



The Sermon on the Mount Study
Bible Study Session 20
Matthew 6:24: Topic 19

Study By
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Greek NT

Οὐδείς δύναται δυοὶ κυρίοις δουλεύειν· ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἓνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἀγαπήσει, ἢ ἐνὸς ἀνθήσεται καὶ τοῦ ἑτέρου καταφρονήσει. οὐ δύνασθε θεῷ δουλεύειν καὶ μαμωνᾷ.

Gute Nachricht Bibel

Niemand kann zwei Herren zugleich dienen. Er wird den einen vernachlässigen und den andern bevorzugen. Er wird dem einen treu sein und den andern hintergehen. Ihr könnt nicht beiden zugleich dienen: Gott und dem Geld.

NRSV

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

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 Study of the Text:¹

1. What did the text mean to the first readers?

In this third pericope of ‘prayer commentary’ by Jesus a simple declaration is put forth about a slave having two owners. It is then followed by expansion and justification, so that the spiritual point more than the daily life point becomes clear as the primary intention of the maxim. 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.

Historical Context:

An exploration of the patterns of slavery in the ancient world is necessary to sharpen the focus of Jesus’ saying here.³ By failing to grasp how the maxim is set forth many Bible students have failed to understand the significance of Jesus’ words here.

The maxim of a slave not having two masters is historically inaccurate.



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 δυοὶ κυρίοις δουλεύειν· ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἓνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἀγαπήσει, ἢ ἐνὸς ἀνθήσεται καὶ τοῦ ἑτέρου καταφρονήσει. οὐ δύνασθε θεῷ δουλεύειν καὶ μαμωνᾷ

³Studies on ancient slavery have taken a sharp turn in the last decades of the twentieth century with the emergence of sociologically based procedures of analysis being applied to the study of the ancient world. In most of the modern world, the ‘classics’ departments of universities on both sides of the Atlantic have downplayed or else dismissed the economic and social impact of slavery in the Greco-Roman world. Mostly this has been done from a modern capitalist viewpoint and to enable an almost fantasy view of the ancient world as the ‘fountain head’ of modern democracy. The modern ideology of anti-marxism drove scholars to dismiss insights from the Soviet block countries who studied ancient slavery intensely, but filtered their findings through a false, modern Marxist grid and thus invalidated most of their findings. For an extremely helpful analysis of this see Richard A. Horsley, “The Slave Systems of Classical Antiquity and Their Reluctant Recognition by Modern Scholars,” *Semeia* 83/84: *Slavery in Text and Interpretation* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998).

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Even in the New Testament allusions to a slave being owned by more than one person exists.⁴ In the ancient world, shared ownership of slaves was relatively common.⁵ The positive / negative attitudes of slaves toward their masters reflected in this verse depict slavery in ways uncommon and thus difficult for modern folks to understand, particularly the positive attitudes of 'love' (ἀγαπήσει) and 'devoted to' (ἀνθεξέται) their masters.



To be a slave in ancient Roman society, and especially a Jewish slave, meant loss of virtually everything of value: family, religious heritage, sense of identity, freedom etc. Slavery was not based on race, but on warfare and the capturing of enemy soldiers and people groups.⁶ Able bodied individuals were made slaves, while most of the rest were simply killed.⁷ Interestingly, the Romans generally considered

⁴Cf. Acts 16:16 (NRSV): “One day, as we were going to the place of prayer, we met a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination and brought **her owners** (τοῖς κυρίοις) a great deal of money by fortune-telling.”

⁵“This statement is not, strictly speaking, true. For instances of one person serving two masters see Acts 16:16; Dio Chrysostom 66:13; *m. Pesah.* 8:1; *m. Git.* 4:5; *t. Yeb.* 9:2. But the point is really another, namely, that one cannot serve two masters well, giving each his due, because their demands will not always be compatible. This is true above all when the masters are God and mammon.” [W. 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), 643.]

⁶Jesus grew up hearing tales of Roman brutality when, at the death of Herod the Great, the Jewish residents around Sepphoris -- some 10 kilometers from Nazareth -- rebelled against the Romans. In retaliation, the Romans enslaved virtually the entire town and residents in the adjoining region.

