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A Higher Order of Righteousness and Consecration

Author(s): John W. Welch

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Chapter 5

A Higher Order of Righteousness and Consecration

In its transition from Matthew 5 to Matthew 6, the Sermon on the Mount shifts into a different mode. Inviting the hearers to move on in becoming perfect even as God is perfect (Matthew 5:48), the next part of the Sermon on the Mount takes up themes of inner righteousness and singular dedication (Matthew 6:1–24). This part contains no references to the law of Moses, or to what has been said by those of old, or to what is thought in or about outside society. Here the concern is not about the opinions of men but the surveillance of God. If Matthew 5 is about Moses, society, the Aaronic priesthood, and the law, then one may view Matthew 6 as pertaining to the domain of Melchizedek, the Lord, individual righteousness, and a distillation of the prophets (represented in Matthew's gospel by the spirit of Elijah; see Matthew 17:3), for the Sermon on the Mount as a whole embraces both the Law and the Prophets (see Matthew 5:17; 7:12). Stylistically there is also a sharp contrast between Matthew 5 and Matthew 6, so much that many biblical commentators have suspected Matthew 6:1–18 of being a later intrusion into the text. That suspicion dissolves, however, if one sees the text as simply taking its listeners the next step further into a higher or holier stage of instructive experience, thus accounting for the different thematic world to which this part of the Sermon on the Mount belongs.

In Matthew 5, the Sermon on the Mount presents a first set of regulations regarding one's mundane dealings with fellowmen, brothers, wives, neighbors, and enemies in the challenging affairs of this world. In this next level, the Sermon on the Mount takes a decisive step in the direction of greater holiness. Here, in Matthew 6, the Sermon on the Mount presents a second set of requirements regarding worship and piety, focusing on almsgiving, prayer, forgiveness, fasting, and total dedication of all that one has to God. In this sphere, emphasis is placed on cultivating secret and inward righteousness, as well as rejecting the treasures of this world and not worrying about the needs of the flesh. Astutely reflecting this fundamental shift from Matthew 5 to Matthew 6, Betz labels Matthew 6:1–18 as "the cultic instruction," because almsgiving, prayer, and fasting are "three ritual acts" that should be performed properly in preparing to "approach the deity."¹

¹ Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Minneapolis, 1995), pp. 329–35, quotes on 330, 332.

Stage 11. Transition into a Higher Order (5:48)

At the end of Matthew 5, which is equally the beginning of the next section of the Sermon, the people are invited to become perfect. At this point in the Sermon on the Mount, the disciples have reached one plateau and now look beyond to a higher order of righteousness. Behind the words *esesthe oun humeis teleioi*, “be ye therefore perfect” (Matthew 5:48 KJV) or “You, therefore, must be perfect” (Matthew 5:48 RSV) stands an interesting ambiguity. Betz is certainly right in puzzling over this conundrum, which arises because the second person plural imperative and future forms of the verb “to be” are one and the same, *esesthe*. Accordingly, “it is not clear from the outset whether *esesthe* is merely an imperative (‘Be perfect!’), or a prediction (‘You will be perfect’), or an eschatological promise (‘You may be perfect’). Grammatically as well as contextually, one could justify each of the options.”² In a temple context, however, one is not forced to choose between the strictly logical or grammatical alternatives, for in a performative setting the word *esesthe* can serve multiple functions: sequentially, it recaps (summarizing the previous commands, “so, be”), it requires (adding yet another command, “be this, too”), it beckons (inviting people to continue on, “come be”), it assures (affirming the listeners that they will succeed, “you can be”), promises (holding out the reward, “you may be”), and prophecies (guaranteeing that those who hear and do these words will succeed, “you shall be”). All of these meanings are possible and pertinent. Standing near the midpoint of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:48 therefore looks both backwards and forwards as a bridge between Matthew 5 and Matthew 6. Thus, the word *therefore* marks a transition in the design of the Sermon: On the one hand, it looks back over the instruction given thus far about the law of Moses, while on the other hand, it looks forward to yet a greater order to be required if the people are to become “perfect,” even as the “heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48).

This textual transition is as dramatic and as concrete as moving from one court or hall within the Temple to the next. In Matthew 5:23–4, the altar in the Court of the Priests was mentioned prominently; it was the place for making one’s offerings according to the law of Moses, swearing of oaths, and offering one’s prayers, even for those who might be one’s enemies or persecutors. With the transition in Matthew 5:48, the Sermon on the Mount progresses forward as if moving from court of the law through the vestibule (the *Ulam*), and into the Holy Place (the *Hekal*), drawing closer to the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies (the *Debir*).³

In much the same way and using grammatically and verbally similar expressions, the Torah commands and exhorts the children of Israel to obey the law in such a way that they will progress and increase in holiness, becoming holy even as God is holy: “You shall be men consecrated (*hagioi esesthe*) to me” (Exodus 22:31); “you shall be holy (*hagioi esesthe*); for I the Lord your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2);

² Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 321.

³ Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven* (London, 1991), pp. 26–9.

“you shall be blameless (*teleios esēi*) before the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 18:13, here a translation of *tāmim*; see also 2 Samuel 22:26). A similar requirement was expressed at the end of Solomon’s dedicatory prayer for the Temple, “Let your heart therefore be wholly true (*estōsan hai kardiai hēmōn teleiai*) to the Lord our God” (1 Kings 8:61). The strong verbal connections between Matthew 5:48 and these cultic passages could scarcely have failed to link this stage in the Sermon on the Mount with progression within the Temple in the minds of Jesus’ listeners. The salient use of the word *teleios*, particularly in Deuteronomy 18:13 and 2 Samuel 22:26, strongly suggests that one need not look any further than mainstream Judaism in order to locate the Sermon on the Mount’s concept of perfection in biblical terminology that was current in first century Palestine⁴ with a meaning that encompassed the composite characteristic of God’s nature and of “a total commitment to do his will.”⁵

Most significant in these texts is the word *teleioi* (perfect), especially in conjunction with its counterpart *hagioi* (holy). These words are used to identify the ultimate attribute of God and his righteous followers. Although it is certainly presupposed that the word *perfect* has, on one important level, a straightforward ethical or religious meaning here⁶—reflecting perfect mercy, “undivided obedience to God,” and “unlimited love”⁷—there is also a significant possibility that on another level the word conveys a temple or ritual connotation here. In this setting, one may understand that Jesus is expressing his desire that the disciples now advance from one level to the next, to go on to become perfect in the sense of being “ultimately finished” or “completed” in the full instruction and with spiritual endowment that will allow them to actualize the divine nature in their own lives and being.

Following the interpretive rule that context usually determines the sense in which any intended “perfection” or “completeness” consists,⁸ the meaning of the word *teleios* in the Sermon on the Mount should be seen as having to do with becoming

⁴ The appearance of the idea of perfection in the Dead Sea Scrolls need not signal some influence of the Essense on Jesus or Matthew, but may reflect instead a common dependence on these biblical passages.

⁵ Leopold Sabourin, “Why Is God Called ‘Perfect’ in Mt. 5:48?,” *BZ* 21 (1980): 266–8, quote on 268.

⁶ See Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago, 1957), pp. 816–17, giving the meanings of *teleios* as “having attained the end or purpose, complete, perfect,” “full-grown, mature, adult,” “complete,” “fully developed in a moral sense”; E. Kenneth Lee, “Hard Sayings—I,” *Theology* 66 (1963): 318–20; and E. Yarnold, “Teleios in St Matthew’s Gospel,” *SE* 4 (1968): 269–73, identifying three meanings of *teleios* in Matthew: Pharisaically perfect in keeping the laws, lacking in nothing, and fully grown.

⁷ This is the preferred meaning suggested in the Protestant view; see *TDNT*, vol. 8, pp. 73, 75.

⁸ Yarnold, “Teleios in St. Matthew’s Gospel,” 271; and Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 322.

completely instructed regarding all the attitudes and behaviors that will enable a person to become godlike. Several reasons support this ritualistic understanding. First, the Greek word *teleios* is an important word in Greek religious literature to describe several things, including the person who has become fully initiated in the rituals of a given religion. *Teleios* is “a technical term of the mystery religions, which refers to one initiated into the mystic rites, the initiate.”⁹ Orphic books spoke of the *teletai* (rites of initiation) which if performed prevented dire pains in the world to come.¹⁰ Second, other forms of this word are used in Hebrews 5:14–6:1 to distinguish between the initial teachings and the full instruction (“full age,” “perfection”). In Hebrews 9:11 it refers to the heavenly temple. Generally, in the Epistle to the Hebrews, its usage follows a “special use” from Hellenistic Judaism, where the word *teleioō* means “to put someone in the position in which he can come, or stand, before God.”¹¹ Third, in a ritual setting, among the connotations of this word, this term refers to preparing a person to be presented before God “in priestly action”¹² or “to qualify for the cultus.”¹³ Early Christians continued to use this word in this way in connection with their sacraments and ordinances.¹⁴ All this tends toward what my mentor, the late Hugh Nibley, saw as the meaning of the word *teleios*, namely

living up to an agreement or covenant without fault: as the Father keeps the covenants he makes with us. . . . *Teleioi* is a locus technicus from the Mysteries: the completely initiated who has both qualified for initiation and completed it is *teleios*, lit. “gone all the way,” fulfilling all requirements, every last provision of God’s command. The hardest rules are what will decide the *teletios*.¹⁵

Moreover, a comparable cultic use of the Hebrew term *shalom* may provide a link between Jewish perceptions and these Hellenistic and Christian uses of the

⁹ Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 817, citing sources and referring to Philippians 3:15 and Colossians 1:28. See Demosthenes, *De Corona* 259, in *Demosthenes*, trans. C.A. Vince (Cambridge, 1971), 190–91, where *telousei* is translated as “initiations” into the mystery religions; see also *TDNT*, vol. 8, p. 69.

¹⁰ Plato, *Republic*, 363C and 364E.

¹¹ Gerhard Delling, “*teleios*,” in *TDNT*, vol. 8, p. 82; citing Hebrews 7:19 and 10:1.

¹² Delling, “*teleios*,” vol. 8, p. 83.

¹³ Delling, “*teleios*,” vol. 8, p. 85.

¹⁴ H. Stephanus, *Thesaurus Graecae Linguae* (Graz 1954), vol. 8, p. 1961, “gradibus ad sacramentorum participationem, ton hagiastaton metochen, admittebantur.” I thank John Gee for this point. See also Guy G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Leiden, 1996), p. 72 (the great mystery being known “only by the perfect ones,” *tois teleiois*).

¹⁵ Hugh W. Nibley, unpublished notes on the New Testament, on Matthew 5:48, in the Hugh W. Nibley Archive, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

Greek word *teleios*. In particular, John Durham has explored in detail the meanings of the Hebrew word *shalom*, in several of the Psalms¹⁶ and also especially in the Priestly Blessing in Numbers 6:26. He concludes that this term, even though often translated as “peace,” “in virtually sixty-five per cent of the usage-pattern, the reference is not to ‘peace’ but rather to ‘fulfilment,’ . . . completeness, a success, a maturity,”¹⁷ concepts that the Greek *teleios* may be striving to express. Durham shows that in many texts *shalom* should be understood fundamentally as a cultic term referring to the complete gift or total endowment from God, “a blessing specially connected to theophany or the immanent Presence of God” that “can be received only in his Presence,”¹⁸ specifically in the Temple of Solomon and represented within the Israelite cult and liturgy.¹⁹ Baruch Levine has similarly analyzed the function of the *shelamim* sacrifices as producing “complete,” or perfect, “harmony with the deity, . . . characteristic of the covenant relationship as well as of the ritual experience of communion.”²⁰ *Teleios* is used in Exodus 12:5 LXX in reference to sacrificing a perfect lamb, one without blemish. Thus, Durham sees Israelite concepts behind the word *teleios* in Matthew 5:48,²¹ concurring with the insight of Gerhard Barth that “Matthew does not use *teleios* in the Greek sense of the perfect ethical personality, but in the Old Testament sense of the wholeness of consecration to God.”²² The related word *teleiōsis* (perfection) is used five times in Exodus 29:22–34 and six times in Leviticus 8:22–33 to describe especially the sacrificial ram of “consecration,” but also the holocaust, the basket, and the seven days of consecration or ordination to the Lord.

¹⁶ In examining over 125 verses, Durham draws attention to Psalms 1:3; 65:1 and 119:165, in which *shalom* is the reward for obedience and love of the torah.

¹⁷ John I. Durham, “Shalom and the Presence of God,” in John I. Durham and J.R. Porter (eds), *Proclamation and Presence: Essays in Honour of Gwynne Henton Davies* (Richmond, Virginia, 1970), p. 276.

¹⁸ Durham, “Shalom and the Presence of God,” 281, 292. On at least fourteen occasions, the Psalms identify God as the giver and source of the state of *shalom* (4:9; 29:11; 34:15; 35:27; 37:11, 37; 69:23; 72:3, 7; 73:3; 122:6, 7, 8; 125:5).

¹⁹ Durham, “Shalom and the Presence of God,” 286–92. Durham lists fifteen predominantly cultic terms with which *shalom* is associated, such as blessing (Psalms 29:11), covenant, good (Psalms 34:15), righteousness, law, name, mercy and faithfulness (Psalms 85:11), prostrate humility (Psalms 4:9), salvation, wealth, faithfulness, commandment, sin, shunning evil and seeking peace (Psalms 34:14). *Shalom* is the complete totality of all these elements, most of which figure prominently in the Sermon on the Mount in leading to the state of being *teleios*.

²⁰ Baruch A. Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord* (Leiden, 1974), pp. 35–6.

²¹ Durham, “Shalom and the Presence of God,” 293, n. 135.

