references see Friedrich Hauck, "μαμωνᾶς" TDNT 4.388-90; BAGD, s.v. *μαμωνᾶς*; Horst Balz, EWNT (EDNT), 2, s.v. *μαμωνᾶς*; Str-B 1.433-35; Black, Approach, 139-40; Hans Peter Rüger, "Μαμωνᾶς," ZNW 64 (1973) 127-31; Klaus Beyer, Die aramäischen Texte vom Toten Meer (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984) 625; Braun, Radikalismus, 2.74 n. 3; Schwarz, "Und Jesus sprach," 6, 21-22; B. A. Mastin, "Latin *Mam(m)ona* and the Semitic Languages: A False Trail and a Suggestion," Bib 65 (1984) 87-90.

⁹Thus the expression "mammon of iniquity" (*ὁ μαμωνᾶς τῆς ἀδικίας*) in Luke 16:9*, 11*, for which see Francesco Vattioni, "Mammona iniquitatis," Augustinianum 5 (1965) 379-86.

¹⁰The great example demonstrating this point is the story of the rich young man in Mark 10:17-22* par. Cf. also *Tg. Prov.* 3:9: "Honor Yahweh with your mammon"; *Tg. Deut.* 6:5: "You shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mammon."

¹¹These ideas were commonplace in antiquity. Cf. the Greek and Latin parallel references, esp. the gnomic poet Demophilus, *Sententiae Pythagoreorum*, ed. Johann Conrad Orelli, *Opuscula Graecorum Veterum Sententiosa et Moralia* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1819) 1.42; cited by Wettstein, 1.333: φιλοχρήματον, καὶ φιλόθεον τὸν αὐτὸν ἀδύνατον εἶναι· ὁ γὰρ ... φιλοχρήματος ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἀδίκος ("It is impossible that the same person is... a lover of money and a lover of God; for the...lover of money is by necessity unrighteous.") For this line of thought cf. also Jas 4:4*; 1 John 2:15-17*.

¹²NRSV, NASB, BBE: "wealth"; NLT, ESV, GNB; HCSB, NIV, NIV, TNIV, Message: "money"; KJV, NKJV, ASV, D-R, RSV: "mammon"; LB 1912; Elberfelder 1905: "dem Mammon"; Louis Segond 1910: "Mamon"; Vulgate: *mamonae*; NCV: "worldly riches"; LBA: "las riquezas."

¹³Paul's admonitions in 1 Timothy do not have quite the same broad scope as 'mammon' but are similar in thrust: 1 Tim. 3:3, the overseer is not to be "a lover of money"; 3:8, deacons are not to be "greedy for money"; 6:10, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." One of the end-time traits is that "people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money,..." (2 Tim. 3:2). Hebrews 13:5 offers this advice: "Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'"

disciple with the Heavenly Father. Quite naturally and expectantly then the three Logia in 6:19-24 would stress the same point as amplifications of these prayer petitions. This can be visually charted out as follows, and as reflected in the above Literary Structural Chart of the entire Sermon:

1. “Hallowed be your name” (6:9b)

extended with:

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (6:19-21)

2. “Your kingdom come” (6:10a)

extended with:

“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (6:22-23)

3. “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (6:10b)

extended with:

“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.” (6:24)

Thus our prayer for God’s will to be fully implemented in our life and in our world just as it is in Heaven carries with it the critical obligation to be undivided in our commitment to serve God. Only out of such undivided loyalty to God will we be able to experience the will of God taking place in our life, and in our world.

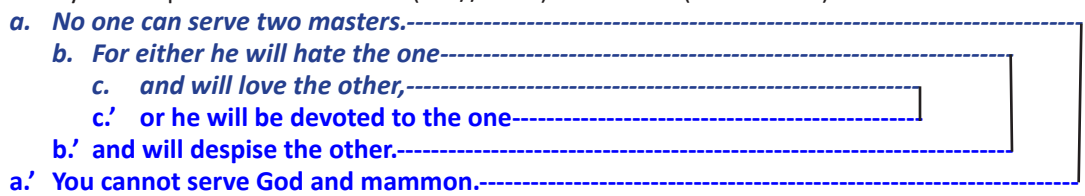
**Diagram of the Sermon on the Mount
Mt. 5:21-26**

101 ^{6:24} **No one can serve two masters;**
 for
 either
 102 **he will hate the one**
 and
 103 **he will love the other,**
 or
 104 **he will be devoted to one**
 and
 105 **he will despise the other.**

 106 **You cannot serve God and mammon.**

At the informal level a structural parallelism exists among these six declarations, which Davies and Allison have called attention to in their commentary:¹⁴

The synthetic parallelism is chiasmic (abc//c’b’a’) and triadic (abc & c’b’a’):

