Foreword—comments on structure

This section of the text is particularly difficult and has some statements which seem very odd to us at first reading. So, I did something a little different with this section in the last article in this series where I went through first and visually mapped out the structure and patterns I saw and tried to draw various links. The literary structure Matthew is employing here is trying to bring attention to certain points. I lay it out as follows using letters for the different sections followed by a short description of their general contents, then in the commentary below I use these to point out their significance:

A. The hypocrite's piety (v. 5, 16)
   i.) Plural address—when you practice a certain act of piety, don’t be like the hypocrite.
   ii.) A negative example of the hypocrites’ act of piety for people to see.
   iii.) That will be their only reward.

B. The disciple's piety (v.6, 17-18)
   i.) Singular address—the contrast of the way in which the disciple should serve or render their act of piety.
   ii.) A positive example of how the disciple's act of piety should be done in secret.
   iii.) The promise of God’s reward.

C. Example of a vain/futile effort by men (C1 = v. 7-8, C2 = v.19-21)
   i.) Negative example of what not to do like people who are pagan/earthly minded.
ii.) The reason why not to follow their example.

Within these structures, there is quite a bit of similarity and mirroring that happens in the sentences of the 2 sections being looked at here; there is mirroring of the verbal tenses and moods used for the positive commands, which I will point out in the examination of the verses. After these general structural patterns for the first part, there is a difference between what follows in the 2 sections of teaching after about prayer (v. 5-8) and then fasting (v. 16-18). So it is hard to find a single way to group the subsequent teachings together without feeling like it’s forced. I have therefore opted to label them **D1** and **D2**, and **E1** and **E2**— since they are different, however there are some similarities which could be noted, though I’d argue not enough to say that they are following a strictly repeated pattern.

**D1.** An example or prayer to follow. (v.9-13)

**E1.** A teaching point based on the example to clarify what is meant and why. (v. 14-15)

**D2.** A parable or illustration. (v. 22-23)

**E2.** Teaching point to clarify. (v. 24)

So, that’s the structure of this passage we’re looking at—my commentary that follows will refer back to these structures. Each section begins with the Greek text followed by my translation and then commentary.

**Matt. 6:16-18** Ὄταν δὲ νηστεύητε, μὴ γίνεσθε ὡς οἱ ύποκριταί σκυθρώποι, ἀφανίζουσιν γὰρ τὰ πρόσωπα αὐτῶν ὡς φανώσων τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύοντες· ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν. οὐ δὲ νηστεύον ἀνεβίεσαι σοι τὴν κεφαλήν καὶ τὸ πρόσωπόν σου νίψαι, ὡς μὴ φανήσῃ τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύων ἄλλα τῷ πατέρι σου τῷ ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ καὶ ὁ πατήρ σου ὁ βλέπων ἐν τῷ κρυφαίῳ ἀποδώσει σοι.

Moreover, whenever you should fast, do not become downcast like the hypocrites; for they disfigure their appearance so that they might appear to be fasting to others. Truly I tell you, they have their reward. However, when you are fasting, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you might not appear to be fasting to others but to your Father who is in the secret and...
your Father, seeing in the secret will reward you.

Again the δὲ here adds this to the previous teaching so I have rendered it as "moreover." (Thus, if you haven’t read the previous article on verses 5-15, it would be good to do so.) Verse 16 states another contrast of the disciple to the hypocrites in a similar formulaic structure to verses 2 and 5. Note that it is assumed that the disciples will fast. However, this time the negative imperative used is not εἰμὶ [eimi – to be] (as in verse 5) but rather γίνομαι [ginomai]. Louw-Nida define γίνομαι as, "to possess certain characteristics, with the implication of their having been acquired." So I have chosen to translate it here as "become." This could perhaps be better rendered as "do not look gloomy like the hypocrites" as the ESV has it, and still communicate the same point. However, I opted for a more word-for-word translation in this case since the following clause explains what is meant by this phrase. Do not become like the hypocrites—do not take on their characteristics.

So what’s the deal with fasting? What type of fasting is being talked about here? There are several mentions of fasting in the OT in response to special situations, a regular fast on the Day of Atonement, and in memory of the destruction of Jerusalem. By the time of the NT, the Pharisees were fasting twice a week and they later use it to criticize Jesus’ disciples in 9:14-17. "What had been a special provision for times of penitence or emergency had thus been turned into a matter of routine religious duty, despite the protest of Isa 58:3–7 against assuming that fasting had an automatic efficacy of its own." However, the fasting which is envisioned here is that of choice rather than tradition or routine.