²² Gerhard Barth, “Matthew’s Understanding of the Law,” in G. Bornkamm, G. Barth, and H. Held, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew*, trans. Percy Scott (Philadelphia, 1963), p. 101; see also Herman Strack and Paul Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Munich, 1922), vol. 1, p. 386.

Accordingly, in instructing the people to be “perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48), it would seem that Jesus had several things in mind besides “perfection” as that word is understood in modern usage. Whatever else he may well have meant, this would have involved the idea of becoming like God (“even as your Father which is in heaven”), which occurs by seeing God (see 1 John 3:2), knowing God (see John 17:3), and not being turned away but being allowed to enter and stand in his holy presence (Matthew 7:21). Through the rites of the Temple, a mortal high priest could become “divine,” a “son of God” and like the Father. Writing about “those who ‘became’ the Lord” through ascent and transformation, Margaret Barker comments, “The ascent to heaven was the way to the angelic state. . . . This was the tradition of the temple and of the high priests who wore the sacred Name.”²³ Since the high priest was born as a normal human being, “we have to ask how it was that the high priest became an angel, how he became divine. The answer must lie in the ritual performed in the Holy of Holies, where only the high priest was allowed to enter. Several texts do describe how the king was ‘born’ as son of God, or ‘raised up’ in the Holy of Holies. Being born as a son of God and being resurrected were both descriptions of the process of becoming divine. Jesus himself used the terms interchangeably. Angels are the sons of God, the resurrected, he said (Luke 20.36).”²⁴ In temple ceremonies, these ultimate realities of seeing, knowing and becoming like God were portrayed and foreshadowed most saliently.

Stage 12. Giving Voluntarily to the Poor (6:1–4)

Almsgiving is the first requirement encountered in connection with this establishment of the higher order inaugurated by the Sermon on the Mount: “Beware of practicing your piety before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give alms, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised (*doxasthōsin*) by men. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret (*en tōi kruptōi*); and your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:1–4). Previously, in Matthew 5:42, the initiate was told to give to those *who ask*; now, the requirement is to give without being asked—voluntarily, inconspicuously, and in holy righteousness.

Apparently, Jesus did not valorize poverty, as did the Essenes. While some of his followers were wealthy (such as Mary, Martha and Lazarus apparently were) and others were undoubtedly very poor (being no better off than the widow who

²³ Margaret Barker, *The Risen Lord: The Jesus of History as the Christ of Faith* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1996), p. 24.

²⁴ Margaret Barker, *Temple Theology: An Introduction* (London, 2004), p. 56.

cast her two mites into the temple contribution box), this requirement of almsgiving assumes that Christian disciples were at least economically capable of giving something regularly to the poor. Jesus agreed with the general Jewish notion that righteousness requires giving to the poor (as discussed above regarding Matthew 5:42). Giving to the poor had long been a requirement placed upon the Lord's covenant people,²⁵ and giving in sacred secrecy has been generally recognized as "a mark of the truly righteous man,"²⁶ and thus "one should not underestimate" the importance of generosity in Jesus' teaching.²⁷

Later in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus will say to the rich young man: "If you would be perfect (the word here again is *teleios*), go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven" (Matthew 19:21), drawing on words and phrases in Matthew 5:48 and 6:21. How much money Jesus actually expected his disciples to forsake or to give to the poor is a topic that has been vigorously debated, especially because Matthew does not appear to go as far as Luke, which has the main disciples leave "all" (Luke 5:11, 28). Under Jewish law, "it was not permissible to spend more than a fifth of one's means on acts of charity," and "according to the Mishnah (M. Arak. 8.4) a man may devote only part of his means to the Temple, and to go further than this was not valid."²⁸ In placing high importance on generosity, the position of Jesus may well have been that such mishnaic limits had set the standard too low. Encouraging the righteous to go beyond this arbitrary ceiling would be one more example of his demand for righteousness that is fuller than that of the Scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). In light of the temple theology which views the land and its crops as belonging completely to God in any event, any demand to give or render (*apodote*; Matthew 22:21) back to God or to his Temple that which is God's is a reasonable demand, and by so giving, the righteous make it talionically possible for a just God to render (*apodōsei*; Matthew 6:4, 6, 18) a comparable reward or repayment back to the righteous.²⁹ As one gives back to God, directly or indirectly, so God can return to the one who gives.

Significantly, the Temple in Jerusalem was connected in several ways with the collecting and dispensing of alms. The event of the widow casting her two mites into the temple treasury box (Mark 12:42; Luke 21:2) may not be historically verifiable, but it undoubtedly reflects the historical reality of collecting voluntary

²⁵ For a broad and sensitive treatment of this subject in the biblical period, see Léon Epsztein, *Social Justice in the Ancient Near East and the People of the Bible* (London, 1986).

²⁶ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 344.

²⁷ Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia, 1969), p. 127.

²⁸ Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, p. 127.

²⁹ Metaphorically, *misthos* can refer to any reward which God gives, but this term was also used for payment for Levitical services in the temple (Numbers 18:31) or remuneration of priests (Micah 3:11). On the talionic nature of God's judgment, see the discussion of Matthew 7:2 below.

offerings in the Temple. A tithe was also collected for the poor, and all these funds were administered by a “special payment-office for the deserving poor of good families. . . . Since this office was situated in the Temple, we may assume that the other arrangements for assistance were also to be found there,” such as the poor-basket and the poor-dish.³⁰ The Talmud describes two rooms or chambers in the Temple that were used for collecting such donations: “There were two chambers in the temple, one the chamber of secret gifts and the other the chamber of the vessels. The chamber of secret gifts—sin-fearing persons used to put their gifts therein in secret, and the poor who were descended of the virtuous were supported therefrom in secret.”³¹ According to this Mishnah, anonymous donations of various vessels or utensils could likewise be placed in the chamber of the vessels; once every month the treasurers opened it, kept those gifts that were useful right within the Temple or in its stewardships, and then sold the others to raise money to pay for temple repairs. The Jerusalem Talmud adds to this mishnah the further detail that it is “those who fear sin” who secretly and righteously put their contributions for the poor into the chamber of secret gifts.

Indeed, Joachim Jeremias, Geza Vermes, and others have argued that Jesus’ requirement that alms must be given in secret alludes to the practice of giving gifts to the poor by way of this “Chamber of Secrets” in the Temple of Herod.³² I would add that Jesus may also have, just as likely, intended to encourage anonymous donations of valuable vessels or utensils for the benefit and upkeep of the Temple. Furthermore, the Greek phrase “in *the* secret [place] (*en tōi kruptōi*)” uses the definite article and thus seems to refer to some place in specific; otherwise, the adverb “secretly” could have been used. Betz, however, resists such an idea, claiming that “the hypothesis does not allow a correspondence with the other two cultic acts” of prayer (Matthew 6:4) and fasting (Matthew 6:18), both of which the Sermon on the Mount also requires to be done in secret.³³ Betz’s concern, however, can be mollified on several counts: first, it is possible that all three demands for “secrecy” or obscurity might refer to doing things, in one way or another, under the covering of the Temple, thus supplying a consistent correspondence throughout. Second, the word *kruptos* means hidden, concealed, covered, or simply out of sight; Jesus’ meaning might just as well be to do these things under the covering of the Tabernacle or Temple as simply to do them without anyone noticing. Third, the secrecy required in each of these three cases need not necessarily be the same: physical gifts need to be kept out of the public eye in a different way than do personal prayers, and no one needs to know that a person is fasting unless it is somehow announced. The fact that Matthew 6:18 uses a somewhat different expression, “without being noticed (*en tōi kruphaiōi*),” signals

³⁰ Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, pp. 132–3.

³¹ M. *Shekalim* 5.6.

³² Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, p. 133; Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (London, 1973), p. 78.

³³ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 360.

that the correspondence between these three cases was, in fact, never intended to be exact. Finally, the normal English translations and the received wisdom which understand the giving of gifts “in secret” rather than in a secret place within the Temple have been unduly influenced by the Vulgate Latin, *in abscondito*, which, of course, lacks the definite article (there being no definite articles in Latin); this widespread Western reading has lent itself more readily to a generic notion of secrecy and has drawn to mind less often the temple-related specificity that may well have been originally intended in this instruction.

In contrast to the quiet giving of alms in secret that was modeled in the Temple, the reference to trumpets in Matthew 6:2 sounds a blaring note that criticizes any inappropriate practice of conspicuous giving, whether in the Temple or elsewhere. The phrase “sound no trumpet [or fanfare] before you (*mē salpisēis emprosthen sou*)” draws the Temple to mind, since “the principal musical instrument [used there] was the trumpet, which was used in conjunction with the sacrificial rites, on occasions of religious celebration (1 Chron. 13:8; 15:24), and at the dedication of the temple (2 Chron. 5:12).”³⁴ Glorifying God with the trumpet is required in the Psalms: “Praise him with trumpet sound” (Psalms 150:3; also 47:5; 98:6); “blow the trumpet (*salpitate*) at the new moon, at the full moon, on our feast day” (Psalms 81:3). Abraham Bloch’s history of the *shofar* notes that “upon the return of the Babylonian diaspora to Jerusalem, the trumpets were restored to the Temple and their use was mainly confined to the Sanctuary.”³⁵ Thus, the use of a *shofar* or *salpinx* for dramatic purposes by an actor in a synagogue would have struck Jesus’ listeners as a usurpation of a temple instrument for personal aggrandizement in a less than holy context and for less than sacred reasons. Indeed, what these hypocrites sought was glory, to be glorified by men. Glory, however, should be given only to God, and no place was more conducive to glorifying God than was the Temple, as was sung countless times in the Psalms (for example, Psalms 22:23; 24:7; 29:1; 30:12; 45:3; 66:2; 76:4; 86:9, 12; 138:5).

Stage 13. The Order of Prayer (6:5–13)

The next topic of instruction in the Sermon on the Mount is about prayer. Although, and by all means, prayer was not limited exclusively to the Temple, prayer was quintessentially connected with the Temple, its rituals, and the very purpose for its existence. Mentioning prayer would never be out of place in any kind of discourse related to the Temple. Indeed, any such discourse would be somewhat incomplete without some mention of prayer. In addition to the temple element of prayer in general, temple correspondences are enriched in the case of the Lord’s Prayer

³⁴ Abraham P. Bloch, *The Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies* (New York, 1980), p. 146.

³⁵ Bloch, *Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies*, pp. 146–7.

due to several of its specific themes as well as by its clear formulation as a group prayer with ritualistic applications.

The stated purpose of Jesus' instruction about prayer in general is to show his followers how not to be "seen by men" (Matthew 6:5) or "heard for their many words" (Matthew 6:7), but how to be seen and heard of God. This is the cry of the ages, the yearning that God will hear the words that we speak: The plaintive plea, "Then hear thou in heaven" (1 Kings 8:32, 34, 36, 39, 43, 45, 49), was repeated at least seven times in the dedicatory prayer of the Temple of Solomon.

The Sermon on the Mount begins its instructions about prayer with the same general point that applied to the giving of alms. Prayers should be offered to be heard of God and not to be seen of men. In the case of private prayers, Jesus advised going into one's *tameion* (Matthew 6:6), that is, into any small enclosed area, and shutting the door. In a domestic setting, such a room would probably have been "an inner storeroom, which is likely to have been the only lockable room in an ordinary Palestinian house,"³⁶ but the word is general enough to refer to any private space, including a barn (Psalms 144:13) or the secret chambers of a king (Psalms 105:30). One's secret place, of course, need not be only in a temple or other sanctuary,³⁷ but at the same time temples served as ideal places of secret communication with God and sheltered refuge from any kind of threatening or vengeful wrath. The idea that God was prone to hide made it all the more attractive to think of finding God in remote or cloistered places; and where can God be found better than in the innermost, private chamber of his own house, the Temple? So when it is said in the little apocalypse in Matthew 24 that God is to be found neither in his wide-open dwelling place out in the wilderness nor in his confined secret chambers (*en tois tameiois*), this merism emphatically drives home the point that God is then to be found nowhere at all, having departed again from all of his usual places of residence, and so there was no need to seek him out either in the open wilderness or in his secret chambers (Matthew 24:26), in other words, even in the Temple. Likewise, the apocalyptic warning in Luke continues by saying that in the last day nothing that was once "covered," including in the Temple, will not be exposed, and all that was whispered in the *tameia* will be shouted from the rooftops, especially the identity of anyone who has confessed or denied the Son of Man (Luke 12:2–3). Such references that embrace even the most secret of all chambers could easily have been connected with the idea of the "glorious innermost Temple chambers" as mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls.³⁸ The Father who sees and hears "in the secret place (*en tōi kruptōi*)" will then reward those who seek and ask him, and him alone. In the Psalms, God is often wont to

³⁶ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2007), p. 239.

³⁷ Isaiah told his people to take cover in their shelters (*tameia*) until the anger of the Lord shall have passed over (Isaiah 26:20).

³⁸ 4Q405 14–15 in Geza Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York, 1988), p. 227.

hide (*kruptein*, Psalms 10:1, 11; 13:1; 30:7; 89:46; 119:114), but the supplications of the righteous are not hidden from him (Psalms 17:8; 38:9; 40:10; 55:1).