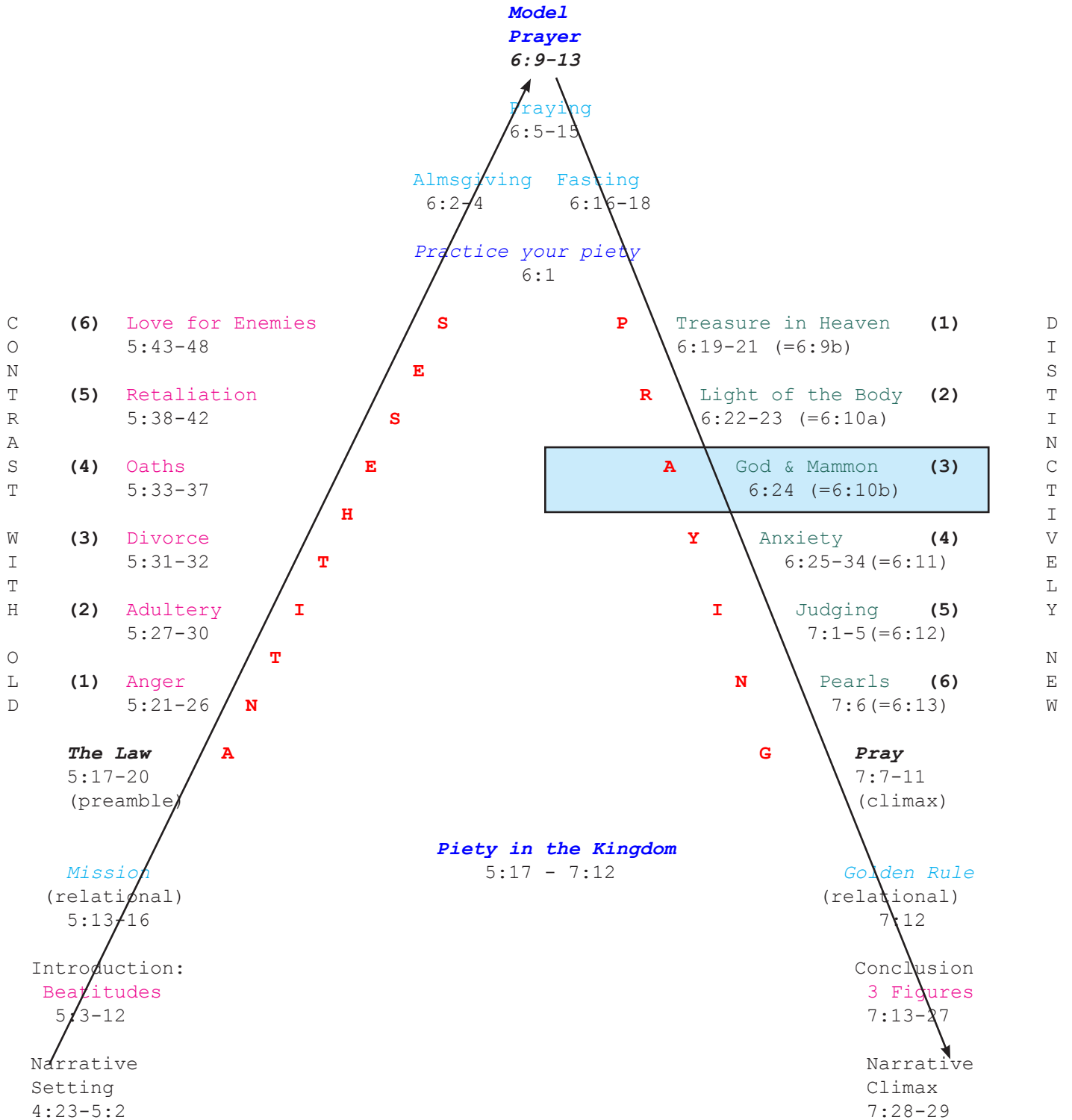


Clearly an inter-connectedness of these six statements is present and together they present a unified expression of idea. Synthetic parallelism, sometimes called ‘step-parallelism,’ was one of the common patterns of thought expression among ancient Jews. Combining it with a chiasmic structure in a threefold pattern is not unusual in ancient Jewish literature either. Statements a.b.c. play off the everyday life reference to human slavery, while the ‘step forward’ in the second strophe, statements c., b., a., focus on the spiritual application which is climaxed by statement a.’ Thus the maxim about two masters (statement a.) provides the foundation for the first two expansion statements b. and c. Then the climatic maxim about God and mammon (statement a.’) provides the target for the spiritual application statements (c.’ and b.’). In typical chiasmic expression the central point is on ‘loving’ / ‘being devoted to’ one master (statements c. and c.’). Slaves should love / be devoted to one master -- this is the major point of the chiasm. Ultimately this means we as disciples should be devoted to God alone.

¹⁴W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 642.

The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 4:23-7:29



Source: Lorin L. Cranford, *Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount: Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing Inc., 1988), 320. Adapted from Gunter Bornkamm, "Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt," *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977-78): 419-432.