

# The Eye is Lamp of the Body

Matthew 6:22-23

by

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## INTRODUCTION

**“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!”** Matthew 6:22-23 (NASB)

Matthew 6:22-23 contains some fascinating imagery such as the lamp of the body is the eye and that we must be careful that the light within us does not become darkness. This can be a confusing statement since it doesn't make sense when looked at within the modern understanding of vision and how our eyes work. In our modern view, an eye takes in light, rather than giving off light. As a result, we often wonder at the meaning of these verses. We also need to be careful not to take them out of context with surrounding scripture. Jesus' description of the eye should not be viewed as referring to the physical eye, but rather to the moral or ethical character of a person.

The verses of Matthew 6:22-23 are part of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount contains instructions on how to live a life that is both dedicated to and pleasing to God. It proclaims the will of God as He wants it to be lived when the kingdom comes in its fullness.<sup>1</sup> Essentially, the Sermon on the Mount is a type of moral compass pointing the direction that God wants us to go. God desires for his people to be a people of moral character and the Sermon on the Mount puts us on the path of morals and ethics.

## THE HUMAN BODY AND CHARACTER

The Bible uses many metaphors (figure of speech) to heighten our understanding of morals and ethics. Various parts of the human body are used as metaphors to this end. In the Old Testament, the heart signifies: personal identity, vital center, affective center, noetic center (that

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<sup>1</sup> John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 853.

is, sense perception), voluntative center, and the religious and ethical realm of experience.<sup>2</sup> A hard heart signifies a person's resistance to the will of God whereas a soft heart signifies a person's obedience to the will of God.

The tongue is another interesting body part. **“But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison”** (James 3:8 NASB). According Psalm 15:3, those who slander with the tongue will not be allowed in God's presence. In Psalm 120:2 David cried out to God to save him from people with lying lips and deceitful tongues. It would seem that when evil is in the heart, the tongue is the relief valve (or perhaps flood gate) allowing it to escape.

The hand is often used to symbolize power in the Bible. In Exodus chapter three at the burning bush, God told Moses that he would stretch out his hand to strike Egypt so that the Israelites would be set free. In 2 Kings 5:11, Naaman expected Elisha to cure him of leprosy by waving his hand over him. In Mark 14:62 Jesus said he would be seated at the right hand of God. There are many other instances where the hand is used to convey power, control, and even ownership.

The eye is often used as a metaphor symbolizing the understanding or ignorance<sup>3</sup>. This is because the sight of the body, the eye, corresponds to the sight (or lack of it) of its spirit, which is the understanding (or ignorance). Job wrote that his eyes had grown dim with grief (Job 17:7) metaphorically meaning that eyes reflected his emotions. The Bible describes a proud man as having haughty eyes (Proverbs 6:17) and a humble man as having downcast eyes (Job 22:29). In Proverbs the process of seeing is intimately connected to the heart.<sup>4</sup>

The reason I demonstrated how the Bible uses body parts as metaphors is because it demonstrates that there is a connection between the body and ethics and is therefore necessary to understand Matthew 6:22-23. We need to understand what the audience Jesus was talking to heard. We need to understand what they understood. We need to understand that when Jesus talked about the eye, his audience did not picture an eyeball, but instead thought about the character and ethical references metaphorically associated with the eye.

#### THE PURPOSE OF A LAMP

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew McAfee, The Heart of Pharaoh in Exodus 4-15, Bulletin For Biblical Research 20 (3) pg. 338

<sup>3</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1963), 270.

<sup>4</sup> Candida Moss, “Blurred vision and ethical confusion: the rhetorical function of Matthew 6:22-23. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73, no. 4. Pg. 769

Since Jesus claimed that the eye is the lamp of the body, in Matthew 6:22, it is important to have a good understanding of what a lamp is and what its purpose was for the people Jesus was talking to. In Biblical times, a lamp was a very simple device. It was a closed bowl with two openings, one hole was for olive oil and the other hole was for the wick. The brightness of the flame was dependent upon the width of the wick. For comparison purposes, an olive oil lamp produced a much brighter flame than a modern-day single wick candle.

The purpose of a lamp has not changed over thousands of years; it provides light to dispel the darkness. While the technology may have changed in how lamps are produced and manufactured, the end result has not changed. A lamp is a source of light to provide illumination when natural light is either insufficient in quantity or quality, or not available. A lamp could be used to illuminate a room or to provide enough light to illuminate a path at night.