⁷“In Rome and the Americas, and perhaps in Athens too, mass slavery was a direct consequence of imperial expansion.” Since the Roman economy was far less differentiated and developed than that of modern northwestern Europe and north America, however, Roman slavery “was more directly a product of war: booty capitalism, as Weber called it, instead of industrial capitalism” (Hopkins, 1978:113). We do not need to enter the debate over whether ancient Greece and Rome were “slave societies.” The key historical point is that both classical Athens and especially late Republican and early imperial Rome created an institutionalized system of large-scale dependence on slave labor for the major portion of basic production by a wealthy aristocracy that presided over an empire. Roman intellectuals themselves understood this, as illustrated by a jurist’s etymology which, while surely false, nevertheless reveals the historical awareness that slavery was the direct result of warfare: ‘Slaves [*servi*] are so called because commanders generally sell the people they capture and thereby save [*servare*] them instead of killing them. The word for property in slaves [*mancipia*] is derived from the fact that they are captured from the enemy by force of arms [*manu capiantur*].’ (Florentinus, Digest 1.5.4.2–3). Other ancient intellectuals confirm the connection between slavery and warfare (e.g., Dio Chrysostom, 15, 25; Varro, *Res Rust.* 2.10.4).

“In a complex and contingent development, enslaving millions of subject people was an essential condition and instrument for the emergence of the Roman imperial order during the late Republic. Indeed, the conquest and plunder of a massive empire and the enslavement of millions of conquered people transformed the earlier political-economy of the city of Rome in the course of the last several generations of the Republic. Keith Hopkins (1978) has laid out a systematic analysis and explanation of how this transformation took place—with the exception of his occasional projection of a market economy onto late Republican Rome. Through the plunder taken in their “triumphs” the noble Roman warlords gained massive wealth, the only socially acceptable investment for which was land. Meanwhile, the military campaigns in which the nobles could make their fame and fortune forced prolonged military service on tens of thousands of peasants. More than ten percent of the adult male population in Italy was commonly serving in the army during the last two centuries BCE. Such prolonged military service drove peasant families into debt and impoverishment. Hopkins calculates that in the seventy-two years between 80 and 8 BCE, “roughly half of the peasant families of Roman Italy, over one and a half million people, were forced mostly by state intervention to move from their ancestral farms” (1978:7).

“The increasingly rich nobles were only too ready to take advantage of the impoverished peasant families. “The rich ... acquired the plots of the poor, sometimes by purchase with persuasion, sometimes by force so that in the end they cultivated large estates not farms (Appian, *Civil Wars* 1.7). This systematic land-grabbing by the elite also required the legal transformation of traditionally inalienable land through new laws that guaranteed secure private ownership of land by the heads of the great households (as Weber saw, 67–76, 119–24). With hundreds of thousands of slaves generated by their conquests, they then reorganized the land into large estates run by gangs of slaves to raise the produce (including fine wine and olive oil) required for their luxurious palaces in Rome, Pompeii, and elsewhere, and their large staff of domestic slaves. The Roman elite knew exactly what they were doing: “After a time the rich men in each neighborhood, by using the names of fictitious tenants, contrived to transfer many of these holdings to themselves, and finally they openly took possession of the greater part of the land under their own names ... The result was a rapid decline of the class of free small-holders all over Italy, their place being taken by gangs of foreign slaves, whom the rich employed to cultivate the estates from which they had driven off the free citizens” (Plutarch, *Life of Tiberius Gracchus* 8). The Roman peasant-soldiers were thus used to fight the wars of conquest in which they captured the provincials who replaced them farming what were once their own lands but now taken over by their commanders who took advantage of their impoverishment that resulted from their prolonged absence. “The sale of western prisoners took place on a vast scale: the wars in the valley of the Po, Liguria, Corsica, and Sardinia have been described as mere slave hunts”



The Two Charts above reflect both the Greek words in the NT and the Hebrew words in the OT for 'slave.'



the Jews inferior as slaves along with one or two other eastern Mediterranean ethnic groups. Consequently, a higher percentage of Jews, when captured, were executed rather than made slaves.

Against this backdrop it is difficult to understand any positive attitudes by slaves toward their masters. And yet in an environment where one's very existence depended on the whim of the master, a sense of total dependency and even loyalty can develop, and evidently did exist in ancient Rome.⁸ Slavery of any kind and at every point of history is to be condemned as reflecting an uncivilized society. The Old and New Testaments, however, came to grips with the reality of slavery that was so much a part of society as to be unthinkable to abolish it without totally changing society -- something Christianity did not aspire to do in direct confrontation with a contrary system of values. Instead, in the apostolic era the teachings of Jesus and the apostles on human dignity and respect for one another laid

the foundation for eventual social change.⁹

Jesus' expression of the maxim based on ancient slavery reflects a pattern that can be found in the literature of that time.