At the time of Jesus, prayer was clearly linked to the Temple. In his main temple action, Jesus solidly affirmed “the public temple as a place of prayer.”³⁹ Incontrovertibly, it was written “My house shall be called a house of prayer” (Matthew 21:13), quoting the long-standing tradition, reflected in Isaiah 56:7, of seeing the Temple as a house of prayer.⁴⁰ Speaking of this central function of the Temple, Rabbi Abraham Bloch explains:

In the course of time a practice of individual prayers, in conjunction with a sacrificial offering, was instituted in the Temple. This practice was predicted by Isaiah: “Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices shall be acceptable upon my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Isaiah 56:7). The chanting of psalms in the Temple was an act of praying. Josephus described the custom of praying at the time when a sacrifice is offered “for the common welfare of all, and after that our own” (“Against Apion” 2.24). . . . While individual prayers were sporadic in the First Temple, they became a permanent feature in the Second Temple.⁴¹

By omitting the phrase “for all peoples” in this quote from Isaiah 56, “Matthew makes it clear that he understands Jesus’ act to be concerned with the proper use of the temple as such,” not just in any particular part of the Temple open to non-Jews.⁴² Geoffrey Troughton further explains the context of the passage in Matthew 21 and how it fits with Jesus’ own attitudes about the Temple and about Jewish leadership:

Jesus recalls Isaiah 56.7, asserting that the Temple should be “a house of prayer for all nations”. In context, Isaiah 56.1–8 describes a gathering of the righteous from foreign nations with the faithful of Israel in their worship in Jerusalem. This is interposed between a call to “maintain justice” (56.1) and accusations that Israel’s leaders are blind and corrupt (56.9–12).⁴³

In short, this Isaiah passage not only calls the Temple “a house of prayer” but also denounces the evil practices and greed of some who worked there. Thus, it is

³⁹ Dale C. Allison Jr, *Matthew: A Shorter Commentary* (New York, 2004), p. 89.

⁴⁰ Bloch, *Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies*, p. 66.

⁴¹ Abraham P. Bloch, *The Biblical and Historical Background of the Jewish Holy Days* (New York, 1978), p. 35.

⁴² France, *Gospel of Matthew*, pp. 786–7.

⁴³ Geoffrey M. Troughton, “Echoes in the Temple? Jesus, Nehemiah, and Their Actions in the Temple,” *JBS* 3/2 (April 2003): 9, available at <http://journalofbiblicalstudies.org/Issue7/Echoes%20in%20the%20Temple.pdf>

significant that these teachings of Jesus on prayer similarly include a denunciation of the public prayer practices of “hypocrites” (presumably referring to influential people) who pray for the purpose of obtaining worldly attention rather than for spiritual gain.

Robert Mounce discusses the inherent connection between prayer and the Temple, as well as the practices of these “hypocrites.”

A second important religious duty among the Jews was prayer. In the morning and in the evening the devout Jew would recite the Shema (three short passages of Scripture from Deut. 6 and 11 and Numbers 15), and at nine in the morning, noon, and three in the afternoon he would go through the Shemoneh Esreh (the Eighteen Benedictions). Acts 3:1 notes that Peter and John went to the temple “at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon.” According to Jewish custom, if you were in the streets at this time it was proper to stop, turn toward the temple, and pray (the Moslem practice even today). Apparently the hypocrites would plan their day so as to be in some conspicuous place when it was time to pray.⁴⁴

Jesus, however, emphasizes the virtue of private prayer, teaching that prayer should not be spoken to be heard and seen of men, but rather that its purpose was to reach the Father. Similarly, in the Temple, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies alone (see Leviticus 16:17) for the private and secluded communication that occurred there between God and his servant the high priest.⁴⁵

After these instructions about praying alone in private, the English pronouns shift from a singular “you” to a plural.⁴⁶ This indicates that the Lord’s Prayer was offered as an instruction in group prayer: “[You (plural)] pray then like this.”⁴⁷ The words of the Lord’s Prayer, which have become familiar to virtually all Christians, would already have had a familiar ring in the ears of Jesus’ original audience: “Pray then like this: Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:9–13). The words of the Lord’s Prayer draw heavily on traditional idioms and temple terminology, with Psalm 103 containing “the majority of Old Testament connections with the Lord’s Prayer.”⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew* (Peabody, Massachusetts, 1991), p. 54.

⁴⁵ See Barker, *Temple Theology*, p. 61.

⁴⁶ The second person plural is used in Matthew 6:9 (*humeis*) and the first person plural runs throughout the prayer itself.

⁴⁷ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 362–3, recognizes the Lord’s Prayer as “a group prayer,” but finds it hard to place it in the context of instruction on personal prayer.

⁴⁸ George Braulik, “Psalms and Liturgy: Their Reception and Contextualization,” *VE* 2 (2003): 309–32, quote on 325.

The prayer begins by addressing God as “Our Father (*pater hēmōn*).” Whether the word used or assumed here is the Greek *pater*, or the Hebrew *ab* or *abba*,⁴⁹ this salutation assumes that a father-child relationship already exists between God and his petitioning children, which implies that the promise made at the outset of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:9 to the effect that peacemakers will be called the sons of God (discussed above) has already been to some extent fulfilled, so that the initiate by now enjoys that status.

Addressing God as Father “is one of the basic phenomena of religious history” worldwide, as it was also in Judaism before and after the New Testament era; it was also a common term of addressing the deity in Hellenistic mystery cults.⁵⁰ Herman Hendrickx has detected and commented on this widespread, sacred use of the term “father” in Near Eastern, Greco-Roman, and the Hebrew prayer and ritual discourse:

In the *ancient Near East* “Father” was used to indicate that God is the creator of the world, the sovereign ruler, and protector. In ancient Egypt, the sun-god Amon-Re was called father, but it is possible that this practice was reserved to the Pharaoh, although there is some recently discovered evidence that ordinary people could do so too. In ancient Mesopotamia, the moon-god Nanna and the sun-god Shamash were also addressed as Father.

In the *Greco-Roman world*, Zeus was referred to as “father of gods and men,” and addressed in prayer as “Father Zeus,” designating him as divine ruler and protector, and later also as creator. The term “Father” was also frequently used for deities like Attis, Osiris and Mithras in the mystery religions in which the promise of personal immortality was expressed in terms of becoming “sons” of the divine “Father.”

In the *Old Testament*, God is spoken of as “Father” on fourteen occasions expressing his relationship to his people (cf. Deut. 32:6; Isa. 63:15–16; 64:7–9; Jer. 3:4, 19). Many other passages describe him as creator, ruler and protector without explicitly using the word “Father.” In this respect the Old Testament usage is parallel to that of other religions and cultures of the ancient world. But it contains also a number of distinctive features. [For example,] the title “Father” has a connotation of God’s working in history on behalf of his covenant people Israel.⁵¹

Although the appellation of “father” is perfectly suitable and was used in several different kinds of literary and social contexts, its use in Isaiah 63 to call upon God as the true Father in his heavenly (temple) habitation is especially pertinent to the invocation that begins the Lord’s Prayer: “Look down from heaven and see, from

⁴⁹ For a lengthy discussion of *Abba*, see Joachim Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (London, 1967), pp. 11–65.

⁵⁰ Gottlob Schrenk, “*patēr*,” in *TDNT*, vol. 5, pp. 951, 953–4, 978–82.

⁵¹ Herman Hendrickx, *The Sermon on the Mount* (London, 1984), pp. 108–9.

thy holy and glorious habitation. Where are thy zeal and thy might? The yearning of thy heart and thy compassion are withheld from me. For thou art our Father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; thou, O Lord, art our Father, our Redeemer from of old is thy name” (Isaiah 63:15–16). In the Psalms, God was extolled as the “Father of the fatherless” (Psalms 68:5; see also 103:13), and the servant of God shall cry unto him, “Thou art my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation” (Psalms 89:26). Elsewhere, in similar tones, both John the Baptist and Jesus place the Lord ahead of Abraham “as father whom we have” (Matthew 3:9), and ahead of Abraham “our father” (“are you greater than *patros hēmōn*,” John 8:53, 58), and that emphatic statement that God is truly “our Father” increases all the more the resonance between these words in Isaiah and the opening words of the Lord’s Prayer. Both texts, in effect, petition the Father, who is in the heavens (or in his holy and glorious habitation in the Holy of Holies) to look down, to hear, and to answer, with zeal and might, the prayers of the righteous who beg God for his acknowledgment, compassion, forgiveness, guidance, and redemption.

Pronouncing this name of God properly also suggests important ritual backgrounds. Knowing and invoking the *nomina sacra* typically carried with it numinous powers. Names were not taken lightly, and often they could be uttered only in sacred ceremonial settings. Some religions had “developed long lists of divine names, hoping that by endless repetition they would somehow invoke the name of the true god and receive what they wanted.”⁵² And so when Jesus began the Lord’s Prayer by calling upon God as “Our Father,” and by “hallowing” that name, he would have evoked a field of meanings that were at home in temples and in solemn rituals. As Margaret Barker explains, holy respect for the name of God was an important temple symbol. When the high priest ministered in the ancient temple, he “wore the Sacred Name on his forehead because he represented the Lord of the hosts dwelling with his people. ‘Blessed is he who comes with the Name of the Lord’ must have been the acclamation for the high priest.”⁵³

In averring that the name of God be “hallowed,” or “made holy (*hagiasthētō*),” the Lord’s Prayer taps into one of the most recognizable psalmodic pronouncements repeatedly sung in the Temple: “May his name endure for ever, . . . and all nations call him blessed!” (Psalms 72:17); “holy and terrible is his name!” (Psalms 111:9; also 99:3); “we trust in his holy name” (Psalms 33:21); “bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name” (Psalms 103:1; also 105:3; 106:47; 145:21).

When the Lord’s Prayer continues to beseech that God’s kingdom might come and his “will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10), other correspondences with the Psalms and the Temple are evoked: “Temple theology knew of incarnation, . . . the life of the age to come, . . . and the kingdom of God”

⁵² Mounce, *Matthew*, p. 55.

⁵³ Barker, *Temple Theology*, p. 26.

for his sons and daughters.⁵⁴ The kingdom of God is praised and extolled in Psalms 22:28, 45:6, 103:19, and 145:11–13; and Psalms 135:6 equates that state with the harmonization of affairs on earth with God’s will in heaven: “Whatever the Lord pleases he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.” The initial verses of Psalm 135 place that hymn in the context of the Temple, praising Lord in his “house” and in “the courts of the house of our God” (Psalms 135:2).

Having just prayed “thy kingdom come,” the mysterious request “give us this day our ‘daily’ (*epiousion*) bread” (Matthew 6:11) is unlikely to be a request “for ordinary food.”⁵⁵ “The consumption of bread was accompanied by rich symbolism.”⁵⁶ The interpretation of the word *epiousion* is notoriously difficult,⁵⁷ but in a temple context the variables and possibilities become contained. It may refer to the bread that came down from heaven (compare Jerome’s rendition of this word as *supersubstantialis*, that is, supernatural), to the future bread of life that will be eaten at the eschatological messianic banquet, or to the bread that is given “day by day” (compare Luke 11:3; James 2:15), as was the manna in the wilderness. Mounce writes, “The background is God’s daily provision of manna that could not be stored (except on Friday) for a future day (Exod. 16). God responds to our needs day by day.”⁵⁸

With the Temple in mind, one might find here a reference to the miraculous daily manna that all the children of Israel received from their protective Father during the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. This enduring provision of this heavenly bread was so amazing “that Moses commanded Aaron the high priest to gather an omer of manna and place it in the ark of the covenant that future generations might be reminded of the Lord’s supply.”⁵⁹ That famed miracle was referenced in a temple context in Psalms 105:40, in praising the Lord through a recitation of his covenant dealings with Israel, and in this context mentions that the Lord “satisfied them with the bread of heaven.”

Additionally, it was the privilege of the high priest to enter the Holy of Holies and eat the Bread of the Presence each Sabbath day: “As with so many temple practices, nothing is said of the meaning [of this bread], but there are enigmatic references to feasts in the Temple, associated with theophany,”⁶⁰ indicating the

⁵⁴ Margaret Barker, *On Earth As It Is in Heaven: Temple Symbolism in the New Testament* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. ix.

⁵⁵ Margaret Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship* (London, 2007), p. 208.

⁵⁶ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 399.

⁵⁷ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 397–9. A.W. Argyle, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 56, states: “The word translated ‘daily’ is so rare that no one knows what it means. It may mean ‘for the following day,’ ‘our bread for the morrow.’”

⁵⁸ Mounce, *Matthew*, p. 57.

⁵⁹ Joel C. Slayton, “Manna,” *ABD*, vol. 4, p. 511; see also Exodus 16:32–3.

⁶⁰ Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*, pp. 208–9; see also Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest* (London, 2003), pp. 101–2.

presence of the Lord himself. Bread was used significantly in the Temple and was a familiar symbol there.⁶¹

A further connection between the Lord's Prayer and the temple context is evident in its doxology and the exclamation of the people in the Temple of Jerusalem on the Day of Atonement. In the opinion of the exhaustive compilers Strack and Billerbeck, after the High Priest had transferred the sins of the people to the scapegoat, had driven it out into the wilderness, and had said the words, "from all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord" (Leviticus 16:30), then

the priests and the people, who were standing in the Forecourt [of the Temple], when they heard the name of the Lord clearly uttered, as soon as it came out of the mouth of the High Priest, bowed their knees and threw themselves down and fell on their faces and said, "Praised be the name of his glorious kingdom forever and eternally!" In the Temple [*im Heiligtum*] one did not simply answer "Amen!" How did one answer? "Praised be the name of his glorious kingdom forever and eternally!" . . . How do we know that the people answered this way upon each benediction [in the Temple]? The scripture teaches, saying, "He is to be exalted with every praise and adulation."⁶²

Accordingly, in the Temple, the faithful would not have answered the High Priest with a simple "amen," but by praising God and mentioning a pleonastic list of his divine attributes, such as his glory, power, kingdom, and everlasting dominion, before concluding with "amen." According to the rabbinic sources, this doxological acknowledgment of the kingdom and glory of God was in regular usage in the Temple before its destruction; and this practice can be attributed to a much earlier time, it being believed that similar words of praise were spoken by father Jacob to his sons shortly before his death.⁶³ In a temple setting, an expansive doxology was clearly called for, if not expected; in a plainer, public context, a simpler ending would have been more appropriate (compare Luke 11:4).

