

Basil the Great

Summary of Basil's Address

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"Basil the Great is excellent in all his works ... inferior to none." —Photius (Patriarch of Constantinople)

"Basil started out for his life's work with the equipment of the most liberal education which the age could supply. He had studied Greek literature, rhetoric, and philosophy under the most famous teachers." —Blomfield Jackson

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This summary comes from the Cave's

The Best of Basil the Great on Reading Literature and Education.

Summary of Basil's Address

The following presents the "In Brief" summaries that appear before each chapter that summarize Basil's address on How to Benefit from Reading Greek Literature.

GIVEN HIS LIFE experience and his warm relationship with his students, Basil the Great opens by declaring his wish to give them direction in life by showing them how to benefit from reading ancient literature. His intention is to explain how they may maintain control of their own minds while determining what is useful and what is not.

Basil goes on to describe the great difference in value between this present life and the future life. It is similar to the vast difference between shadows and

real things. Consequently, he urges his students to be oriented to and prepare themselves for the life to come. The sacred writings found in the Bible are the primary means by which they may do so. Nevertheless, for people who are too young to dive into the profound teachings of these writings—as Basil's students are, he contends—it is beneficial to prepare by other means, namely, by means of literature outside the sacred writings. Paying attention to the good found in this other literature, his students will then be able to

turn to the sacred writings once they are older and ready.

Basil next turns to how Christian and non-Christian writings correspond to each other and what the role of each is in education. He settles upon the image of a tree with its fruit and leaves. Although the fruit is the proper excellence of a tree, the leaves nonetheless serve it in their own way and excellence. Similarly, both Christian truth and non-Christian wisdom are proper and useful to the soul. Basil offers the biblical Moses and Daniel as examples. Both men studied non-scriptural wisdom before turning to the divine truth of the sacred Scriptures.

Having established that one may do so, Basil pivots to explore 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, he suggests, 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.

Basil advises the young to pay attention to those passages in poetry and other writing having to do with virtue. Given the responsive and formable nature of their minds, this point is particularly important for them. He goes on to mention and give examples from five Greek authors (Hesiod, Homer, Solon, Theognis, Prodicus), who praise virtue and call on men to travel along her road rather than that of vice. All stress the superiority and benefits of virtue as compared with vice, as well as any other object or experience typically valued by humans.

Then there is the whole issue of living with integrity. Basil stresses the value of lining up one's actions with what one says and thinks. One should not merely strive for the appearance of virtue but its reality.

Basil counsels his students to take into account and imitate the examples of noble conduct and outstanding deeds from the past. These examples may serve as models. Among the models on display are Pericles of Athens, Eucleides of Megara, the philosopher

Socrates, Alexander the Great, and Cleinias, the disciple of Pythagoras. Basil asserts that these men exemplify a handful of Christian principles: turning the other cheek; enduring another man's anger with patience and wishing for his good; avoiding lust in one's heart; and refusing to swear an oath.

Basil returns to his original and primary point—that readers should only take in what is useful from literature rather than everything without discrimination. When reading, readers should always keep in mind the ultimate goal.

Among other examples, Basil suggests that readers should behave like a ship's captain guiding his ship into port, or a musician or an athlete preparing for a contest. He mentions the renowned musician Timotheus, and the athletes Polydamas and Milo. As for the latter, in order to take first prize an athlete keeps his mind on the goal of winning the contest by rigorously training, and by enduring many hardships and the harsh advice of his trainers. So too should the young and others attentively and actively keep their minds on the final prize that is beyond words. He also advises them to keep in mind the place of punishment and correction reserved for those who prefer wrongdoing.

Basil counsels that his students' major concern should be the care of their souls. For this reason they should work to free their souls from the passions and desires of the body. They may do this by scorning everything that surpasses necessity. He defines necessity, or need, in terms of the requirements of nature rather than other perceived needs, including the demands of pleasure—for certain foods, or clothing, or perfumes, or music, or entertainments, or sex, or wealth, or adulation and reputation. He directs them to care for the body only insofar as it may serve the soul, freeing it to pursue wisdom.

Basil finishes by expounding the usefulness of gathering together non-Christian writing having to do with virtue. