



The Sermon on the Mount Study
Bible Study Session 18
Matthew 6:22-23

Study By
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Greek NT

22 Ὁ λύχνος τοῦ σώματός ἐστιν ὁ ὀφθαλμός. ἐὰν οὖν ᾗ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου ἀπλοῦς, ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου φωτεινὸν ἔσται· 23 ἐὰν δὲ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου πονηρὸς ᾗ, ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου σκοτεινὸν ἔσται. εἰ οὖν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἐν σοὶ σκότος ἐστίν, τὸ σκότος πόσον.

La Biblia de las Américas

22 La lámpara del cuerpo es el ojo; por eso, si tu ojo está sano, todo tu cuerpo estará lleno de luz. 23 Pero si tu ojo está malo, todo tu cuerpo estará lleno de oscuridad. Así que, si la luz que hay en ti es oscuridad, ¡cuán grande no será la oscuridad!

NRSV

22 The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; 23 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!

NLT

22 Your eye is a lamp for your body. A pure eye lets sunshine into your soul. 23 But an evil eye shuts out the light and plunges you into darkness. If the light you think you have is really darkness, how deep that darkness will be!

The Outline of the Text:¹

The pictorial language of Jesus certainly captures our attention. The eye is a lamp. The lamp is an entry point into the body for sunshine to enter into the body. A healthy eye means the entire body is flooded with sun light on the inside of the body. But an evil eye plunges the body into total darkness inwardly. Some light is not really light, even though we may think it is; instead, it is actually darkness. Clearly Jesus is talking figuratively here, not literally! And what does He mean by all this?

Discovering the meaning of these words is the goal of our study of this passage. This means exploring the way these word pictures functioned in the first century Jewish world, and how distinctive meaning was injected into them by Jesus. Also, how this language relates to the second petition in the Model Prayer (6:10a) is part of that discovery.

“Your kingdom come.”



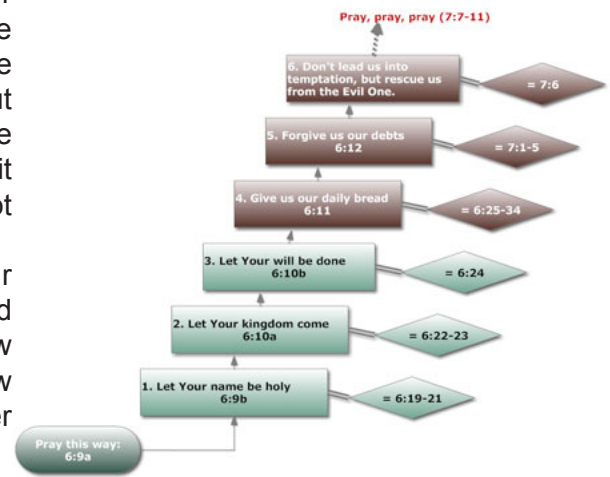
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Clearly the language is not speaking of a physical eye and body. These are but pointers to something spiritual in nature. Literarily this material is parabolic saying in genre, which signals that the text is making a comparison between something material and spiritual truth. The way this is done here is to put a basic principle on the table as a parabolic saying, and then to amplify and apply this truth with explanation and warning. All of this stands as an elaboration of the prayer petition asking for God’s kingdom, i.e., His expressed authority, to take place in increasing fashion in this world. When we ask for this to happen we need to make sure our ‘eye’ is healthy so we can grasp how that divine authority is to express itself in our life. Spiritual awareness of God moving in our life is critical for knowing when and how God is seeking to lead us through life. If we have an ‘evil eye’ then we stumble along completely oblivious of the presence and activity of God in both our life and in our world. This makes our request for the coming of God’s kingdom rather hallow and meaningless.

I. The eye is a lamp. v. 22a

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.

Role of Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount



The eye is the lamp of the body.

Ὁ λύχνος τοῦ σώματός ἐστιν ὁ ὀφθαλμός.

Parabolic expression always makes a comparison between something concrete and something abstract like spiritual reality. The material designation is simple and easy to understand, but points to something beyond itself that is more complicated and difficult to understand.