Indeed, words of praise and honor such as the doxology found at the end of the Lord's Prayer were comfortably familiar in Israelite temple ritual and liturgy. An exclamation of praise similar to Matthew 6:13 is set in a temple context as David glorified the Lord at the time when the people made generous offerings to support the building of the Temple: "Thine, O Lord, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and thou art exalted as head above all" (1 Chronicles 29:11). Likewise, another doxology, this time in the context of the Holy of Holies, is found in the words of the seraphim who speak

⁶¹ Alan R. Kerr, *The Temple of Jesus' Body: A Temple Theme in the Gospel of John* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supp. 220, New York, 2002), p. 345.

⁶² Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 1, p. 423, citing Mishnah, *Yoma* 6:2, and others.

⁶³ Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 1, p. 423.

to each other in Isaiah's vision of the temple throne, declaring, "The whole earth is full of his glory" (Isaiah 6:3). From the Psalms, further doxologies, each with strong connections to the kingdom, power and glory included in the doxology at the end of the traditional version of the Lord's Prayer, are known to have been sung with reverence and jubilation in the Temple. For example, "I will declare thy greatness, . . . and shall sing aloud of thy righteousness: . . . All thy saints shall bless thee! They shall speak of the *glory* of thy *kingdom*, and tell of thy *power*, to make known to the sons of men thy mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of thy kingdom" (Psalms 145:6, 10–12, emphasis added).

Thus the longer ending of the Lord's Prayer, "for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever, amen," would probably have been recognized by Jesus' listeners as a traditional sign of the great sanctity and solemnity connected with the Temple, and its hue and tone would have easily evoked emotions and experiences usually reserved for the holiest of temple rituals on the Day of Atonement. Thus, as Betz has pointed out, the words of praise used at the end of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6 may even have signaled a ceremonial "acclamation," indicating that "perhaps the original function of the 'doxology' in the Lord's Prayer was that of a response by the worshiping congregation."⁶⁴

The ritualistic tenor of the Sermon on the Mount is borne out by the long-standing use of the Lord's Prayer in religious services. From the earliest Christian times, the Lord's Prayer was "basically a prayer used by a group,"⁶⁵ and several early Christian texts document the use of sacred group prayers, with the participants standing in a circle around Jesus at the center.⁶⁶ The Lord's Prayer was undoubtedly intended as a pattern or model for group prayers. Jesus probably used words such as these as he prayed on several occasions; and it would appear that he taught his followers to pray in this way, modifying the words of the prayer somewhat from time to time, as is reflected in the fact that the earliest texts of the Lord's Prayer are not all quite the same (compare, for example, Matthew 6:9–13; Luke 11:2–4; Didache 8:2). The early church father Origen understood the Lord's Prayer to be only a model or outline,⁶⁷ and the rabbis similarly expressed "strong prohibitions against reciting a fixed prayer," recommending that in saying a set personal prayer one should vary it a little each time.⁶⁸

The Lord's Prayer also has covenantal characteristics that draw it once again into a temple environment. In the lines "thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven"

⁶⁴ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 414. Compare Psalm 106:48.

⁶⁵ Gordon J. Bahr, "The Use of the Lord's Prayer in the Primitive Church," *JBL* 84 (1965): 156.

⁶⁶ Hugh W. Nibley, "The Early Christian Prayer Circle," in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City, 1987), 45–99.

⁶⁷ Bahr, "Use of the Lord's Prayer in the Primitive Church," 153.

⁶⁸ Bahr, "Use of the Lord's Prayer in the Primitive Church," 157. See Hans Dieter Betz, "The Lord's Prayer" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Chicago, 1988).

and “thy kingdom come” (Matthew 6:10), Margaret Barker sees an allusion to aspects of temple worship in the Holy of Holies pertaining to the Lord’s creation of the world and mankind’s fulfillment of the all-crucial covenant. The phrase “‘on earth as it is in heaven’ would be a good description of the creation as it was intended to be”⁶⁹ and the “kingdom” represented the Holy of Holies, the home of the “eternal covenant.”⁷⁰ In the Temple, heaven and earth meet, and thus Barker aptly explains that covenant-making in the Temple essentially constituted the binding together of earth and heaven. “The Hebrew dictionary suggests that the root meaning of ‘covenant’ is ‘to bind’. . . . Creating in the holy of holies was a process of binding into bonds, engraving limits and definitions, and then using them to order the visible creation.”⁷¹ The covenant-making language of the Old Testament “refers to the correspondence between earth and heaven.”⁷² The binding force and effect of this covenant was also recognized in the New Testament’s teachings about atonement, for as Barker also writes,

The high priest’s renewal of the cosmic covenant is the natural context in which to understand Ephesians 1.10: “. . . a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth”. . . . The one who is the image of the invisible God, who reconciles all things on earth and in heaven, who makes peace by means of blood, is the high priest.⁷³

As Jesus prayed to bring the Father’s will onto earth, he sought to connect or bind earth to heaven. His words invoked the concepts of covenant and atonement.

Always alert to further possibilities of temple allusions in a wide variety of ancient texts ranging from ancient Egypt to early Christianity, Hugh Nibley has detected more than a polite request or pious wish in the structure of the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer.⁷⁴ Nibley has maintained that the three main sections of this prayer conform to the well-known archetype of “mysteries or ceremonies” that bring down to earth the pattern of heaven (“on earth exactly as it is in heaven”), to which our present linkage and our “password is the name” of God (“hallowed be thy name”).⁷⁵ Like the three typical elements of the Greek mysteries, the Lord’s Prayer synoptically covers an *archē* (beginning in heaven, father of spirits), an

⁶⁹ Barker, *Temple Theology*, p. 41.

⁷⁰ Barker, *Temple Theology*, p. 51.

⁷¹ Barker, *Temple Theology*, p. 43.

⁷² Barker, *Temple Theology*, p. 43.

⁷³ Barker, *Risen Lord*, p. 82.

⁷⁴ On Jewish legalistic prayers, see Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud* (Berlin, 1977), pp. 193–217, discussing the “law court patterns” in similar prayers, where one presents a plea to the divine judge, gives the facts, defends himself, and asks for judgment in his favor.

⁷⁵ Hugh W. Nibley, unpublished notes on the New Testament, on Matthew 6:9–13, in the Hugh W. Nibley Archive, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo,

omphalus (history, this world, bread, debts, temptation, and cry for deliverance), and *sphragis* (end of the world, seal, kingdom, and glory).⁷⁶

Unfortunately, most of these connections between the Lord's Prayer and the Temple have gone missing over the centuries. As Margaret Barker has observed, not all of the teachings in early Christianity regarding prayer were committed to writing, perhaps because many of them were Christian counterparts to ineffable holy things that were at home particularly in the Temple:

St Basil, in his mid-fourth-century treatise *On the Holy Spirit*, explained that there were teachings from the apostles which had never been written down. These concerned facing east to pray, marking with the sign of the cross, and the *epiklesis*, the words used in the Liturgy to call on the Lord to come, originally to the temple (e.g. Ps. 38.21–22; Ps. 70.1, 5), but in this instance to the bread and wine. It cannot be coincidence that all three were customs from the first temple. Basil explained that “they had been kept in silence and in secret”, and concerned “liturgical customs, prayers and rites of the sacraments” and the theological doctrines implied in them. . . . Basil compared facing east, the sign of the cross, and the *epiklesis* to the secrets of the holy of holies.⁷⁷

Thus, when the Sermon on the Mount introduced its audience to the correct “manner” of prayer, it drew heavily upon the sacred teachings of the ancient temple, where prayer was given particular solemnity through the words, patterns, and symbols that were taken for granted in the instruction given and exemplified by Jesus.

Stage 14. Forgiving and Receiving Forgiveness (6:14–15)

The theme of forgiveness, which was introduced in the altar law of Matthew 5:23 and formulated in the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:12, is expanded and elaborated in Matthew 6:14–15: “For if you forgive (*aphēte*) men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive (*aphēsei*) you; but if you do not forgive (*aphēte*) men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive (*aphēsei*) your trespasses.” This pointed repetition places heightened emphasis on the inescapable fact that, under the new order of holiness, prayers beseeching the Lord for forgiveness of sin or for deliverance from evil will be granted only to the extent that the petitioners have truly forgiven or delivered one another. As the listeners are taken one step further along the Sermon on the Mount's path of progression, they learn that

Utah. Apparently, the hallowed, holy name is something other than Abba, which is not a proper name.

⁷⁶ Nibley, unpublished notes; see Raymond E. Brown, “The Pater Noster as an Eschatological Prayer,” in *New Testament Essays* (London, 1965).

⁷⁷ Barker, *Temple Theology*, pp. 21–2 (citation omitted).

something more than reconciliation is now required. It is not enough to know that your brother or sister holds no hard feelings against you (which was the sacrificial prerequisite of Matthew 5:23–4). Now, the petitioner must be sure that there remains no residue of any incomplete forgiveness in his or her own heart. The one who asks God for forgiveness must hold no hard feelings against his brother or sister and must have completely forgiven all those who have sinned or trespassed against him. To be completely forgiven, one must forgive completely, for (following again the talionic nature of divine justice) God will only forgive us *to the extent* (*hōs kai*) that we have forgiven others.

Moreover, at this stage one now also learns that this is the only way to obtain forgiveness. Having asked “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12), the petitioners are now told that no other way to obtain forgiveness is open. Being forgiving is both a sufficient and also a necessary condition of receiving forgiveness from the Lord. One will be forgiven if and only if one forgives others: “if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

Expiating sin, removing impurity, and making possible a reconciliation with God and his forgiveness was one of the most important functions of the Temple. Five times in his prayer dedicating the Temple, Solomon besought the Lord to hear the prayers and supplications of the people in that place: “when they pray toward this place; yea, hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place; and when thou hearest, forgive” (1 Kings 8:30; see also 8:34, 36, 39, 50). In the Temple, “the priest shall make atonement for them, and they shall be forgiven” (Leviticus 4:20; see also 4:26; 19:22). Those who sought forgiveness in the Temple offered sacrifices there in order to “repair the broken relationship” with God; “if God will accept his sacrifice he will once again be restored to grace, at one with his deity.”⁷⁸ Through the sacrificial cult the high priest was able to bear and forgive the transgressions and imperfections of the people.

The name which the high priest wore enabled him to bear the guilt of the holy offerings and make them acceptable (Exod. 28:38). Wearing the Name enabled the high priest to carry, or to forgive—the word *naśa’* has both meanings—the imperfections of the people’s offerings. He was the sin-bearer, and so the Palm Sunday acclamation: “Hosanna [which means ‘Save us’]. Blessed is he who comes with the Name of the Lord” (Mark 11:9) must have been an acclamation for the one who bore the Name as the sin-bearer. The third commandment had been intended for the high priest: “You shall not wear/carry [the word *naśa’* again] the Name of the Lord your God in vain for the Lord will not hold him free of guilt who wears his Name in vain” (Exod. 20:7). The high priest had the Name and thus the power of the Name. He was the seal of the eternal covenant, like Isaiah’s Servant figure, or the cherub high priest described by Ezekiel.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York, 1991), p. 245.

⁷⁹ Barker, *Temple Theology*, p. 59.

The Sermon on the Mount teaches much the same principle as it warns all disciples that they must not fail to forgive or bear the sins of others. Those who fail to forgive (and thus wear the Name in vain) will not be held free from sin nor be forgiven.

Although several texts in the Hebrew Bible speak of forgiveness, mercy, release, and atonement, no book in the Greek scriptures uses the word *aphiein* more vividly and memorably than in the Psalms. After praising God for instructing “sinners in the way (*hodōi*)” and teaching “the meek (*praiēis*) in his ways” (Psalms 25:8; compare Matthew 5:5; 7:14), the hymn poignantly begs, “Consider my affliction and my trouble, and forgive (*aphes*) all my sins” (Psalms 25:18). Psalm 32 begins, “Blessed (*makarioi*) are they whose transgressions are forgiven (*aphethēsan*), whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. . . . I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’; then thou didst forgive (*aphēkas*) the guilt of my sin.” Psalms 85:2 rejoices, “Thou didst forgive (*aphēkas*) the iniquity of thy people; thou didst pardon all their sin.” Being made free—released from sin, debt, and servitude—was also the objective behind the Jubilee year, the year “of release (*apheseōs*),” which celebratory period began in the Temple on the Day of Atonement.⁸⁰ Thus, at many levels Jesus’ teaching about forgiveness reflected central teachings and powerful symbols deeply embedded in Israelite and Jewish temple worship.

But perhaps for this very reason, more than any other, Jesus’ potent teaching about forgiveness was on a collision course with the Temple and the chief priests and scribes, whose vested interests were compromised by the logical implications of this particular teaching. That conflict was foreshadowed shortly after the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus said to the paralytic, “Take heart, my son, your sins are forgiven,” and some of the scribes accused Jesus of “blasphemy” (Matthew 9:2–3), that is, in this case, of offending or invading the unique domain of the sacrificial cult of the Temple.⁸¹ They dropped their accusation, however, when the paralytic took up his bed and walked home, expressly to show that if the Son of man could perform such a miracle he also had “authority to forgive sins” (Matthew 9:6), a power traditionally reserved to God and accessible through the priestly caste in the Temple alone.

Stage 15. Fasting, Washing, and Anointing (6:16–18)

An instruction about fasting, anointing, and washing was next added to supplement the instructions on prayer and seeking forgiveness. “When you fast (*nēsteuēte*), anoint (*aleipsai*) your head and wash (*nipsai*) your face, that your fasting may not

⁸⁰ Barker, *Temple Theology*, pp. 64, 70–71.