I’ve translated the phrase ὅπως φανῶσιν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις νηστεύοντες as, “so that they might appear to be fasting to others.” There seems to be an irony in the play on words between ἀφανίζω [aphanizo]—which can also mean "become invisible"—and φαίνομαι [phainomai] meaning "make visible." The words σὺ δὲ (but you) puts the follower of Jesus in contrast to this—it is saying, that way is not for the disciple to follow. The following prescription to anoint and wash themselves is simply a part of normal cosmetic practices of their day and hygiene. It doesn’t have any special meaning of ‘anointing’ as some may falsely

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1 Louw, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 149.
try to assert. Also, what is in mind here is not an artificial show of happiness, but rather simply to appear normal since your fasting is done secretly.

The address shifts from a plural verb in verse 16 to singular verbs in 17, similar to verses 5 and 6. However, there is a difference here to verse 6, in that a reason for the commands (to wash and anoint) is included: "so that you might not appear to be fasting to others." The present participle νηστεύων [nēsteuōn] (fasting) introduces the command ἀλειψαί [aleipsai] (anoint) implying that this is to happen while fasting. It could also be rendered, "while you are fasting, anoint..." This further emphasizes the purpose of the act is to keep oneself in a presentable manner so as to not intentionally draw attention to their fasting.

Matt. 6:19-21 Μὴ θησαυρίζετε ύμιν θησαυροὺς ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς, ὅπου σής καὶ βρῶσις ἀφανίζει καὶ ὅπου κλέπται διορύσσουσι καὶ κλέπτουσιν· θησαυρίζετε δὲ ύμιν θησαυροὺς ἐν οὐρανῷ, ὅπου οὔτε σής οὔτε βρῶσις ἀφανίζει καὶ ὅπου κλέπται οὐ διορύσσουσι οὐδὲ κλέπτουσιν· ὅπου γάρ ἔστιν ὁ θησαυρὸς σου, ἐκεῖ ἔσται καὶ ἡ καρδία σου.

Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moth and vermin destroy and where thieves break in and steal. Instead, store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor vermin can destroy and where thieves cannot break in nor steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

This section continues the thought of heavenly reward, phrasing it as "treasure in heaven" and opposing it with "treasure on earth." Verse 19 states a negative command to not store up earthly treasure, whereas verse 20 states the positive counterpart to store up heavenly treasure instead. There may also be a connection in this section to the petition in verse 11 for daily bread which would represent the material needs of the disciples which they should commit to their Heavenly Father. Also, unlike the similar structure in verses 7-8 (C1), this section uses imperative instead of subjunctive verbs. So, perhaps the force of these verses is strengthened by the imperative verbs? What does this mean? Well, the negative present imperative (used here) often implies that what is being prohibited is already happening. Whereas the aorist subjunctive (used before) is generally used to prevent something contemplated but not yet actual. So, "the instruction 'Do
not store up for yourselves’ might better be rendered 'Stop storing up for yourselves'” to bring out the stronger chastening tone of this verse.⁵ The culture of the time did not have banking as we do today, so the storing up of goods or hard currency in the home was a common practice. However, this makes them susceptible to corruption via moths, rust, and deterioration. "Everyone has some 'treasure,' the main object in life. Jesus is asking whether that is to be the transient or the eternal, and he warns that earthly riches may disappear."⁶ We must ask ourselves, what do we store up as our treasure or source of security?

"Equally obviously, however carefully it may be preserved, material wealth is of no use beyond this life on earth (Ps 39:6; 49:16–19; Eccles 2:20–26; this is the point of the parable in Luke 12:16–21). In place of such dubious acquisitions, “treasures in heaven” are a much more desirable alternative; cf. Isa 33:1–6 where the stable “treasure” of the fear of the Lord is contrasted with the short-lived triumph of Zion’s enemies."⁷

The verb βρῶσις [brōsis] means "eating/consuming" (as in Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 8:4; 2 Cor 9:10; Col 2:16) and brings up the question of what kind of treasure is being eaten. It would be literally rendered "where moth and eating destroy." It has traditionally been rendered as “rust” which would assume that the treasure is metal. However, the word “ίός would be the normal term for rust (as in Jas 5:3), whereas βρῶσις would better suit an animal pest (it is used in LXX Mal. 3:11 for a devouring locust), perhaps mice or rats nibbling at rich fabrics, or even woodworm destroying the treasure-chests."⁸ So, I have chosen to render it "vermin." Also, the word rendered "destroy" here is the same word from verse 16 which was rendered as "disfigure," ἀφανίζω—which can mean "become invisible." So there may be some continuity of the previous word play in mind here.⁹ What is clear here is that these earthly stored up treasures are susceptible to being eaten up and disappearing.