The challenge of this proverb is its designations reflecting ancient viewpoints that are different from modern perspectives. The human eye is equated with a lamp, and the lamp is not for illuminating a room but to illuminate the interior of the human body. In ancient Jewish writings the eye is frequently associated with light, but hardly ever with a lamp, such as here, even though this linkage was common in ancient Greek literature. More complicated is the tendency of modern interpreters to treat the lamp image more as a mirror or a window, than as a lamp, in clear violation of the language of the text. This reflects modern understanding of a lamp as producing light within itself through being lighted up by electrical current etc. Light as produced from within the eye doesn't make sense in modern perspective, and so the image of a lamp is largely ignored by most interpreters. The ancient world, including Jews, had a different understanding of how the eye works.² For a person to be able to see with his eyes, the fire or light understood to reside inside the eye had to be burning before sight was possible. It then enabled the person to see the outside world illuminated by the light of the sun. If that fire inside the eye wasn't burning, the eye was dark and sight was impossible. Thus, the eye functioned like a lamp; it had to be burning before it gave off light to enable sight to take place. When the light coming from inside the eye made contact with the outside things that were illuminated by the sun, the individual could see and recognize the surrounding material world.



Now what was the fire inside the eye that had to be burning? Ancient Greeks often assumed that this fire in the eye was connected to the mind. It was the mind that provided the fuel to fire up the light inside the eye, just as olive oil was the fuel for the ancient lamp. But Jesus turns a different direction in His use of this proverb. For the fire inside the eye to burn and thus enable sight, one has to possess spiritual awareness of and openness to the Kingdom of God. It is the posture of humble submission to God that lights up the fire in our spiritual eye and thus enables the light of God to penetrate into the interior of our life. Only then can we see spiritually. It was this very thing that was missing among the Pharisees. Their devotion to God was entirely external, and the light of God had no chance to penetrate into their soul deep down within. No fire of spiritual awareness was burning in their spiritual eye, and so they were completely ignorant of what God was seeking to do in His Kingdom. Jesus wants something better for His disciples.

II. Keep your eye healthy, vv. 22b-23

So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; 23 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!



ἐὰν οὖν ἢ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου ἀπλοῦς, ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου φωτεινὸν ἔσται· 23 ἐὰν δὲ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου πονηρὸς ἢ, ὅλον τὸ σῶμά σου σκοτεινὸν ἔσται. εἰ οὖν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἐν σοὶ σκότος ἐστίν, τὸ σκότος πόσον

The inferential conjunction οὖν draws a conclusion from



²“Pre-modern people tended to believe that the eyes contain a fire or light, and that this fire or light is what makes sight possible (see Allison (v)). Ancient Jews were no exception. They spoke of ‘the light of the eyes’ (Prov 15:30 MT; Tob 10:5; 11:13 a), of eyes becoming dimmed or darkened (Gen 27:1; 48:10; Deut 34:7; Lam 5:17; T. Benj. 4:2; Josephus, Ant. 8:268; b. Ber. 16b), and of God ‘enlightening’ or ‘brightening’ the eyes (Ezra 9:8; Bar 1:12; cf. 1 Sam 14:24–30 MT; T. Gad. 5:7; b. Yeb. 63a; b. Meg. 12b). They imagined that the eye was like the sun, both being senders of rays (2 Sam 12:11; Ecclus 23:19; 3 Bar. 8; Jos. Asen. 14:9), and they told stories in which the light or fire of the eyes actually became so intense that it was visible (Dan 10:6; Rev 1:14; 2:18; 19:12; 1 En 106:2, 5, 10; 2 En 1:5; 3 En 1:7–8; 9:4; 25:2–3, 6–7; Par. Jer. 7:3; b. B. Meş. 59b; b. Šabb. 33b). For the eye as a lamp, see Empedocles, frag. 84 (= D.-K. I, 342:4–9 [31 B 84]); Dan 10:6; Zech 4; T. Job 18:3; 2 En 42:1 A; 3 En 35:2; b. Šabb. 151b. (cf. Theocritus, Idylls 24:18–19; Theophrastus, De sensu 26, quoting Alcmaeon; Aristotle, De sensu 437a 22–6).” [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), 635.]

the beginning proverb. The antithetical parallelism between a 'healthy' (ἀπλοῦς) eye and an 'evil' (πονηρὸς) eye sets up two options of spiritual reality. The healthy eye results in a body full of light (φωτεινὸν), while the evil eye produces a body 'full of darkness' (σκοτεινὸν).