⁸¹ That one could be accused and executed on a charge of blasphemy for speaking words that compromised the Temple, “this holy place,” see the charge leveled against Stephen in Acts 6:9, 11.

be seen by men but by your Father who is in secret (*en tōi kruphaiōi*); and your Father who sees in secret (*en tōi kruphaiōi*) will reward you” (Matthew 6:17–18).

Whatever else one may think about the ethical and eschatological dimensions of this brief section of the Sermon on the Mount, there can be no doubt that fasting, washing, and anointing are very often related to ritual acts, especially associated with preparations, purifications, and consecrations of those presenting themselves at the Temple or participating in temple procedures. Hans Dieter Betz has persuasively defended on several literary and historical grounds his designation of the block of text in Matthew 6:1–18 as a “cultic *didache*” or “ritual instruction,”⁸² and his characterization is strongly supported at this stage by the mere fact that fasting, when accompanied by washing and anointing, is undoubtedly connected with some religious ritual. Moreover, the triad of fasting, washing, and anointing readily draws to mind ritual practices connected with the Temple. While one might fast, wash, and apply scented olive oil at home or on special occasions in family or village life, the most salient reason for such acts of self-denial, cleansing, and purification was to prepare to enter the Temple and to present oneself humbly before the Lord.

Although this two-verse section of the Sermon on the Mount is shorter than the foregoing sixteen verses on almsgiving and prayer, one need not conclude that fasting was unimportant to Jesus or the earliest Christians. Other stages in the Sermon on the Mount are of great importance, even though they are very brief (such as the requirement of sacred secrecy in Matthew 7:6 or the Golden Rule in Matthew 7:12). The overall flow of the Sermon on the Mount enhances the importance of each of its elements beyond what any single item might mean taken in isolation. The system of the Temple as a whole elevates every one of its details—no matter how small it might initially seem—in spiritual stature and sparkling significance, with the least of those observances sometimes becoming even the most highly esteemed (compare 1 Corinthians 12:23). The common thread in Matthew 6:1–18 is taking private, personal steps in secret, holy ways, so that God will see and rewards one’s personal righteousness in some secret, holy space and time. Those three steps involve showing charity to others by giving alms, loving God by hallowing his name and praying to him, and attending to oneself by self-denial, personal cleanliness, and beautification.

Fasting

Fasting and prayer, topics that stand in close proximity to each other in stages 13 and 15 of the Sermon on the Mount, were closely linked to each other throughout the New Testament in connection with ceremonies of exorcizing demons (Matthew 17:21), in Jesus’ ordeal of overcoming the temptations of Satan (Matthew 4:2; 1 Corinthians 7:5), or in ordaining elders (Acts 14:23). Fasting and prayer are suitable preparations for all ritual applications.

⁸² Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 330–35.

People fasted on various occasions in biblical times. Ascetics, such as John the Baptist, fasted (Mark 1:6). Those mourning the dead fasted, such as when David and his men wept over the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (1 Samuel 1:12). Pertinent for present purposes, those seeking purification at the Temple on the Day of Atonement afflicted themselves or, literally, deprived their throats (Leviticus 16:29, 31; 23:27, 29), which at least always included fasting.⁸³ In Jesus' day, it may well have been a subject of some dispute how much more a person needed to do to comply with the requirement that "in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month, you shall afflict yourselves" (Leviticus 16:29). Later rabbinic rulings require the person to refrain from eating, drinking, bathing, anointing, and having sexual intercourse,⁸⁴ perhaps borrowing from the occasion when David afflicted himself in all those ways, and also by sleeping on the ground and not changing his clothes, as he fasted and prayed for a son (2 Samuel 12:16–20), but nothing would necessarily require that litany of afflictions when appearing at the Temple. Evidently the "dismal" looking (*skuthrōpoi*, sullen, sad, or annoyed) Pharisees held that they should "disfigure" (*aphanizousin*, make unrecognizable, or hide) their faces when they fasted; and so perhaps the audience of the Sermon on the Mount would have understood this to be the case especially when the Pharisees were on the way to the Temple, for, as Betz points out, one of the "most interesting parallels" to Matthew 6:16 is found in the Platonic dialogue *Alcibiades Minor*,⁸⁵ a text that was widely known in antiquity. At the beginning of that dialogue, Socrates meets Alcibiades on his way to a temple to offer a sacrifice and to pray to a god; Alcibiades was going along, looking down at the ground, sad or worried (*eskuthrōpakenai*, essentially the same word as in Matthew 6:16). Socrates proceeds to teach Alcibiades the importance of asking the gods for the right things, and in the end Alcibiades decides to place on the head of Socrates the wreath (*stephanos*) he was carrying and to put off his sacrifice (*thusia*) until another time.⁸⁶ If this allusion was not lost on the Sermon on the Mount's audience, those hearers would have understood that the Pharisees were just as wrong as Alcibiades in approaching God in the Temple with worries and sullen countenances, instead of with joy and rejoicing.

Moreover, as a natural part of the public weeping and wailing that would go on in funerals or contrived legal proceedings (as in the case of Jezebel's framing

⁸³ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, p. 1054; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27* (New York, 2001), p. 2022.

⁸⁴ *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* and *Yoma* 8:1, cited in Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, p. 1054; see also Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 417–18; Bloch, *The Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies*, pp. 168–9.

⁸⁵ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 420.

⁸⁶ Plato, *Alcibiades Minor* 138a and 151a. Greeks "who went to a temple to pray to a god carried a garland, which they wore while praying; and hence Socrates knew, on meeting Alcibiades, whither he was going." George Burges, *The Works of Plato* (6 vols, London, 1891), vol. 4, p. 397, n. 87.

of Naboth in 1 Kings 21:9) or in pietistic afflictions on temple occasions, fasting could easily lend itself “to ostentatious displays of piety, that is, to false piety,” and the Sermon on the Mount took particular exception against any such false pretenses.⁸⁷ While Jesus inveighed against those who fasted that way to be seen of men, he did not reject fasting in general; indeed, he encouraged correct fasting as a part of true righteousness in order to be seen of God.⁸⁸ And here, again, the Temple is brought to mind. When the prophet Joel summoned Israel to come to the Temple, he called out: “Sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly. Gather the elders and all the inhabitants of the land to the house of the Lord your God; and cry to the Lord. . . . Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning” (Joel 1:14; 2:12). When the Jews returned to Jerusalem, they assembled themselves at the Temple “with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth upon their heads. . . . they made confession and worshiped the Lord their God” (Nehemiah 9:1, 3). All this was a necessary precursor to the joy that would come in celebrating the forgiveness of the Lord, especially on the great Day of Atonement at the Temple. That day of pilgrimage to the Temple, of sacrifice, giving to the poor, fasting, offering prayers, receiving forgiveness, and feeling “spiritual ecstasy and joy,”⁸⁹ was so prominent that “there was no need to identify it by name, and a mere reference to ‘the fast’ was sufficient” to call it to mind (see Acts 27:9).⁹⁰ The Day of Atonement temple themes of charitable giving, prayer, forgiveness, and fasting are all closely linked⁹¹ and completely consonant with the themes of the instructions in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:1–18.

Over-enthusiastic joy for the Almighty also needed to be corrected. When the Psalmist was overcome in public by his passion for the glory of the Temple, he was ridiculed by the public and alienated from his family; in response, he humbled and corrected himself by fasting privately: “For zeal for thy house has consumed me, and the insults of those who insult thee have fallen on me. When I humbled my soul with fasting, it became my reproach” (Psalms 69:9–10). Thus, it was advisable to approach the Lord in his Temple with inconspicuous, secluded fasting, especially praying in behalf of one’s enemies or persecutors. When false witnesses rose up

⁸⁷ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 422.

⁸⁸ I take the saying in Gospel of Thomas 14 as a conscious reversal of Matthew 6:1–18. It reads, “If you (plur.) fast, you will acquire a sin, and if you pray you will be condemned, and if you give alms, it is evil that you will do unto your spirits,” Bentley Layton, trans., *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, New York, 1987), pp. 382–3, reversing not only the sense but also the order of alms, prayer and fasting in Matthew 6, and therefore should be taken as secondary to the Sermon on the Mount.

⁸⁹ Bloch, *Biblical and Historical Background of Jewish Customs and Ceremonies*, p. 170, “Thus Rabbi Simon b. Gamliel said: ‘There never were in Israel greater days of joy (*yomim tovim*) than the fifteenth of Av and YomHaKippurim’ (*Taanit* 26b).”

⁹⁰ Bloch, *Biblical and Historical Background of the Jewish Holy Days*, p. 28.

⁹¹ For the connection between fasting and giving to the poor, see Isaiah 58:6–7; *Shepherd of Hermas*, Similitude 5.3.7.

against the Psalmist and to him returned “evil for good,” he reciprocated by fasting and praying for them when they were sick, wearing sackcloth and grieving as for a friend or brother (Psalms 35:11–14). It was then promised that the Lord would hear and answer the prayers of those who approached him in a humble state of fasting and self-denial, but no outward manifestations would sanctify the prayers or offerings of those whose acts were worldly or evil. Jeremiah warned the wicked that even “though they fast, [the Lord] will not hear their cry, and though they offer burnt offering and cereal offering, I will not accept them; but I will consume them by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence” (Jeremiah 14:12). Hence, the Sermon on the Mount requires moderation and restraint on the part of its adherents as they participated in temple ordinances.

Anointing

Anointing and washing could also take the ordinary practice of fasting to a higher level of holiness and divine acceptance. The word used for “anoint” in Matthew 6:17 is *aleiphō*. This Greek word appears in various Septuagint texts as the translation of three different Hebrew words, all three of which may stand behind this one word in the Sermon on the Mount: *suk*, which has to do with applying cosmetic lotions and “encompasses only the secular realm,” not the cultic;⁹² *tuach*, which means to rub, coat, or smear; and *māshach*, meaning to pour an offering of oil over something or someone. While *māshach* was used in connection with ceremonial applications of oil, especially for “induction into leadership offices,” in which case it is usually translated into Greek as *chriō*, *māshach* can also “refer in everyday usage to such acts as . . . applying oil to the body (Amos 6:6).”⁹³ Thus, while anointing of oneself with lotion or olive oil may, on some occasions, entail nothing more than an act of ordinary hygiene or beautification, as in the cases of Ruth who washed and anointed (*aleipsēi*, LXX) herself and put on her best clothes as she went to offer herself in marriage to Boaz (Ruth 3:3) and of Judith who anointed her face with ointment to lure Holofernes with her beauty (Judith 16:8), the Sermon on the Mount’s mention of anointing in a clearly religious context elicits more than cosmetic applications and brings to mind solemn connotations of anointing for purposes of consecration, glorification, and election by God. As Jacob Milgrom comments, the main symbolic roles of anointment in the ancient Near East were “to ceremonialize an elevation in legal status: the manumission of a slave woman, the transfer of property, the betrothal of a bride, and the deputation of a vassal, and—in Israel—the inauguration of a king, [or] the ordination of a priest.”⁹⁴ Several of these functions may be called to mind by the Sermon on the

⁹² C. Dohmen, “*nāsak*,” in *TDOT*, vol. 9, p. 459.

⁹³ Victor P. Hamilton, “*māshach*,” in *TWOT*, vol. 1, p. 530; see also Seybold, “*māshach*,” in *TDOT*, vol. 9, p. 45.

⁹⁴ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, p. 553. On the widespread use of anointing, “including the consecration of priests,” in ancient urban temples and countryside shrines, see Daniel

Mount, as its adherents also effectively will change their legal status to become deputies of God, not servants of Mammon, and to lay up their property in the treasury of heaven, not on earth. Such “anointment stems from God” and “the implication of anointing as a sacred rite is that the anointed one receives divine sanction and that his person is inviolable (1 Sam 24:7, 8; 26:9, 11, 16, 23; 2 Sam 1:14, 16; 19:22).”⁹⁵

The outward action of pouring olive oil onto the head or skin had “its own inner meaning,” evoking not only “a mood of joy and festivity,” but also powerful expectations with respect “to healing [James 5:14], . . . at conjurations [to expel evil spirits], . . . to change or to dispense life.”⁹⁶ Thus, olive oil, which can symbolize or transmit the Holy Spirit (1 Samuel 10:1, 6, 9; Acts 10:38; 2 Corinthians 1:21–2), is associated with the transformation of the recipient into a new person or being born of the spirit.⁹⁷ In 2 Enoch 22:8–10, Enoch was anointed with oil and arrayed in the garments of God’s glory, and the appearance of the oil was greater than the brightest light, and Enoch looked at himself and saw that he “had become like one of the glorious ones, and there was no observable difference,” that is, no outward physical difference seen of men, or any inward difference either, for there had been a total, inner regeneration.⁹⁸

Accordingly, the instruction about anointing in Matthew 6:17 may be taken as a step toward one being called, chosen, and anointed a king or a priest in the kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9), or as one of God’s angelic servants. Even the anointing of the king in the Temple transformed the chosen monarch from his previous status of an ordinary mortal into a new person, one begotten of God (Psalms 2:7). As Mowinckel says of the anointing of the king: “By the anointing, which was a sacred, cultic act, he becomes ‘another man,’ he has ‘another heart’ (1 Sam. 10. 6, 9), that is he has obtained a special ‘holiness’, a superhuman quality.”⁹⁹ It requires little imagination to relate these ideas about the meaning of anointing to the intended aims of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:17. The Sermon on the Mount equally seeks to transform the hearts and souls of all its adherers.

Fleming, “The Biblical Tradition of Anointing Priests,” *JBL* 117/3 (1998): 401–14.

⁹⁵ Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, p. 553.

⁹⁶ Heinrich Schlier, “*aleiphō*,” in *TDNT*, vol. 1, pp. 229–30.