The theme that the disciples are not expected to be among the rich and affluent is repeated throughout the gospel. "Jesus lived simply (8:20), and most inhabitants of the Roman Empire would have..."
possessions as unduly radical." They must be made for God's glory and care for His people's material needs, so they are called to be unsparingly generous. The exact nature of these heavenly treasures is not discussed here, however later in the gospel, as compensation for the loss of earthly things we see "inheriting eternal life" (19:27-29), "entering the master's joy" (25:21,23) and "inheriting the kingdom" (25:34). There is also the contrast between "earth" and "heaven" with the implied assumption that heavenly treasures should be expected to be infinitely more valuable. So then, what does this tell us about the way we should aspire to live? While riches, money and possessions are not inherently evil in themselves, it does speak to the value of living simply and not being easily entangled by the things of this world. Oh how many have lost out on the freedom of simplicity and amassing more stuff!

The use of the verb θησαυρίζετε [thēsaurizete] means "make a treasure for yourselves," and the use of reward language suggests that these treasures are earned by the efforts of the disciples. However, in Matthew 20:1-15, we see a parable illustrating reward and effort which has a deliberate discrepancy between that correlation of effort and recompense received. So, God’s grace is not limited to human deserving. In His Kingdom, one cannot compute heavenly treasures strictly on earthly effort. "Those treasures are “stored up” not by performing meritorious acts (and certainly not only by alms-giving) but by belonging to and living by the priorities of the kingdom of heaven." The concluding statement in verse 21, which switches to the singular, makes the teaching personally applicable for the individual disciple. By placing our treasure in heaven with God, or rather in God himself, our "heart" or affections and pleasure will also be there. There is a push towards then treasuring those things of heaven and of God which reminds me a lot of Jesus' mini-parables in Matthew 13:44-45 of the one who found a treasure in the field or a pearl of great price and "in his joy" he sells all that he has to have it. You see, as we store up treasure in heaven, it means that our heart or affections are increasingly set on heaven and on Christ—who is our ultimate reward and joy!

Matt. 6:22-23 Ὁ λύχνος τοῦ σώματός ἐστιν ὁ ὀφθαλμός. Ἐὰν οὖν ἢ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου ἀπλοῦς, ὅλον τὸ σώμα σου φωτεινὸν ἔσται. Ἐὰν δὲ ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου πονηρὸς ἢ, ὅλον τὸ σώμα σου σκοτεινὸν ἔσται. Εἰ οὖν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἐν σοὶ σκότος ἔστιν, τὸ σκότος πόσον.

The eye is the lamp of the body. Therefore, if your eye should be sincere, your whole body will

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be full of light; but if your eye should be bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

This saying is a bit puzzling at first and I'll be first to admit, it confused me quite a bit! The connection to the previous thoughts is not immediately apparent to many of us and it seems quite random, so many just gloss over it. The first question is, what does the opening statement mean that the eye is the lamp of the body? Some speculate that the light of the eyes is a mark of happiness as in the OT and Jewish writings, or that the eyes are the "window" through which light comes into the body. However, this is an odd use of the word "lamp" if that is what is intended. Some think it might be taken that a lamp shows the way to go. However, it is not the way that is the subject of illumination in this text but rather the body itself which is either illuminated or in darkness. There is no consensus amongst various commentators, so perhaps the best we can say is that "the imagery depends on light being necessary for the proper functioning of the body (person) and that this light is in some way dependent on the condition of the eye."  

There is perhaps a correlation and connection to the preceding verses between the heart following the treasure (v. 21), the service following the master (v. 24), and now the body following the eye. This is the best connection I can make here.

The second question is, what does it mean "if your eye should be sincere?" (which is what the Greek text literally says) This is a strange phrase! There is an obvious mirroring of opposites happening between the "if/then" clauses of verses 22 and 23 with φωτεινὸν [phōteinon] (full of light) and σκοτεινὸν [skoteinon] (full of darkness). However, the word ἀπλοῦς [aplous] normally means "simple, single-minded, morally whole, faithful, without ulterior motive" but the word πονηρὸς [ponēros] (bad/evil) is not a natural opposite to ἀπλοῦς in that sense. "In classical Greek, 'haplous is the opposite of diplous, meaning simple or single rather than double... sometimes in the moral sense of straight, without turning aside.'"  

Some take it to mean that the point here is "'unclouded loyalty,' in the sense in which pure hearts will see God (Matt 5:8), but the deepest meaning is that of a simple soul, not parcelled out, like that of a small child, oriented exclusively toward God." However, this is still not fully satisfactory for me.

