The eye is the lamp of the body Matt 6:22-23

(Iver Larsen, revised October 2026)

Matt 6:22-23 is translated by the NIV2011 as follows:
The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

ESV has:
The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light, but if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

There is a lot of variation on this healthy/unhealthy contrast. Some translations have sound/bad, others clear/diseased, unclouded/diseased , good/bad etc

CEV (Contemporary English Version) translates:
Your eyes are like a window for your body. When they are good, you have all the light you need. But when your eyes are bad, everything is dark. If the light inside you is dark, you surely are in the dark.

NLT2004 translates:
Your eye is a lamp that provides light for your body. When your eye is good, your whole body is filled with light. But when your eye is bad, your whole body is filled with darkness. And if the light you think you have is actually darkness, how deep that darkness is!”

These are difficult verses that translators have always been struggling with. Let us look at the Greek text and a literal rendering:

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

The eye is the lamp for the body. So, if your eye is single-minded, your whole body will be shining bright, but if your eye is evil, your whole body will be dark. So, if the light (that should have been) in you is (in reality) darkness, how great the darkness is.

I have discussed the Greek word haplous in a different article. The meaning is single-minded, sincere, with pure devotion and motives. It can hardly mean “healthy”, and “good” is too general. Such words are too far removed from the semantic range of the word.

One question is whether two Hebrew idioms are relevant here. To say in Hebrew that you have an evil eye can mean that you are envious, while having a good eye can mean that you are generous. However, it is unlikely that these idioms are intended here or at least not at the forefront, since the text does not talk about a good eye, but a sincere eye.

We do have some metaphors and words that are commonly used in both a literal and a metaphorical sense. The lamp is a metaphor for something that brings light to a house. Light is often used to refer to Jesus and his teaching. The eye is a metaphor for what allows you as a person/soul living inside your body/house/tent to perceive what is outside. Paul talks about the "eyes of the heart" (Eph 1:18). The eye being single-minded has nothing to do with being healthy, because it is not a description of the physical eye, but of an attitude of mind. It must refer to how you look at the outside world and whether you open your inner eye to allow the light of Jesus to shine in and reach your soul and mind. The word that KJV translated as single, can also mean sincere, with an open mind, without a hidden agenda. It is the opposite of being double-minded, having ulterior or selfish motives. The two words are related to simplicity versus duplicity.

The previous verses in Matthew talked about two opposite things that one can focus the eyes on. One is worldly treasure, the other is heavenly treasure. A sincere and single-minded person would look to Jesus and the heavenly treasure, while a follower of Jesus with an evil (maybe including envious) attitude would try to look both to Jesus and to the world and what it has to offer. That is duplicity.

The next verses talk about the impossibility of serving two masters at the same time. That would be duplicity or what a double-minded person might try to do. Jesus says you cannot do that. You need to serve God single-mindedly, to shut out these worldly desires.

Such single-minded people who focus their eyes on Jesus and allow His light to illuminate the soul and mind will not only receive the light for themselves but will be shining out to others as well. This is related to Matt 5:14-16. But people who do not have this single-mindedness towards Jesus, will focus their eyes on the things of this world, and they will remain in darkness, because they do not allow the light of Jesus to shine in them and through them. If what should have been light in them is only darkness, that is indeed a great darkness with eternal repercussions.

The meaning "generosity" has been suggested for haplous, but it does not fit the context well, and it is unlikely that this Greek word is ever used with that sense. I much prefer the sense of pure motives, sincerity, and an undivided devotion to God which is closely related to obedience. The bad/evil eye is then impure motives, insincerity, divided or mixed allegiances and a lack of obedience. Jesus is urging the hearer to allow the spiritual light that he brings to penetrate and enlighten every part of that person. Only then can this person be a light to others. It all depends on how you look at Jesus and receive his teaching.

It is very difficult to translate these metaphors in a meaningful way. I suggest the following rather free rendering:

The eye is like a lamp that brings light to your inner being. If you have a trusting and sincere mind, your inner being will be filled with my light. But if you have a closed and evil/selfish mind, your inner being will be full of darkness. Be careful not to shut my light out, because then your life will become one big darkness.