⁹⁷ See generally, Donald W. Parry, “Ritual Anointing with Olive Oil in Ancient Israelite Religion,” and John A. Tvedtnes, “Olive Oil: Symbol of the Holy Ghost,” in Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch (eds), *The Allegory of the Olive Tree: The Olive, the Bible, and Jacob 5* (Salt Lake City, 1994), pp. 279–81, 446–52.

⁹⁸ F.I. Andersen, “2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch,” in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (New York, 1983), vol. 1, pp. 138–9 and note q. Anderson notes that “the emphasis is physical,” but “42:5 speaks of feasting in eternal life” and “there are statements elsewhere that suggest that he has become omniscient.”

⁹⁹ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship* (New York, 1962), vol. 1, p. 53.

Washing

Moreover, Matthew 6:17 calls not only for anointing the head but also washing the face. Washing and anointing were combined in biblical religion on several ceremonial occasions: Before David went into the house of the Lord to worship, he “washed (*elousato*), and anointed himself (*ēleipsato*), and changed his clothes” (2 Samuel 12:20). A bride was washed, anointed, and clothed in preparation for marriage, as Ezekiel reflects as he spoke of Jerusalem becoming Jehovah’s bride: “Then I bathed (*elousa*) you with water and washed off (*apepluna*) your blood from you, and anointed (*echrisa*) you with oil. I clothed you also with embroidered cloth and shod you with leather, I swathed you in fine linen and covered you with silk” (Ezekiel 16:9–10).

Of the three possible Greek words for washing, *nīptō* is the one used in Matthew 6:18. *Pluneō* was used only for washing inanimate objects; *louō* usually involved bathing the entire body; but *nīptō* (or *nizō*) referred to washing particular parts of the body, usually the hands or feet (see Matthew 15:2; 1 Timothy 5:10).¹⁰⁰ Of these three, *nīptō* is the least common, perhaps drawing to mind the ritual use of this word in Exodus 30:18–21 in connection with the laver of bronze in the court of the Temple, as well as anticipating the washing of the feet of the apostles by Jesus in John 13:5–14 at the Last Supper.

This word choice in Matthew 6:17 may intentionally reflect a ritual in which certain parts of the body (the head) were washed, different from a *miqveh* or baptism which involved a full ritual immersion of the body. Thus, the Sermon on the Mount may well assume an audience whose members had already been baptized by John the Baptist for the remission of sins or had been ritually cleansed in a *miqveh* near the entrance to the Temple Mount or elsewhere. The washing and anointing mentioned here would then serve a different, further purpose, very possibly relating to some ritual of initiation, since several initiatory texts from the Second Temple period “involve some form of washing with water, even ‘living water.’”¹⁰¹

Interestingly, Matthew 6:17 instructs the listener to anoint only the head and to wash only the face, perhaps with the idea in mind of preparing the disciple to see God (Matthew 5:8), face to face. Hand washing before meals, which was such a point of controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees (Matthew 15:2), is not the issue in the Sermon on the Mount. At this stage of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is more concerned about transforming the head, the mind and the countenance, than about the washing of hands as a part of pure eating. For Jesus, loving God

¹⁰⁰ F. Hauck, “*nīptō*,” in *TDNT*, vol. 4, pp. 946–7. Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *Greek-English Dictionary*, s.v. “*louō*,” “*nizō*,” “*plun-*” pp. 1062, 1423. “Each kind of impurity [had] its own specific rituals of purification,” but all involve washing in some way. Jonathan D. Lawrence, *Washing in Water: Trajectories of Ritual Bathing in the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Literature* (Atlanta, 2006), p. 27.

¹⁰¹ Lawrence, *Washing in Water*, p. 76.

with all one's heart and mind always stood ahead of other concerns about purity (see, for example, Matthew 15:18–20; Mark 12:30, 34).

Jesus may reflect this same point—namely, that what matters most is complete love for and dedication to God with all the mind—when Peter reacted to the washing of the feet at the Last Supper. Jesus said, “If I do not wash you, you have no part in me,” to which Peter reacted “not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” (John 13:9). Then Jesus said, “He who has bathed (*louloumenos*) does not need to wash (*nipsasthai*), except for his feet” (John 13:10). Although the meaning of this instruction is not very clear, the point may be that once a person has been fully bathed (that is, baptized by complete immersion), a washing of a part of the body is sufficient as a token of remembrance or renewal in maintaining or intensifying that relationship.

Nevertheless, as Luz rightly cautions, due to the cryptic nature of this passage in Matthew 6:17, more cannot be said about the exact nature of what is required: “The listener himself or herself has to determine what ‘washing and anointing’ means tangibly.”¹⁰² And yet, the thrice repeated promise of the Sermon on the Mount is clear enough: When a disciple, washed and anointed, truly seeks the Lord with generosity, forgiveness, prayer, and fasting, in a condition of inward and outward purity, the Lord will see and reward the supplicant openly in heaven (Matthew 6:4, 6, 18). The importance of the confluence of these outward rituals and inward attitudes is evident: “Whether someone’s righteousness is safeguarded is therefore decided not by convictions of faith but by the performance of rituals.”¹⁰³ And the pattern of repeating things three times or grouping things in clusters of three has been identified as a prevalent feature in the Sermon on the Mount;¹⁰⁴ it is also a common marker of ritual.

Fasting continued to serve many purposes in early Christianity, some of which were set in ritual contexts, most notably in preparing for the washing and anointing of baptism. According to Didache 7:4, “Fasts are to be held one or two days prior to baptism.”¹⁰⁵ Fasting, washing, and anointing may be mentioned in Matthew 6 for a similar purpose. Just as fasting was used to prepare a proselyte for baptism, the triad of fasting, washing and anointing would serve well to prepare the disciple to advance to the next requirement of pledging wholehearted and exclusive loyalty to God, whose face one seeks to see in the innermost courts of his holy house.

¹⁰² Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Wilhelm C. Linss (Minneapolis, 1989), p. 361.

¹⁰³ Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, p. 352.

¹⁰⁴ Dale C. Allison Jr, “The Structure of the Sermon on the Mount,” *JBL* 106/3 (1987): 423–45; see Matthew 5:22 (angry, Raca, fool); and Matthew 7:7 (ask, seek, knock) for examples of triadic structures.

¹⁰⁵ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 419.

Stage 16. A Requirement to Lead a Life of Consecration and Singleness of Heart (6:19–24)

The final stage in this part of the Sermon is the requirement of total commitment and uncompromised dedication. Its three parts are familiar, about laying up treasures exclusively in heaven, having an eye single to the glory of God, and serving only one master. These three requirements of complete loyalty to God all serve to establish the same theme, namely to insure obedience to the first and greatest commandment to love God with *all* one's heart, soul, and might (Deuteronomy 6:5; Matthew 22:37). That commandment calling for total love of God is violated if any part of the heart, mind, or might is drawn away. Significantly, this cluster builds on recognizable temple themes.

One Treasury of the Heart

“Do not lay up (*thēsaurizete*) for yourselves treasures (*thēsauros*) on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up (*thēsaurizete*) 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 will your heart (*kardia*) be also” (Matthew 6:19–21). At stake here is not just good advice regarding the protection of one's investments, for the heart itself is at issue. Involved here is not only a wise recommendation or moral exhortation,¹⁰⁶ for the Greek can just as well be translated imperatively,¹⁰⁷ “Thou shalt not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth.” Also intended here is not just a commonplace philosophical truism that true wealth was to be found in wisdom and not in herds or hoards;¹⁰⁸ the point of the Sermon on the Mount is not to encourage people to become philosophers, but to inspire them to consecrate all that they have in serving and loving God with all their might.

Moreover, one should not minimize or trivialize the future tense of the concluding line. That line should not be taken merely as a statement of the fact that one's heart is where one's treasure is. Instead, it should also be understood as a promise or as a warning that one's heart *will be* found—for better or worse, and both in this world and in the world to come—in the same place as where one's treasures are. As a promissory pronouncement, the future tense *estai* carries much the same import as do the future tense verbs in the initial promises in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:4–9 whose aura colors the entire Sermon on the Mount.

¹⁰⁶ As in Psalm 62:10, “If riches increase, set not your heart on them,” or in Tobit 4:7–9, giving alms lays up good deposit for yourself “for a needy day” (*eis hēmeran anagkēs*), for if you do not turn your face away from the poor, God will not turn his face away from you.

¹⁰⁷ Barclay M. Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York, 1988), pp. 183–4.

¹⁰⁸ Betz privileges this line of interpretation in *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 429.

But the sober prediction of future realities in Matthew 6:21 escalates the matter by warning the devotee that he or she must now make a choice between the one type of treasure or the other. Likewise, Matthew 6:21 looks back to the saying about almsgiving at the beginning of Matthew 6, which required the devotee to give to the poor in secret. But the invitation of Matthew 6:19–20 now goes beyond giving occasional alms to the Temple’s chamber of secrets or paying ten percent of one’s produce as tithing to the house of the Lord. This saying now heightens those mandates by further requiring devotees to dedicate all that they have,¹⁰⁹ entrusting or laying up all of their treasures to God, and the idealized Temple provided the model and religious background for how this injunction should be taken.

The word *thēsauros* (treasure) readily brings the Temple and its treasures to mind, and that root word is used five times in this short passage. The Temple was widely known as the treasury of God, and its most precious and sacred objects were known in the Septuagint as the treasures (*thēsauroi*) of the house of the Lord (for example, 1 Kings 7:51; 14:26; 15:18; 2 Kings 12:18; 16:18; 24:13; 1 Chronicles 9:26; 26:20). Ordinary people could deposit for safe keeping¹¹⁰ their precious things in the *gazophylakeion* (vault; 2 Maccabees 3:4–6, 10–15; 4 Maccabees 4:1–3, 7) of the Temple, which was a common term for the Temple treasury (Esther 3:9; Nehemiah 10:37 [38]; 12:44; 13:4, 5, 7, 8, 9; 1 Esdras 5:45; 1 Maccabees 3:28, 14:49; 2 Maccabees 3:24, 28, 40; 4:42; 5:18). In addition, the Temple served many other financial purposes. The Temple probably acted as a lender, not of money which it held on deposit, but of property that had been given outright or otherwise dedicated to the Temple.¹¹¹ As secure as the Temple treasure generally was, temples in antiquity were sometimes raided and plundered by thieves or enemy soldiers, even as the sacred “hidden treasures” were stolen away from the Temple in Jerusalem by Antiochus (1 Maccabees 1:23). Managers of the Temple treasury, which according to data given by Josephus contained the phenomenal amount of at least 10,000 talents of gold or silver,¹¹² could also misappropriate these assets, causing Jesus to decry their practices which had transformed the Temple from a “house of prayer” into a “den of robbers” (Matthew 21:13; citing Jeremiah 7:11).

This strong temple theme leads to the distinct possibility that something more is going on here than merely encouraging people to do good works in general.

¹⁰⁹ The option is not given to have one part of one’s treasures on earth and another part in heaven.

¹¹⁰ Ancient temples “functioned as ‘treasuries’ or ‘depositories,’ a place for the storage and retrieval of (precious) commodities and metals by the depositor. . . . Temples lent their own property, not that of others on deposit with the temple.” Marty E. Stevens, *Temples, Tithes, and Taxes: The Temple and the Economic Life of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, Massachusetts, 2006), p. 137.

¹¹¹ Stevens, *Temples, Tithes, and Taxes*, p. 150.

¹¹² Josephus, *Antiquities*, 14.72, 105–9, mentioning 2,000 of money and 8,000 talents of gold respectively. The total of 10,000 talents may have something to do with the parable of the unforgiving steward in Matthew 18:24.

The mention of rust and moths signals that precious physical objects are somehow involved¹¹³ and, thus, that something more than having kind deeds recorded in heaven's Book of Life is being called to mind. How else might one in first-century Judaism have thought of voluntarily "treasuring treasures" to God?

The law required people to give many types of sacrifices, tithes, and offerings to God at the Temple, but beyond all that many people followed the widespread practice of voluntarily devoting additional property in the payment of vows at the Temple (see Leviticus 22:21; 27:2–8, and Numbers 15:3, 8; 30:2–4). Completely of their own volition people took vows upon themselves. At this stage in the Sermon on the Mount, the listeners were, in effect, invited to do as one who has found a "treasure hidden in a field" then joyously and voluntarily "goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matthew 13:44), that is, buys it from God and uses all that he has.

The votive system in Israel created a binding agreement, in the presence of a priest or sanctioned by an oath, to enter into a written agreement or to complete certain transactions or performances. This system operated in Jesus' day (see Acts 23:14), and its rules and regulations were addressed in the Dead Sea Scrolls and filled in an entire tractate of the Talmud. Vows were often expressed in the form of a person negotiating with God, saying, in effect, if you will bless me in a certain way, I will practice certain forms of self-affliction or denial, or contribution of pledged property. Reduced to its simplest form, a vow essentially said "to the god(dess) in question: 'If, *and only if*, you do something for me, then I will do something for you.'"¹¹⁴ It is perfectly expectable that, shortly after discussing prayer and fasting, the Sermon on the Mount would turn its attention to the total dedication of property. More than anything else, the disciples of Jesus sought forgiveness of their transgressions and trespasses. Nothing would be more natural for them to say to God, "If you will forgive me of all my sins, I will give you all my treasures." By giving property to God in the Temple, people in the Jewish world of the New Testament reinforced the seriousness of their commitments to obey God's instructions and to follow the order of his kingdom. Making a vow to that effect would have solemnized that obligation and made it irrevocable. Therefore, the devoting of the treasures mentioned in Matthew 6:19–21 might well relate to the tacit or explicit making of comprehensive vows and an eternal covenant with God.