In the Old Testament, the lamp had metaphorical meanings as well. It can also represent life as in 2 Sam 21:17, 2 Kings 8:19, and Proverbs 20:20. The lamp stand, or menorah, lit the tabernacle, and then later the temple, symbolizing the Spirit of God (Zechariah 4:6). Scripture is also referred to a lamp. In Psalm 119:105 (NASB), the psalmist writes, “Thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path.” Proverbs 6:23 (NASB) says “For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching is light.” The Bible is our light to show us the path God wants us to walk in a dark world.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EYE AND THE BODY

In our modernistic way of looking at the body, we see the eye as an instrument that captures an image that the brain interprets. Without going into great detail, light comes into the eye and is focused on the retina. The retina translates the light into electrical impulses which are then carried to the visual cortex of the brain. The brain then tells us to “go left” or “go right” or sends other signals throughout the body depending upon what visual cortex interprets. This is how we see the relationship between the eye and the body. This is not however, how Jesus’ audience viewed the relationship.

Ancient Hebrews most likely saw the eye as an object that both received and emitted light. Aristotle described how people generally believed that the eye contains a fire, while in Sophocles and Euripides believed the eyes emitted light rays.<sup>5</sup> Plato expressed that the eye was

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<sup>5</sup> Candida Moss, “Blurred vision and ethical confusion: the rhetorical function of Matthew 6:22-23. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73, no. 4. Pg. 763

an organ within the body that produced a ray or beam, and that vision occurred when the ray or beam from the eye met the light produced by an object.<sup>6</sup> In the ancient mindset, vision took place in the coalescence between the rays of emitting from the eyes and the light emanating or reflected from the object.

**“Don’t collect for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But collect for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves don’t break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. “The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eye is good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. So if the light within you is darkness - how deep is that darkness! “No one can be a slave of two masters, since either he will hate one and love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot be slaves of God and of money (Matthew 6:19-24 HSCB).**

Jesus’ audience would have heard the metaphors rather than a literal meaning. They would also have placed these metaphors within the context of what Jesus had just said. Jesus had just talked about laying up treasure in heaven rather than on earth because where their treasure was, their heart would be. The audience would have kept the metaphor of the eye being the lamp of the body in context with the heavenly treasure that Jesus just mentioned.

Heavenly treasure would have been associated with light and earthly treasure associated with darkness. Collecting treasure on earth would be equated with coveting. If a person’s heart is evil and covetous, then the body will be full of darkness.<sup>7</sup> The determination of the heart to store up treasure either in heaven or on earth, creates either inner light or inner darkness.<sup>8</sup>

The heart that is inclined toward good works and an attitude of giving will be full of light.<sup>9</sup> The connotation is that when ones’ treasure is in heaven, that person is full of an internal light that comes from within. If a person is bent toward collecting earthly treasure, indicating greed, there will be darkness rather than internal light. It is therefore, the ethical character of a

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Hauck, “Like a gleaming flash: Matthew 6:22-23, Luke 11:34-36 and the divine sense in Origen.” *Anglican Theological Review* 88, no. 4 (September 2006): 563.

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary On the Whole Bible: Wherein Each Chapter Is Summed up in Its Contents*, new modern ed. (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), Vol 5, pg 65.

<sup>8</sup> John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 856.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pg 64.

person (whether he is giving or greedy) that determines whether or not the eyes function properly as a lamp.<sup>10</sup> If the person has no internal light, he would not be able to operate as a lamp, and in a manner of speaking, he would not be able to see.

If we look at this from an ethical context, the eye is affected by sinfulness which causes the light to go out, or be extinguished, resulting in a loss of lamp light. A good eye reflects generosity and moral integrity and is a result of light within.<sup>11</sup> Generosity is proof of light within, and greed is proof of darkness within.<sup>12</sup> In a manner of speaking, generosity is the light, and greed is the darkness.

### THE SANDWICH

It is interesting that Jesus' two sentences on the eye being the lamp of the body are sandwiched between several sentences about money. Jesus starts about talking about our treasure being either heavenly (generosity) or earthly (hoarding), transitions to the eye being the lamp of the body and concludes with serving either God or money. Jesus starts with the moral choice of where we store our treasure, transitions to how we display our moral choices, and ends with another moral choice. Apparently, our moral choices are very important to Jesus, and are therefore very important to us.

To use the analogy of a sandwich, money is the bread and inner light, or inner darkness is the meat. The quality of the bread determines the quality of the meat. If our bread is focused on God, then it acts like a reflector focusing the light of God and the "meat" will provide light. If our bread is focused on self, then God's light is not being reflected and our "meat" will not provide any light, leaving only darkness. It is an analogy that is designed to cause us to question the whether we are producing light or darkness. It is a matter of we are what bread we eat. The sandwich is either heavenly, producing light, or earthly, producing darkness.