There is another, more probable sense of the word which provides a good opposite to πονηρὸς which is: "pertaining to willing and generous giving—'generous, generously, liberal.'"\(^{17}\) If we understand this generosity as the outworking of the normal sense of the word as "simplicity" or "faithfulness," then it forms a direct counterpart to the phrase ὁφθαλμὸς πονηρὸς (bad eye) which is used for a jealous stinginess in Matthew 20:15.\(^{18}\) So, it seems like the saying means that one's generosity or lack of it is an indication of their spiritual health. This is emphasized in the summary statement at the end of verse 23. This is where translations sometimes meet a road bump in the weakness of being able to communicate everything in another language. There is a word play in Greek between the "bad eye" and the "sincere eye" and the eye being "the lamp of the body" which is hard to reproduce in English. The LXX also uses ἀπλοῦς for "single" to translate the Hebrew term for "perfect," that is, "single-minded" devotion to God. "Jesus’ contemporaries also used the expression for righteousness (1 Macc 2:60; Test. Iss. 3:5 MSS; Eph 6:5…) and generosity (...cf. Ps 119:113; Rom 12:8; Jas 1:8). An ‘evil eye,’ conversely, was a stingy, jealous, or greedy eye (Deut 15:9; Prov. 23:6; 28:22…)."\(^{19}\) Thus, I played around with the idea of rendering this phrase, "if you have a generous outlook" and the counterpart as "if you have a bad (or stingy) outlook"—which I believe gets to the heart of what is trying to be communicated here. However, I ended up sticking with a more formal translation, but what is in view here is one's generosity.

If the eye is the lamp, and the logical function of the lamp is to give light, then the concluding statement is emphatic. He specifies also that it is "the light that is in you." If what is supposed to give light—your generous outlook (the generous eye)—is actually darkness, then you're in some serious darkness! The last part, τὸ σκότος πόσον is literally "that darkness [is] great," however, it is supposed to be an emphatic—hence my rendition in English as "how great is that darkness!" This ὁφθαλμὸς ἀπλοῦς or "single-eye" is "used as a transition to his next point, for the ‘single’ eye is literally undivided, seeing the whole picture: thus one is not divided between two masters, as the text goes on to explain (6:24)."\(^{20}\)

\(^{17}\) Louw, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, 569.


\(^{19}\) Keener, The Gospel of Matthew, 208.

Understanding this therefore helps us make sense of how the last saying about money fits in.

Matt. 6:24 Οὐδεὶς δύναται δυσὶ κυρίοις δουλεύειν· ἢ γὰρ τὸν ένα μισήσει καὶ τὸν ἑτέρον ἀγαπήσει, ἢ ἕνος ἀνθέξεται καὶ τοῦ ἑτέρου καταφρονήσει. οὐ δύνασθε θεῷ δουλεύειν καὶ μαμωνᾷ.

No one is able to serve two masters, for 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 God and money.

As in E1 (v. 14-15) there is a positive/negative balance in this saying as well. If one takes that the previous section D1 (v. 22-23) is in reference to generosity, then this saying follows it well with regards to serving money or God and would serve to reinforce the point. Generosity marks those who serve God, therefore you cannot serve God and love to amass and hold on to money, or any other resource for that matter. Also, there is a connection found in the idea of "single-mindedness" from ἕπλοος, and the sort of double-mindedness shown here of trying to serve God and money. God must be served wholeheartedly. "This is the thrust of the teaching about light and darkness (it is to be one or the other, not both), and this is further brought out with the forthright statement that it is impossible to give one’s first allegiance to both God and money."  The word δουλεύειν [douleuein] stems from δοῦλος [doulos] (slave). So, although some translations render it ‘serve,’ it should probably be understood as "to be a slave" rather than serve—since it is possible to serve two employers, however one is only properly a slave to one master.  "It is that total commitment which Jesus uses to illustrate the demands of God’s kingship and to show the impossibility of combining those demands with the pursuit of ‘mammon.’"  

"Mammon" here was a common Aramaic term for money or property, but its contrast with God as an object of service here suggests that it has been deified as well as personified (cf. Sir 34:7...). However, the word μαμωνᾶ (mammon) is not necessarily pejorative. It is used in the targums of Deut 6:5 ("love the Lord your God with ... all your māmōn") and Prov 3:9 ("honor the Lord with your māmōn"); in Gen 34:23 it represents the Hebrew for

"livestock," the principal "wealth" of the Shechemites. So the warning here is about possessions which, though they may be neutral of themselves, can become a source of greed which competes for the disciple's total loyalty to God. "The principle of materialism is in inevitable conflict with the kingship of God." Thus I have chosen to render it simply as "money." But the point should not be lost on us, that our possessions, if they become ultimate things to us which compete for our affections and total loyalty to God, can become idols to us. We serve God with our μαμωνᾷ, we don’t become enslaved to it.

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