Whether the Sermon on the Mount contemplates individual vows or a collective promise connected with a common covenant remains unknown, but both may be implicated. Matthew 6:19–20 speaks in the plural ("lay ye not up"), while Matthew 6:21 (your treasure, your heart) is singular. Interestingly, just as Matthew 6 switches from plural to singular discourse, the votive regulations in

¹¹³ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2005), p. 298; Newman and Stine, *Translator's Handbook*, p. 184.

¹¹⁴ Jacques Berlinerblau, *The Vow and the "Popular Religious Groups" of Ancient Israel* (Sheffield, 1996), p. 41.

Numbers 15 begin with plural forms in verses 2–3, while verses 4–8 qualify or develop that regulation using singular forms. In the Psalms, vows are frequently mentioned, and “the fact that the votary is a solitary agent is tacitly assumed in Pss. 22:26; 50:14; 56:13; 61:6, 9; 66:13 and 116:14.”¹¹⁵ This temple vow practice continued into New Testament times (Acts 21:24). Although vows were typically initiated by individuals as a part of their private piety, groups of soldiers, sailors, or other communities facing a common crisis could still personally adopt the same vow as all the others who were similarly situated, as may be reflected in the group experience in Jonah 1:16 when all the sailors feared God, made vows and offered a sacrifice. In all cases, “the application is personal,”¹¹⁶ which explains the shifts from plural to singular in Matthew 6.

Vows were typically accompanied by votive offerings or sacrifices “laid up in the temple.”¹¹⁷ Thus, “in his long hair the Nazarite bears on his head a sacrificial gift dedicated to God,”¹¹⁸ and the word *euchē* (prayer) came to mean the dedicated gift itself (as in Leviticus 7:6). While some vows were made in sanctuaries or temples, not all of them originated in a sacred confines. Nevertheless, the vow texts in Hebrew literature make it quite clear that “most vows are to be *paid* in a sanctuary,” even though they were not necessarily sworn to begin with in front of altars or in the presence of a priest.¹¹⁹ “It seems certain that the literati want us to know that good Yahwists fulfill their vows within a temple, shrine, or sanctuary.”¹²⁰ Thus, Absalom returns to Hebron to fulfill his vow (2 Samuel 15:7–8). Elkanah and Hannah similarly returned to Shiloh (1 Samuel 1:21, 24). Deuteronomy 12 goes so far as to demand that vows be paid solely at the temple (Deuteronomy 12:4, 11, 26), and “in the Psalms there is more evidence supporting the proposition that vows were paid in a temple, although in these instances it is specifically the Jerusalem Temple that is posited as the location in which public compensation takes place (see for example, 22:26; 65:2; 66:13 and 116:14).”¹²¹ Within the Israelite system, the votary exclusively controls what he or she takes upon himself and also when the promise is to be paid, and thus those who cheat on their vows or sacrifices are most despicable (Malachi 1:14; 3:8), but on all counts the making and fulfillment of vows normally involved very expensive or treasured offerings, such as Hannah’s sacrifice of a three-year-old bull together with an ephah of flour and a skin of wine (1 Samuel 1:24). Vows were binding agreements and failure to follow through with the offered behavior or donation

¹¹⁵ Berlinerblau, *Vow*, p. 57.

¹¹⁶ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1992), p. 153.

¹¹⁷ Johannes Behm, “*anathema*,” in *TDNT*, vol. 1, p. 354.

¹¹⁸ Heinrich Greeven, “*euchomai*,” in *TDNT*, vol. 2, p. 777.

¹¹⁹ Berlinerblau, *Vow*, p. 67.

¹²⁰ Berlinerblau, *Vow*, p. 79.

¹²¹ Berlinerblau, *Vow*, p. 81.

caused profanation, defilement, or desecration.¹²² Hence the Psalms require: “and pay your vows to the Most High” (Psalms 50:14).

Seeing Matthew 6:19–21 in this light provides insight into the interplay between this passage and the earlier text in Matthew 5:33–4, “you have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not swear falsely (*ouk epiorkēseis*), but shall perform to the Lord what you have sworn (*tous horkous sou*).’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all (*mē omosai holōs*).” A key distinction lies in the difference between an oath (usually *horkos*; see Leviticus 19:12) and a vow (typically *euchē*, see Numbers 6:2–21 regarding the Nazarite vow, and Numbers 30:3–15 regarding vows of women). An oath “is primarily self-cursing should one not be speaking the truth,”¹²³ whereas a vow involves an affirmative promise to pay in thankful reciprocation for God’s granting the negotiated blessing. As discussed above, Jesus was not necessarily opposed to the simple and proper swearing of oaths; nor would he have had any reason to oppose the votive system per se, for he insisted that he had not come to destroy but to fulfill and to honor every part of the law. Thus, Matthew 6:19–21 addresses a person at a different, higher stage of religious commitment. At this stage the concern has advanced beyond simple truth telling, respecting God’s name, and avoiding self-cursing. Here the concern is about asking for divine blessings, dedicating to God all of one’s treasures, and paying one’s vow with complete gladness of heart (Deuteronomy 6:5).

One Light of the Body

Woven into the command to love God with all one’s heart and might is its corollary to love God with all one’s mind and body. In a similar way, the Sermon on the Mount builds on the point about the heart in Matthew 6:21 by speaking next about the body: “The lamp of the body (*ho luchnos tou sōmatos*) is the eye. So, if your eye is sound (*haplous*), your whole body will be full of light (*phōteion*); but if your eye is not sound (*ponēros*), your whole body will be full of darkness (*holon to sōma sou skoteion estai*). If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!” (Matthew 6:22–3).

Betz sees Matthew 6:22–3 as “one of the most difficult and yet most interesting of the SM,”¹²⁴ and indeed it can be read at several levels. Betz offers an elaborate analysis of ancient Greek theories of vision as background for his interpretation of this passage, suggesting that these two short verses might be “a condensation into a sayings composition of what in an elaborate form would be a treatise” on the physiology of vision, sense perception, as well as psychological and metaphysical reflections on the origins and behavior of light, both as a divine and human quality.

¹²² See generally Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 21–36* (New York, 2000), pp. 425–41.

¹²³ J. Schneider, “*Horkos*,” in *TDNT*, vol. 5, p. 458.

¹²⁴ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 438.

He sees Jesus as entering “only hesitatingly into the debate” about the eye and the faculty of vision.¹²⁵

While there can be no doubt that ancient people puzzled over the great mysteries of the physics of light, of how good eyes work, and what causes some people to be blind—phenomena that modern people take for granted but which in actuality have only been explained relatively recently—one need not go so far afield as to the pre-Socratics and Plato in order to make clear sense of this parable in the Sermon on the Mount. Temple themes and Jewish symbols are much closer to home and more relevant to this stage in the Sermon.¹²⁶

For one thing, this text is concerned about the body as a whole, not just about the eye. The totality of the body is at issue; the body is completely affected by the light or by the darkness that surrounds it and enters it through the portal of the eye. The word for “whole,” used twice in Matthew 6:22–3, is *holon*, and it would seem obvious that this occurrence draws intentionally on the prominent, three-fold repetition of this same word in the great commandment in Deuteronomy 6:5 to love God with one’s whole mind (*holēs tēs dianoias*), one’s whole spirit (*holēs tēs psuchēs*), and one’s whole power (*holēs tēs dunameōs*). Whereas the word *pas* (all) typically tends to focus on quantitative totality, the word *holēs* usually connotes wholeness or completeness with a qualitative “focus on unity,”¹²⁷ making it the more suitable of these two, both semantically as well as traditionally, in Matthew 6:22 and 23.

Matthew 6:22–3 is also linked to Matthew 5:14, where Jesus had extended to his listeners a favorable prospect and opportunity, “You are the light (*phōs*) of the world.” In that stage of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus projected positive allusions reinforced by the favorable temple themes of the creation and the menorah (*luchnia*). In Matthew 6:22–3, however, the Sermon presents a radical dichotomy. Disciples may choose not to be the light of the world, but they must know that such a choice carries with it stark consequences. One may elect to live either in the glorious light or in profound darkness; a person will be either full of

¹²⁵ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 442–8, quotes on 441, 448. Similarly, see W.D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp. 635–41; Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1982), p. 113. To the contrary, however, Mounce holds that people in Jesus’ day had an understanding of the eye more in line with modern science—that it was a portal through which light enters.

¹²⁶ As Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, Minnesota, 1991), p. 101, points out, the moral approach to this text would be “more at home in Judaism.” Davies and Allison cite six Jewish texts that presuppose an extramission theory of light and see the eye as a light-emitting lamp (*Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel*, pp. 635–6); and Morris points out that “the light that is in you’ is surely not the light that strikes the eye” (*Gospel according to Matthew*, p. 155).

¹²⁷ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament based on Semantic Domains* (2nd edn, New York, 1989), p. 613.

light and goodness or full of darkness and wickedness. But it will be either one or the other. That is their choice.

The consequences of this choice are illustrated by the parable of the eye. This parable takes for granted several things: (1) there is only one source of light for the soul, just as a lamp (*luchnos*) usually has only one wick; (2) there is only one way that light can enter the body, through the eye; (3) if an eye works properly, light spreads uniformly and completely throughout the whole body and will make the body radiant (*phōteinon*); and (4) if an eye works improperly, the whole body will be darkened (*skoteinon*). So, if that light (*phōs*) is darkness, how complete that darkness will be!

This text has much to do with the Temple and temple themes.¹²⁸ Just as there is only one source of light for the soul, the Lord is the only light of the world in Jewish and early Christian symbolism. Temple psalms sang, “The Lord is my light (*phōtismos*, illumination, enlightenment, revelation) and my salvation” (Psalms 27:1). “In thy light do we see light” (Psalms 36:9), “that I may walk before God in the light of life” (Psalms 56:13). Thus, at the outset of the book of Isaiah comes the plea: “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord” (Isaiah 2:5).

The light of the Lord is the only light that really matters, for without it there is only darkness: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.” Otherwise, “darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples” (Isaiah 60:1–2). “When I fall, I shall rise; when I sit in darkness, the Lord will be a light to me” (Micah 7:8). Thus, the plea was raised in the Temple, “Let thy face shine, that we may be saved” (Psalms 80:3).

Seeing salvation, the righteous and the simple could then see their way. “For with thee is the fountain of life; in thy light do we see” (Psalms 36:9). “The unfolding of thy words gives light (*phōtiei*); it imparts understanding to the simple (*nēpious*)” (Psalms 119:130).

That light streamed forth from the Temple,¹²⁹ as from a lighthouse: “Send out thy light and thy truth, let them [the light and truth] lead me, let them bring me to thy holy hill and to thy dwelling!” (Psalms 43:3). Worshipers followed that light in processions all the way to the altar of the Temple: “The Lord is God, and he has given us light. Bind the festal procession with branches, up to the horns of the altar!” (Psalms 118:27). The Hymns from Qumran understood that illumination would come from the Lord himself because of or by means of the covenant.¹³⁰

The covenant-keepers who saw the Lord, the source of light, themselves became lights to the world. “Those who saw the light reflected the light.”¹³¹ The book of Isaiah’s Servant was appointed to be “a light to the nations” (Isaiah 42:6; 49:6). When Moses saw the Lord in a blazing bush (Exodus 3:2) his face became

¹²⁸ Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*, pp. 160–64.

¹²⁹ Barker, *On Earth As It Is in Heaven*, p. 18.

¹³⁰ 1QH 17; see Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*, p. 162.

¹³¹ Barker, *Temple Themes in Christian Worship*, p. 162. Enoch, for example; see Barker, *On Earth As It Is in Heaven*, pp. 21–2.

radiant (Exodus 34:29). All people in the Temple were invited, likewise, to “look to him and be radiant (*phōtisthēte*)” (Psalms 34:5), and thus when Jesus was transfigured “his face shone like the sun, and his garments became white as light,” and “a bright (*phōteinē*) cloud overshadowed them,” out of which the voice of the God recognized the Son (Matthew 17:2–5). The word *phōteinos* in Matthew 17 and in Matthew 6:22 means shining or radiant, indicating the presence of God (Matthew 17:5). It is also used to describe the radiant garments of angels in the Apocalypse of Peter 3:7.

This light, however, could be received only by those whose eye is described in Matthew 6:22 as *haplous*. This word can be translated in many ways:¹³² physiologically (“healthy, sound”), morally (“humble, simple, sincere,” or “unbegrudgingly generous”¹³³), psychologically (“single-minded,” “wholehearted,” “free from inner discord”), ontologically (“single”¹³⁴), functionally (“focused,” “undistracted”¹³⁵), or ritualistically (“pure,”¹³⁶ “innocent,” “without blemish,” “whole-hearted dedication,” or “ready for sacrifice”¹³⁷). Under any of the renditions, but especially in its ritual application, this word points to qualities and behaviors befitting the Temple. Likewise, its opposite, *ponēros*, which can mean many things, including bad, evil, base, wicked, spoiled, sick, worthless, vicious, or guilty, epitomizes all that opposes the Temple, holiness, God, or goodness.

Thus, the eye in the parable of Matthew 6:22–3 is either completely full of light or completely full of darkness. The concept of “the light of the eyes” was proverbial, either for good—“The light of the eyes rejoices the heart, and good news refreshes the bones” (Proverbs 15:30)—or for ill, “the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me” (Psalms 38:10).¹³⁸ This light drives away darkness. “Even the darkness is not dark to thee, the night is bright as the day; for darkness is as light with thee” (Psalms 139:12). “Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light, and gloom with no brightness in it?” (Amos 5:20). The two cannot coexist.

¹³² “Sound is the word used by most translations, but the precise meaning is difficult to determine. By itself it contrasts with the Greek term for ‘two-folded,’ as if to say ‘singlefold.’ It thus has the idea of simplicity, straightforwardness, or purity, and depending upon context it can mean ‘single,’ ‘simple,’ or ‘sincere,’ that is, with no ulterior motive.” Newman and Stine, *Translator’s Handbook*, p. 187.