It is probable that Jesus used the analogy of the eye being a lamp to cause his audience to contemplate where they stood with God. The "meat" of this analogy would cause them to question whether or not they had inner light or inner darkness. It would also leave the listener questioning his motives about the "bread" or money. Jesus' audience might be worried on a

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<sup>10</sup> Francois Viljoen. 2009. "A contextualized reading of Matthew 6:22-23: "Your eye is the lamp of your body". HTS 65, (1) pg. 169

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., pg 169

<sup>12</sup> John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 856

number of counts: not only may their eye, and indeed their whole body be full of darkness, but, if so, how would that affect their relationship with God?<sup>13</sup>

### THE CHOICE

Jesus makes the point that no one can be a slave of two masters. We do have a choice however, of who we will be slave to; either God or money. It requires a single-minded devotion to the chosen master. That choice of which master we will serve determines whether we will be full of light or full of darkness. Our focus in life; or that which we give our attention to, will either be heavenly or earthly bound. As a slave to God, we will be generous and as a result God will get the glory. As a slave to money, we be greedy and keep the glory for ourselves.

The accumulation of money is seductive, and money is powerful enough that it can become another god in a person's life, if not the primary god.<sup>14</sup> In addition to becoming the primary god, money becomes the master in a master/slave relationship. It is important to remember that money is simply an inanimate object. It's not the money itself that is evil; it is the desire (love of money) for more that is evil (1 Timothy 6:10). The money question was never about the quantity of what we have, but always about the quality of what we do, or don't do, with what we have.<sup>15</sup> Once again it comes down to moral character. What we do with our money displays our moral character for all to see.

Living by morals is a choice that we must make. In Deuteronomy 30:19, God gave Israel the choice between life and death, good and evil, blessings or curses. The choice did not end with Israel. We make the same choices today. We choose which road to walk down. We choose which master we will serve. Jesus made it clear that we can only serve one master, but the choice is ours to make.

### CONCLUSION

Matthew 6:22-23 uses a description of the eye that should not be viewed as referring to the physical eye, but rather to the moral or ethical character of a person. The eye being the lamp of the body is not based on a scientific framework of how the eye works, but rather it is based on a moral, ethical framework. Jesus left no confusion about how to identify whether a person was filled with darkness or with light. We should be concerned not only with the unrighteous that

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<sup>13</sup> Candida Moss, "Blurred vision and ethical confusion: the rhetorical function of Matthew 6:22-23. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73, no. 4. Pg. 772.

<sup>14</sup> Erica Kennedy, "Can you have mammon and serve God?: Maybe not?" *Word & World* 30, No. 2 (2010), 210

<sup>15</sup> Gerry Rafferty . "Can you have mammon and serve God?: Yes!" *Word & World* 30, No. 2 (2010). Pg. 208

might be in our hearts but also with the possibility that our own lamps might be darkness and our own salvation in jeopardy.<sup>16</sup>

If we interpret the scripture according to the modern scientific theory of vision, it would imply that the eye is seen as a window through which light enters into the body. The proverbial notion that the eye is the lamp of the body suggests that the eye emits rays when looking.<sup>17</sup> According to the Bible there is a direct correlation between body and character, or ethics. The ancient Hebrew understanding would have seen the state of an eye as signifying the internal character, or ethical state of a person.

Because Jesus' audience would have heard the sermon in metaphors rather than a literal meaning, the description of the physical eye should be interpreted in metaphorical or ethical terms. Sight would have been interpreted as a function of the moral or ethical light within a person. His audience would have interpreted the eye as the instrument from which the innermost moral attitudes and ethics of the heart flows.

If the eye is good (the person has moral integrity and seeks the welfare of others) your whole body will be full of light (v.22). But if your eye is bad (the person is stingy and covetous), your whole body will be full of darkness (v.23). Therefore these verses go beyond being concerned with the nature of the person, but focus on the person's actions that are caused by such nature. These actions can be either selfish and greedy or generous and concerned about the welfare of others.

The morals and ethics that we display comes from the internal light in the heart. That light or darkness is based on where we store our treasure. Everyone, whether they are rich or poor, is in the process of storing up treasure. It is where we store that treasure that makes all the difference in the world. The choice is ours.

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<sup>16</sup> Candida Moss, "Blurred vision and ethical confusion: the rhetorical function of Matthew 6:22-23. *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 73, no. 4. Pg. 776.

<sup>17</sup> Francois Viljoen, 2009. "A contextualized reading of Matthew 6:22-23: "Your eye is the lamp of your body". HTS 65, (1) pg. 170

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