The import of 6:24a is hardly novel, as the following texts, Jewish and non-Jewish, show: *Plato, Rep.* 8:555C ('It is impossible for the citizens of a city to honour wealth and at the same time acquire a proper amount of temperance; because they cannot avoid neglecting either the one or the other'); *Philo, frag.* 2:649 (see S^{10B} 1, p. 435: 'It is impossible for love of the world to coexist with the love of God...'); *Poimandres* 4:6b ('It is not possible, my son, to attach yourself both to things mortal and to things divine. And he who wills to make his choice is left free to choose the one or the other. It is not possible to take both'); *T. Jud*¹¹: 18:6 (δυσὶ γὰρ πάθεισιν ἐναντίοις δουλεύειν καὶ θεῶ ὑπακοῦσαι οὐ δύναται). Also of interest is *Ruth Rab.* on 3:14: 'Man, while he lives, is the slave of two masters: the slave of his Creator and the slave of his inclination. When he does the will of his Creator he angers his inclination, and when he does the will of his inclination, he angers his Creator. When he dies, he is freed, a slave free from his master' (cf. b¹² Ber.

(Gordon: 109). From his glorious conquests of the Gauls the great general Julius Caesar may well have introduced as many as a million slaves into Italy, primarily to be deployed on the expanding estates of wealthy and powerful Roman nobles. Large numbers of slaves also came from Asia Minor and Syria (and Judea) through piracy as well as wars of conquest (Gordon: 94–95)."

[Richard A. Horsley, "The Slave Systems of Classical Antiquity and Their Reluctant Recognition by Modern Scholars," *Semeia* 83/84: *Slavery in Text and Interpretation* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 1998).]

⁸I would venture to suggest this dependency attitude reflects many of the same traits as that of a 'battered wife' in modern society. Even though irrational in many ways, it none the less exists at high levels of loyalty.

⁹For example, see Gal. 3:28 (NRSV): "There is no longer Jew or Greek, **there is no longer slave or free**, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

^{10B}B SB H. L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, 6 vols., Munich, 1921–1961.

¹¹ Jud. T. Jud. Testament of Judah

¹²*Babylonian Talmud*

61a; b¹³, Erub. 18a).¹⁴

Thus, Jesus drew upon an idea frequently found in his world, and then applied it to a specific teaching distinctly His.

Literary Aspects:

This single verse contains several interesting literary angles that are important for the interpretation of the text.

Literary Form:

The literary genre of this text reflects a general proverb (maxim) with explanatory amplification (cf. statements #101 and #s 102-106 in the block diagram below). Together these statements form a Logia Jesu, i.e., a Saying of Jesus.

One should note also the exact parallel wording in the original Greek text between Mt. 6:24 and Luke 16:13:

Mt. 6:26. Οὐδείς δύναται δυοῖ κυρίοις δουλεύειν· ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἕνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἀγαπήσει, ἢ ἐνὸς ἀνθήξεται καὶ τοῦ ἑτέρου καταφρονήσει. οὐ δύνασθε θεῶ δουλεύειν καὶ μαμωνᾶ.

Lk. 16:13. Οὐδείς οἰκέτης δύναται δυοῖ κυρίοις δουλεύειν· ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἕνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἀγαπήσει, ἢ ἐνὸς ἀνθήξεται καὶ τοῦ ἑτέρου καταφρονήσει. οὐ δύνασθε θεῶ δουλεύειν καὶ μαμωνᾶ.

In form critical and, especially, source critical methods of Bible study, this constitutes a Q-source¹⁵ for both Matthew and Luke. Matthew has taken this source and applied it to the Sermon as an amplification of the third prayer petition in the Model Prayer. But Luke has used this same source as an extension of the parable of the dishonest steward in Luke 16:1-12. The core meaning in both settings remains the same, while the application of this meaning is different between the two gospel writers.