¹³³ Henry J. Cadbury, “The Single Eye,” *HTR* 47 (1954): 71; compare James 1:5, “liberally.”

¹³⁴ Mounce, *Matthew*, p. 58.

¹³⁵ France, *Gospel of Matthew*, p. 261.

¹³⁶ Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, p. 397.

¹³⁷ Otto Bauernfeind, “Haplous,” in *TDNT* vol. 1, p. 386; and Strack and Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament*, vol. 1, pp. 431–2.

¹³⁸ “The light that is in you is surely not the light that strikes the eye. We might call it the brightness of the goodness within.” Morris, *Gospel according to Matthew*, p. 155. See also Gerald Friedlander, *The Jewish Sources of the Sermon on the Mount* (New York, 1969), pp. 183–4.

This dualistic view that pervades this parable as well as the Sermon on the Mount and much of the Dead Sea Scrolls allows for no middle ground. A person is either full of light or full of darkness. Just as a tree brings forth either good fruit or evil (*ponēros*) fruit (Matthew 7:17–18), a person brings forth either light or darkness, and “woe to those who . . . put darkness for light and light for darkness” (Isaiah 5:20). And so, as in Matthew 5:29, “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away.”

One Lord

Finally, after assuring that the listener has set his heart exclusively on treasures in heaven and has filled his whole body with light, the Sermon on the Mount requires complete dedication in serving God the Lord and him alone: “No one can serve (*doouleuein*) two masters (*kuriois*); for either he will hate the one and love (*agapēsei*) the other, or he will be devoted to (*anthexetai*) the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon” (Matthew 6:24). Although in common parlance one may easily speak of serving God by doing deeds of moral kindness in ordinary life, the rhetorical register of this compelling postulate in Matthew 6:24 draws upon the much more intensive social institutions of slavery and temple service in formulating this ultimate mandate of total loyalty to the Lord God and “submission at entry into [temple] service.”¹³⁹

This culminating requisite is founded on the categorical assertion that no person is able to serve two masters. The problem assumed here is one of practical, legal, logical and spiritual impossibility. As a practical matter, true service to a lord or master by a slave or servant simply cannot occur when loyalties are divided. Perhaps under some odd legal circumstance a slave might have been owned in antiquity by two masters, but I am unaware of documentary evidence of any such instances of cotenancy or joint ownership over slaves. Legally as well as logically, the idea of one slave being owned by two masters and owing complete fidelity to both of them is patently nonsensical. Spiritually, the dichotomy of Matthew 6:24 is axiomatic in biblical thought: Either “all nations serve him” (Psalms 72:11), or they must serve other gods (Exodus 23:33, *douleusēis tois theois autōn*).

This verity, which has its roots in the ordinary social world of ancient master-slave relations, transfers readily to the world of Lord-worshiper relations, especially in a temple context. The use of certain key words and phrases facilitates the mental transfer of this image from one of slaveholder/slave to that of Lord/devotee. When Matthew 6:24 speaks of serving two masters, it uses the word *kurioi*. In Hellenistic Greek it was “particularly used in expression of a personal relationship of man to the deity, whether in prayer, thanksgiving or vow, and as a correlate of *doulos* inasmuch as the man concerned describes as *kurios* the god under whose orders

¹³⁹ Fleming, “Biblical Tradition of Anointing Priests,” p. 404.

he stands.”¹⁴⁰ In the Septuagint, on some occasions the word *kurios* could be used to designate men as lords, owners, masters, or rulers, but in the religious sphere it was most commonly “reserved for the true God” and stood as “an expository equivalent” for the name of Jehovah some 6,156 times.¹⁴¹

Based on this key word, the Ten Commandments begin, “I am the Lord (*Kurios*) your God. . . . You shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:1, 3); and they continue, “you shall not bow down (*proskunēseis*) to them or serve them” (Exodus 20:5); “him only shall you serve (*monōi latreuseis*); you shall cleave (*kollēthēsēi*) to him” (Deuteronomy 6:13), for it follows summarily that a person can righteously serve or bow down to only one Lord. Paraphrasing Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 13, Jesus dismissed Satan at the end of the temptations according to Matthew with the same words: “Be gone, Satan! for it is written, ‘You shall worship (*proskunēseis*) the Lord your God and him only shall you serve (*monōi latreuseis*)’” (Matthew 4:10), and this same resolve to drive away the Evil One and his minions is articulated in Matthew 6:13 and deeply embedded in the either/or of Matthew 6:24. Satan, the Evil One, is the alternate. Mammon signifies more than just money. The word was used in Jewish texts to describe ransom, tangible property, dishonest gains, or bribes; mammon personified the world of materialistic powers and influences, and in some cases “the idea of the impure, dishonest and worldly is intrinsically bound up with the word,” all of which may derive from the root meaning “that in which one trusts.”¹⁴² The idea that “demonic power” was present in money or possessions¹⁴³ was not weakened by the fact that Greek and Roman coinage characteristically bore the images of the gods or potentates of the cities and empires from which that money came.

The idea of serving God, of course, can evoke a wide range of meanings, ranging from being a domestic servant, subjugated captive, or purchased slave (*doulos*), and in each case being subjected to, belonging to, or being at the disposal of the lord or master to one degree or another (see Exodus 12:44; 21:2, 6; Leviticus 22:11; 25:39; Numbers 31:26; Deuteronomy 15:12; 20:10–14; 21:10). But the verb *douleuō*, used in Matthew 6:24, also entails the full complement of temple service and servitude, with all of its sacrificial, ritual, musical, and worshipful cultic activities. In this temple sense, *douleuō* appears often in the Psalms in

¹⁴⁰ Werner Foerster, “*Kurios*,” in *TDNT*, vol. 3, p. 1052. “In figurative senses: *doulos* designates the individual in his or her *relationship of dependence and service* toward God, the absolute Lord, whose possession he or she is. . . . The sonship of Christians does not mean autonomous and certainly not unbridled freedom, but rather *service* to God.” Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, eds, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1990), vol. 1, pp. 350, 352.

¹⁴¹ Foerster, “*Kurios*,” vol. 3, pp. 1058–9.

¹⁴² F. Hauck, “*mamōnas*,” in *TDNT*, vol. 4, pp. 388–9. Mammon is used in the Targums to describe the sacrilegious priestly corruption at Beer-sheba of the sons of the high priest Eli.

¹⁴³ Hauck, “*mamōnas*,” vol. 4, p. 389.

contexts that refer to temple service, expressing the idea of serving God: “Serve (*douleusate*) the Lord with fear” (Psalms 2:11); my “posterity shall serve him” (Psalms 22:30, *doleusei*); “serve (*douleusate*) the Lord with gladness! Come into his presence with singing!” (Psalms 100:2). Likewise, regarding priestly service, the Hebrew words *‘avodah* (service) and *‘avod* (serve) can mean work or serve, but they also may mean worship or “to perform a (cultic) rite,” referring especially to temple worship.¹⁴⁴ These terms are frequently used in expressions such as the “service of the tabernacle,” as the Levites “execute the service of the Lord” (Numbers 8:11), or the priests perform “the work of the service of the house of God” (1 Chronicles 9:10, 13), with “the vessels of service in the house of the Lord” (1 Chronicles 28:13; 9:28), clearly linking service with holy, cultic, temple service (Joshua 22:27; 2 Chronicles 35:16).

Set out in a chiasmic form, Matthew 6:24 emphatically punctuates the conclusive climactic importance of this antithesis:

- a No one is able to serve two Lords
- b Hate the one
- c Love the other
- c Hold fast to the one
- b Despise the other
- a You are not able to serve God and mammon

At stake here once again are matters of serving God with all one’s heart and mind: on the one side there is the passion of hate with the mindset of resentment or scorn (*kataphronēsei*), and on the other side is the emotion of heartfelt love with the tenacity of faithful conviction.

Loving God stood at the heart of the Shema^c, recited daily in the Temple. “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love (*agapēseis*) the Lord your God (*Kurion ton Theon sou*) with all your heart” (Deuteronomy 6:4–5). The word used here in the Septuagint for “love” is *agapaō*, arguably the most distinctive theological and ethical word in the early Christian message, figuring most prominently in the writings of John, Paul, and Peter as well. Significantly, this word was not a word that was invented or dredged up by Christians out of obscure Greek sources; it comes right out of the Shema and the Temple, and from what was identified by Jesus as the greatest (*megalē*) of all the commandments (Matthew 22:37) and by Paul as the greatest (*meizōv*) of all the spiritual gifts.

Cleaving unto God brings the mind into service. The word *antechō* has to do with holding fast to, being devoted to, paying attention to, or being concerned

¹⁴⁴ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden, 1958), pp. 670–71; see also Jacob Milgrom, *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology* (Leiden, 1983), p. 19; cited and discussed in Donald W. Parry, “Service and Temple in King Benjamin’s Speech,” *JBMS* 16/2 (2007): p. 45.

about someone or something.¹⁴⁵ Used, as in Matthew 6:24, in the middle voice with a genitive of a person, it also means to worship.¹⁴⁶ This word involves trust and faith, but also wisdom and covenant. Thus, Wisdom “is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her (*tois antechomenois autēs*)” (Proverbs 3:18), and the prophets exhort people to “hold fast to the covenant” (Isaiah 56:4, 6) and to “hold fast to the law” (Jeremiah 2:8), while Zephaniah warns that the names of the priests who worship the host of heaven upon the housetops and cleave not (*antechomenous*) unto the Lord will be removed from the face of the land (Zephaniah 1:2–6).

In sum, the ultimatum in Matthew 6:24, about the impossibility of serving two masters, epitomizes the point made throughout this section. One must choose between serving and loving God with all one’s heart, might, mind, and body, or alternatively serving and loving other gods. This instruction is tantamount to requiring one to consecrate all that one has and is to the Lord. The true heart dedicates all toward the kingdom. The pure eye does not deviate from the course that God has ordained. As servants of God, his followers have been marked as temple slaves, as a “peculiar people,” purchased by and belonging to him (*laos periousious; laos eis peripoiēsīn*, Exodus 19:5; 23:22; Deuteronomy 7:6; Malachi 3:17; 1 Peter 2:9), and hence it would be a breach of contract or covenant to serve another lord.¹⁴⁷ Thus, the Sermon on the Mount presupposes a totally committed community, one that is “prepared to take responsibility for the consequences of the teaching of Jesus, even if it means their lives.”¹⁴⁸ By such total, exacting devotion to God, his disciples are given the ultimate promises that they will have treasures in heaven and that their “whole body will be full of light” (Matthew 6:22). Heavenly treasures and a fullness of light are what the righteous continually seek.

This concludes this next major part of the Sermon on the Mount. Betz has suggested that, after the end of the teaching about fasting in Matthew 6:18, “a new section obviously begins, treating subjects other than worship,” but he also laments that “most difficult to explain is the composition of the third major block of material,” which he runs from 6:19 to 7:12.¹⁴⁹ That problem, however, is alleviated, as has been seen in the foregoing discussion, by connecting Matthew 6:19–24 with the material about approaching God in the proper order of fasting, prayer, and generosity found in Matthew 6:1–18, all of which taken together introduces disciples into a higher order of righteous relationship with God.

As will be argued next, a new and final section of the Sermon on the Mount begins in Matthew 6:25 and runs to the end of Matthew 7. With the break at the

¹⁴⁵ Hermann Hanse, “*antechō*,” in *TDNT*, vol. 2, p. 827.

¹⁴⁶ See, “worship him [Hercules] above all (Pindar, *Nemean Odes*, 1:33),” cited in Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1968), p. 152.

¹⁴⁷ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 456–7.

¹⁴⁸ Hans Dieter Betz, *Essays on the Sermon on the Mount*, trans. Laurence Welborn (Philadelphia, 1985), p. 21; see Matthew 5:11–12.

¹⁴⁹ Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 423.

end of Matthew 6:24, the Sermon on the Mount has completed the stipulations that are carried in the new covenant, presented here on the new mountain of the Lord. According to the widely accepted treaty pattern of covenant formation in the ancient Near East and in the Bible, after the stipulations have been enumerated, the treaty document pronounces blessings and curses upon those who either keep or disobey the covenant.¹⁵⁰ As will be seen, the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount turns attention in a similar way to the blessings promised to the disciples as well as to the catastrophes that will befall those who fail to give strict heed to its requirements. Just as Matthew 5 presents Jesus' interpretation of the requirements of the second tablet of the Decalogue and of the second commandment to "love you neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 5:43), this part of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6 ends in essence in the opposite order with the first of the Ten Commandments, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7) and with the first and greatest of the commandments to "love God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5). In the Sermon on the Mount, the last of the stipulations of the former covenant were presented first, while the first was saved for last, correctly understanding that "*all* of these stipulations represent those characteristics of human behavior that constitute the definition of the will of God: they describe the highest value, the 'ultimate concern' of the community formed by covenant."¹⁵¹ *In nuce*, the ultimate commitment required in Matthew 6:24, to love and serve only God as master, is counterweighted immediately with the ultimate blessing in Matthew 6:33, that all things will be added to those who seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.¹⁵² Having given its stipulations, the Sermon on the Mount now turns its attention to the favorable blessings or adverse consequences that follow either compliance or noncompliance.

¹⁵⁰ George E. Mendenhall and Gary A. Herion, "Covenant," in *ABD*, vol. 1, pp. 1179–202.

¹⁵¹ Mendenhall and Herion, "Covenant," vol. 1, p. 1184.

¹⁵² Sensing the centrality of this pairing, Jonathan A. Draper sees Matthew 6:22–34 as the chiasmic turning point of the concentric structure of the entire Sermon on the Mount, in "The Genesis and Narrative Thrust of the Paraenesis in the Sermon on the Mount," *JSNT* 75 (1999): 32–5.