Basil the Great

Reading 2 – How to Engage with Literature – Seeking What Is Useful, Like a Bee or Gardener

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This reading comes from the Cave's
The Best of Basil the Great on Reading Literature and Education.

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IN BRIEF: *Basil discusses how one may benefit from non-Christian literature. Whether reading poetry or prose, the key is to focus on that which praises virtue and to avoid that which glorifies vice. A reader may do this by imitating the bee, which gathers what is useful from the flower while leaving alone what is merely pleasurable. One may also imitate a gardener, who successfully gathers roses while avoiding their thorns.*

WELL, THE FACT that knowledge outside of our own is not unprofitable for the soul has been sufficiently affirmed. The next point I will discuss, then, is just how you should engage with that learning.

First, I should begin with the writings that come from the poets. Since every kind of subject is found in their writings, you should not turn your mind to everything found therein, one after another without exception. Rather, whenever they recount for you the words or deeds of good men, you should be pleased with them and admire them, earnestly trying to imitate such as these. [2] But whenever they go through

the words and deeds of wicked men, you should avoid such imitation, stopping up your ears just as much as Odysseus did, as the poets affirm, when he avoided the songs of the Sirens.[1] I say this because habitual contact with the bad words and deeds of these writings is a road leading to bad behavior.

[3] Therefore, we must watch over our souls with every safeguard, so that we may not unknowingly accept something of the worse kind through the pleasure of the poets' words, like those who ingest poisons sweetened with honey.[2] [4] We will not, therefore, praise the poets when they abuse or scoff at others. Nor when they portray people engaged in passionate love affairs or drinking to the point of intoxication.[3] Nor when they define happiness in terms of tables brimming with food and depraved songs.[4] We will least of all pay attention to them when they tell stories or say anything about the gods—especially when they go on about the plural number of the gods and about the lack of harmony among them.[5] [5] For in their stories, brothers form factions against brothers, as do parents against children, and, yet again, offspring wage endless war against their parents. As for the gods' adulterous affairs and their passionate desires and their sexual acts done in public—especially those of Zeus, the chief god and highest of all, as the poets themselves say—all things which we cannot mention without blushing, even in connection with cattle and other animals, we will leave all these to stage actors.[6]

[6] I have the same things to say about prose writers—especially whenever they fabricate stories for the amusement of their audience. And certainly we will not imitate the public speakers in their art of lying—the rhetoricians, orators, and politicians. For neither in courts of law nor in other affairs is lying right for us who have chosen the straight and true way of life, and for whom the prosecution of lawsuits is forbidden by law.[7]

[7] Rather, we will certainly accept those passages of theirs in which they praise virtue and condemn vice. For just as bees know how to extract honey from flowers, which to men are enjoyable only for their sweet fragrance and color, even so with literature, those who look beyond the sweet and agreeable aspects of such writings may gather from them some benefit for their souls.[8]

[8] So then, we should engage with literature in a way that follows this image of the bees. For bees neither approach nor land upon every flower without discrimination. Nor do they attempt to carry off the whole flower. Instead, taking only as much as is useful for their work, they are glad to give up the rest. [9] Consequently, if we are wise and moderate, we will acquire from their literature whatever is suitable to us and akin to the truth, while passing over the rest. And just as we avoid the thorns while picking flowers from a rose garden, let us guard against what is harmful when gathering whatever is useful from writings such as these.[9] [10] Therefore, from the beginning, we should examine at once each one of the teachings and harmonize them with the present goal—according to the Doric proverb, "Bringing the stone to the line."[10]

So ends Reading 2. **See you in Reading 3**,
"Poetry – Paying Attention to Virtue in Poetry."

NOTES

[1] See Homer, *Odyssey* 12.39-54 and 165-200, as well as Basil, *Letter* 1. Interestingly, Basil seems to get the details wrong in referring to this episode. He suggests that Odysseus himself stopped up his ears with wax, when, according to the *Odyssey*, it was only his comrades who did so, while he, tied to the ship's mast, listened to the Sirens. Even so, it was Odysseus who made the provision for the wax and ordered his men to tie him to the mast so he would not experience harm in listening to their beautiful voices.

[2] The notion of watching over or guarding one's soul or heart is present in Proverbs 4.16: "Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it."

[3] Basil may have the poetry of Anacreon (sixth century BC) and the Anacreon-inspired *Anacreontea* in mind—poetry that glorifies wine and love-making. That suggested, the possibilities are too many to identify his source with any precision.
[4] See, for example, Homer, *Odyssey* 9.5-11 and Odysseus' declaration to the Phaeacian king Alcinous: "As for me, I declare that there is nothing better or more delightful than when a whole people join in merry festivity together, with the guests sitting side by side listening to the singer, while before them the table is loaded with bread and meats, and the cupbearer draws wine from the mixing bowl and pours it into all the goblets. In my mind, this seems to be the most beautiful thing."
[5] His refusal to "pay attention" is doubtlessly inspired by Socrates in Plato's *Republic* Books 2 and 3.
[6] Among other sources, we find such stories in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Basil may have in mind the Trojan War, in which the gods formed factions against one another, or the great Titanomachy (the Titan-battle) related in Hesiod's *Theogony*, in which the younger generation of Olympian gods waged war against the older generation of Titans, who, led by Kronos, had themselves ambushed their own progenitor (Ouranos), cutting off his genitals. As for love-making, he may have in mind Zeus' outdoor encounter with Hera (*Iliad* 14) or Ares' passionate affair with Aphrodite (*Odyssey* 8). Whatever Basil precisely had in mind, the embarrassment, outrage, or just plain puzzlement caused by these and many other passages had existed for centuries. N.G. Wilson informs us that "embarrassing passages of Homer had led to the development of allegorical interpretations as early as Theagenes of Rhegion (c. 525 BC)" (*Saint Basil on Greek Literature*, 47).
[7] See 1 Corinthians 6.1-7.
[8] Compare what the Athenian orator Isocrates (436-338 BC) says to Demonicus: "For just as we see the bee settling on all the flowers and sipping the best from each, so also those who strive for education and culture should not leave anything untasted, but they should collect useful knowledge from every source" (*To Demonicus* 1.52). For a similar image, see Plutarch, *How a Man May Become Aware of His Progress in Virtue* 8 (*Moralia* 79c-d).
[9] F.M. Padelford rightly explains that "the general attitude taken here toward selectiveness in reading is Platonic." He cites both Plato's *Republic* and *Laws* to make the point. See Frederick Morgan Padelford, *Essays on the Study and Use of Poetry by Plutarch and Basil the Great* (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1902), 105.
[10] The proverb was apparently popular during this time (the fourth and fifth centuries AD)—both Gregory of Nazianzus and John Chrysostom cite it in their own work. N.G. Wilson notes, "While [the proverb] is cited by the fathers, I have not found any use of it in a classical author that is likely to have served as Basil's source" (*Saint Basil on Greek Literature*, 50).