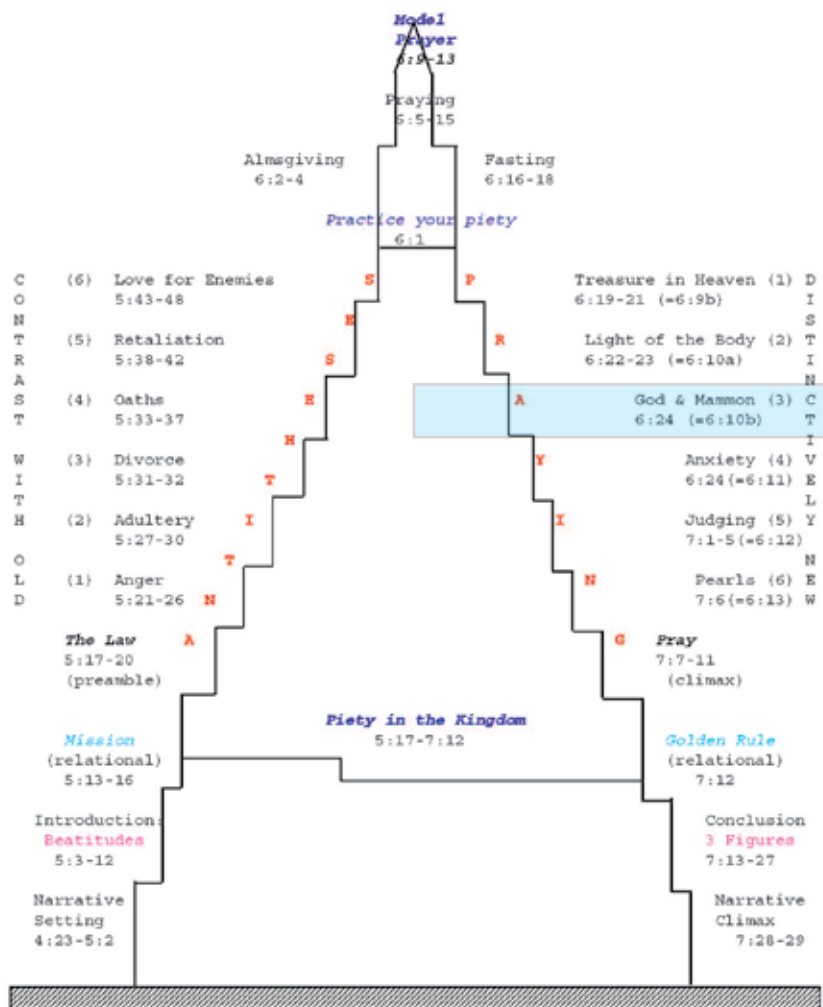
Literary Setting:

Two aspects of literary context are important to consider. **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 with 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

The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount

Matthew 4:23-7:29



Source: Lerin 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.

¹³b. *Babylonian Talmud*

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.

¹⁵The letter Q stands for the German word *Quelle* meaning 'source.' Because of the extensive parallels in wording and structural organization of the first three gospels, the so-called Synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, an understanding of sources used by these gospel writers has emerged over the past 300 years of New Testament study. For more details on the Q-document proposal see "Q document," Wikipedia Encyclopedia online.

of the 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.

Literary Structure:

The block diagram of the text in English highlights the flow of ideas, thus making it easier to understand how they are put together as a unit of expression:

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:¹⁶

The synthetic parallelism is chiasmic and triadic:

- | |
|---|
| a. No one can <i>serve</i> two masters.
b. For either he will <i>hate</i> the one
c. and will <i>love</i> the other, |
| c.' or he will <i>be devoted</i> to the one
b.' and will <i>despise</i> the other.
a.' You cannot serve God and mammon. |

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

¹⁶W. 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.

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 c.). 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.

Exegesis of the Text:

Slaves and masters: "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other" (Οὐδεὶς δύναται δυοῖ κυρίοις δουλεύειν· ἢ γὰρ τὸν ἓνα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἕτερον ἀγαπήσει). The historical and literary backdrop to these statements have already been addressed. One point of exegesis remaining is the parallelism of Luke 16:13, Οὐδεὶς οἰκέτης δύναται δυοῖ 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,¹⁷ the maxim, "No one can serve two masters," is stated as a legal principle largely of Roman law in the ancient world.¹⁸ 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.

The alternative verbal expressions of "hate" / "love" (μισήσει / ἀγαπήσει) clearly express opposite ideas. This pair of verbal expressions reflect contrary attitudes 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.