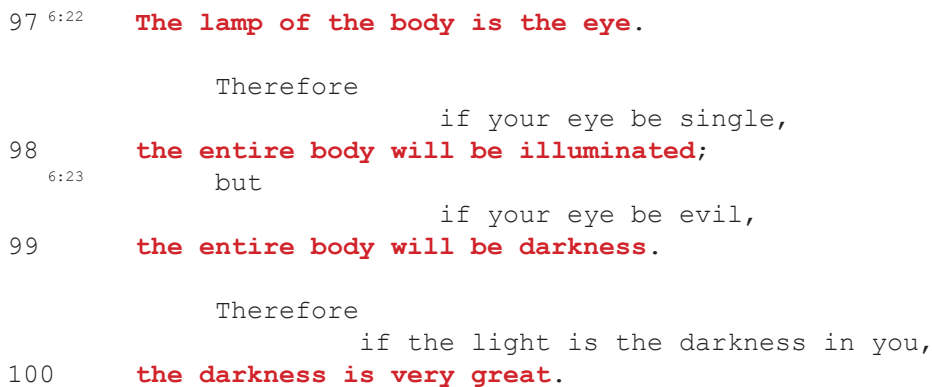
The ἀπλοῦς eye is rather simple expression, but masks over the significant translation difficulties posed by the two contrasting adjectives of ἀπλοῦς and πονηρὸς. The NRSV use of healthy / unhealthy to translate the two Greek terms reflects an effort to produce a sensible English expression, but not a literal translation of the Greek words. The huge variations of translation patterns³ revolves largely around whether to use terms based on the health of the physical eye or the moral tone of the spiritual eye. The Greek adjective ἀπλοῦς stresses physical health ('soundness'), while the adjective πονηρὸς emphasizes moral tones. The body being completely filled with light reflects not only profound spiritual understanding of the Kingdom of God, but also the positive impact of God's rule reaching down to the interior of a person and not just changing outward behavior. The opposite, 'full of darkness,' underscores not only complete ignorance of God's active presence but the complete inability of that divine presence to make an impact on the inner life of the individual.

Light and darkness here suggest the presence or absence of God in one's life. The body here represents one's complete life in this world. The option is to live life in complete ignorance of God's presence and leadership, or to live it in deep understanding of how He is leading and directing our life. These are two very different lives!

The second inferential conjunction οὖν draws an additional conclusion with disturbing implications. What if the 'light' we assume to be present in our spiritual eye is actually darkness and not light? The surface logic of this is challenging, but the meaning contextually is profound. How can light be darkness? Only if the light in the spiritual eye is false perception of God's presence. We assume we know when God is present and guiding, but in reality He is absent and having no impact upon our life. This not so subtle allusion here was to the Pharisees of Jesus' day. They thought for certain that they understood how God was at work in their life and world. But Jesus knew that they were spiritually blind to God⁴ and this produced devastating disaster. Thus Jesus concludes with a warning against spiritual deception.

When we ask for God's Kingdom to come we obligate ourselves to developing spiritually healthy eyes. We need to grasp how God moves to assert His authority over our life and in our world. How easily we can miss seeing what God is doing! He wants to impact our lives in deep and profound ways, but we need spiritual sensitivity to His presence and power in order to realize that impact. Thus before we ask Him to come in power and control, there must be humble submission of our entire life to Him. This is the only way to fire up the light inside our spiritual eye so that God's light can flood into our existence with change and transformation.

