

Matthew 6:23–24

22–23 The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

The understanding of this saying of Yeshua must be gleaned from the idiomatic use of “good eye” and “evil eye” in the Tanach and thus in the Jewish and rabbinic literature. An “evil eye” עֵינַי רָעָה is one who lacks generosity and who hoards things for himself. The opposite, then, is a “good eye” עֵינַי טוֹבָה, one who is generous and gives to those in need. Note the following.

Beware that there is no base thought in your heart, saying, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the Lord against you, and it will be a sin in you. (Deut 15:9)

The man who is refined and very delicate among you shall be hostile toward his brother (literally, his eye shall be evil toward his brother, Deut 28:54.

Do not eat the bread of a selfish man (evil of eye, רָע עֵינַי), or desire his delicacies (Prov 23:6)

A man with an evil eye (רָע עֵינַי) hastens after wealth and does not know that want will come upon him. (Prov 28:22)

The rabbis speak similarly:

A good eye (עֵינַי טוֹבָה) and a humble spirit and a lowly soul, they in whom are these are of the disciples of Abraham our father. (m.Avot) 5.19

R. Joshua says, Envy (עֵינַי רָעָה), desire of bad things, and hatred for people push a person out of the world.”

We therefore understand how this saying of Yeshua follows closely on His teaching regarding the storing up of treasures. We store up treasures in heaven in numbers of ways, but one way is to be generous to others, i.e., have a “good eye.”

However, the saying of our text is not so easily understood, for a number of reasons. First, we tend to read the text from our modern world without considering how the ancient man considered the function of the eye. Pre-modern people tended to believe that the eyes contained a fire or light, and it was this fire or light that made seeing possible. Prov 15:30 speaks of the “light of the eyes” (מְאוֹר־עֵינַיִם) and Gen 48:10 speaks of the “eyes becoming dim” as indicating near blindness. In 2Sam 12:11, “broad daylight” is literally “the eyes of the sun” in the Hebrew (עֵינַי הַשֶּׁמֶשׁ). It was not until c. 1500 CE that the eye was understood as collecting and focusing light. Up until that time, the belief was that the eye generated its own light. Thus, in our text, the eye is spoken of as a “lamp” (λύχνος, *luxnos*) which is obviously a source, not a collector, of light.

This being the case, the point that Yeshua is making is that the “light” of the “eye” shines forth in being generous, while the “eye” of the stingy person actually brings darkness. Moreover, the “eye” as a metaphor for one’s generous or stingy heart is capable of representing the entire person (represented metaphorically by one’s “whole body”) and thus one’s entire life. The person who is generous, his generosity is seen in all that he is and does. Conversely, the person who is self-absorbed and therefore stingy is so in all that he is and does. This will be emphasized in Yeshua’s teaching about the “two masters” in v. 24.

We should also note in this regard that the word translated “clear” in the second phrase of v. 22, “so then if your eye is clear,” is ἀπλοῦς (*haplous*) which means “to being motivated by singleness of purpose so as to be open and aboveboard, single, without guile, sincere, straightforward i.e. without a hidden agenda.” This fits well with the understanding that the “eye” is used metaphorically here of one’s disposition, either of generosity or selfishness. Singleness of purpose in being a disciple of Yeshua will evidence itself in a consistent generosity toward others. For if we have become aware of the unspeakable gift of grace given to us in Yeshua, then we will most certainly strive to express a genuine generosity to others. “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matt 10:8).

Thus, the emphasis upon one's whole life having a single, overarching purpose and direction, flows perfectly into the next verse which discussing the impossibility of serving two masters.

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

Yeshua is not speaking here in absolute terms, for surely there are those who serve more than one master (cf. Acts 16:16). But rather what our Lord teaches, and which is an obvious and absolute truth, is that no one can serve two masters well, giving to each his rightful due, for the simple reason that each one, as a master, has the right to demand the attention of the servant at any given moment. Moreover, Yeshua has two masters well in mind: God, on the one hand, and wealth on the other. Thus, His teaching about the two masters is a continuation of His early teaching about storing up treasure (vv. 19–21) and the necessity to be generous (vv. 22–23).

The contrastive terms “love” and “hate” should not be understood so much as an emotional response to the masters, but in terms of faithful labor, “love” having its covenant sense of “loyalty” while “hate” implying a lack of loyalty and service. These two terms are paralleled in the next line with “devoted” and “despise,” again, seen in the context of fulfilling one's obligation to the master.

The Greek word translated here as “wealth” is *μαμωνᾶς*, *mamonas*, which is a transliterated form of the Aramaic *מָמוֹנָא* or *מָמוֹנָא*. The etymology of this word is not certain, though some have suggested *אָמַן*, “to trust” as its root. The word signifies “resources, money, property, or possessions.” Some have suggested that the word had already gained a pejorative sense in the 1st Century. Hengel writes that “Perhaps the early church left this Semitic loan-word untranslated because they regarded it almost as the name of an idol: the service of mammon is idolatry.”

Here Yeshua warns us about the trap of materialism, which reminds us that the same things that impede our striving for righteousness are those which are common to all people in all generations. The snare of materialism is that one's longing for it can never be satisfied. In our affluent society, moving up the economic ladder more often than not simply results in larger homes and more possessions, which in turn require greater outlays of money and the need, therefore, to acquire greater wealth. Moreover, once a person has become used to living at a certain economic level, it is increasingly difficult to ever think of returning to something more modest. Indeed, the desire to have wealth is a master that can never be satisfied.

The simple words of our Lord and Savior at the end of the Sermon apply here: “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (v. 33), that is, all the things necessary for true happiness and fulfillment in being the servant of One Master.