God and mammon: "or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth" (ἢ ἐνὸς ἀνθέξεται καὶ τοῦ ἐτέρου καταφρονήσει. οὐ δύνασθε θεῷ δουλεύειν καὶ μαμωνᾷ). The true religious intent of the saying of Jesus comes out in this section. In 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.¹⁹ With the first use the object of the service is δυοῖ 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

¹⁷"The saying is introduced by what appears to be a proverb: "No one can be a servant [or: slave] of two masters" (Οὐδεὶς δύναται δυοῖ 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]

¹⁸See 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").

¹⁹δουλεύω: 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.]

devoted to“. Service means commitment, proper attitude, and performance.

The idea of mammon (μαμμωνᾶ) needs explanation. Betz and Collins offer helpful insight here:²⁰

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, מַמְוֹן,²¹ in its Greek form it designates “wealth” and “property” as a personified and demonic force.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ The use of the term ‘money’ is not incorrect, but is too limiting since the Greek term is inclusive of more than just money.

James Montgomery Boice offers helpful insight into the application of this text:

The final verse of our section (v. 24) deals with the mutually exclusive nature of serving God and riches. “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”

Nothing could be said more clearly, or be more obvious. It should be a heart-searching question for all Christians. Ask yourself this: Can anything be more insulting to God, who has redeemed us from the slavery of sin, put us in Christ, and given us all things richly to enjoy than to take the name of our God upon us, to be called by his name, and then to demonstrate by every action and every decision of life that we actually serve money?

In discussing this verse in *The Sermon on the Mount*, Dr. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones tells the story of a farmer who one day reported to his wife with great joy that his best cow had given birth to twin calves, one red and

²⁰Hans 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.

²¹Emphatic state, מַמְוֹן, Greek μαμμωνᾶς, 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, “μαμμωνᾶς” TDNT 4.388–90; BAGD, s.v. μαμμωνᾶς; Horst Balz, EWNT (EDNT), 2, s.v. μαμμωνᾶς; Str-B 1.433–35; Black, Approach, 139–40; Hans Peter Rieger, “Μαμμωνᾶς,” 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.

²²Thus the expression “mammon of iniquity” (ὁ μαμμωνᾶς τῆς ἀδικίας) in Luke 16:9*, 11*, for which see Francesco Vattioni, “Mammona iniquitatis,” *Augustinianum* 5 (1965) 379–86.

²³The 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.”

²⁴These 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: φιλοχρήματος, καὶ φιλόθεον τὸν αὐτὸν ἀδύνατον εἶναι: ὁ γὰρ ... φιλοχρήματος ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἄδικοος (“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*.

²⁵NRSV, NASB, BBE: “wealth”; NLT, ESV, GNB; HCSB, NIV, TNIV, Message: “money”; KJV, NKJV, ASV, D-R, RSV: “mammon”; LB 1912; Elberfelder 1905: “dem Mammon”; Louis Segond 1910: “Mamon”; Vulgate: mammonae”; NCV: “worldly riches”;

one white. He said, “You know, I have been led of the Lord to dedicate one of the calves to him. We will raise them together. Then when the time comes to sell them, we will keep the proceeds that come from one calf and we will give the proceeds that come from the other to the Lord’s work.”

His wife asked which calf he was going to dedicate to the Lord, but he answered that there was no need to decide that then. “We will treat them both in the same way,” he said, “and when that time comes we will sell them as I have said.”

Several months later the man entered the kitchen looking very sad and miserable. When his wife asked what was troubling him he said, “I have bad news for you. The Lord’s calf is dead.” “But,” his wife remonstrated, “you had not yet decided which was to be the Lord’s calf.” “Oh, yes” he said. “I had always determined that it was to be the white one, and it is the white calf that has died.”

It is always the Lord’s calf that dies—unless we are absolutely clear about our service to him and about the true nature of our possessions. Who owns your possessions? The Lord Jesus Christ tells us that either God owns them and you serve him, or else your possessions own you, and you serve them. In any case, no one ever really possesses them himself, although many persons think they do. May God give us each the victory that comes when our gifts, wealth, time, friends, ambitions, and talents are turned over to him and we use them to establish indestructible riches in heaven.²⁶

2. What does the text mean to us today?

1) How many ‘masters’ do you have?

2) Who do you serve?

3) What does ‘service to God’ mean?

²⁶James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount : An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2002), 213–218.