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



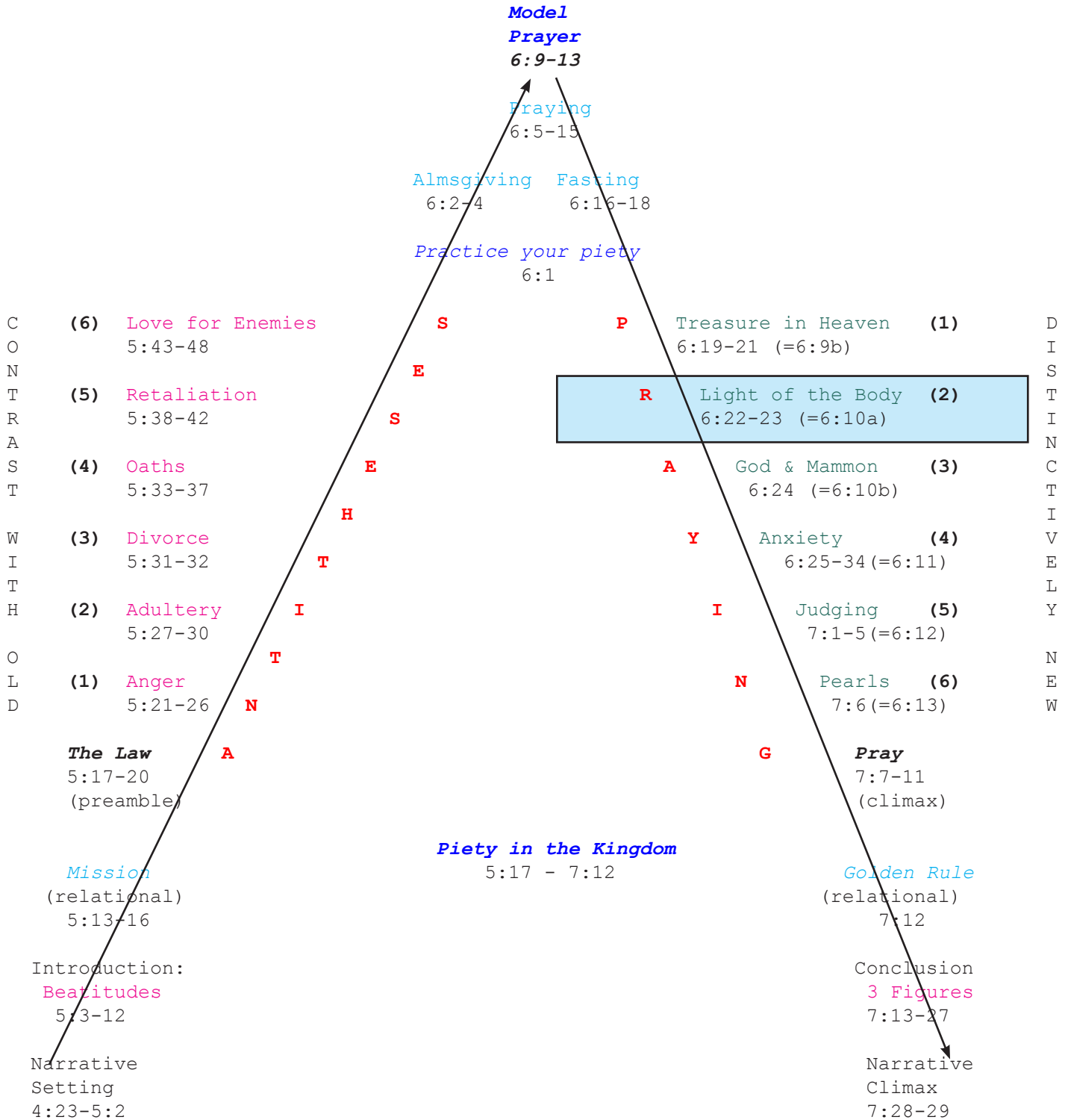
From the diagram, one can clearly notice the literary flow of ideas from the proverb (#97) to the commentary (#s 98-100). Statement 97 is the maxim expression in a proverb form. Statements 98 and 99 form the antithetical parallelism defining opposite scenarios. Then statement 100 draws the conclusion of how disastrous it is when darkness prevails. This brings the saying to a climatic point of warning.

³Various translations adopt differing patterns of expression for ἀπλοῦς and πονηρὸς. NRSV, TNIV: healthy / unhealthy; NASB 95: clear / bad; ESV: healthy / bad; NIV, NLT, NIrV, NKJV, HCSB: good / bad; KJV, ASV, D-R: single / evil; NCV: good / evil; GNT: sound / no good; RSV: sound / not sound; Message: open your eyes wide in wonder and belief / live squinty-eyed in greed and distrust; Net Bible: healthy / diseased; Cotton Patch: in focus / not in focus; EU: gesund / krank; LB 1912: einfältig / ein Schalk; ZB: lauter / böse; Courant: en bon / malades; Vul, CVul, BSVul: simplex / nequam; LBA: sano / malo.

⁴Spiritual blindness is another image attached to the Pharisees in Matthew's gospel: 15:14 and 23:16, 24.

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.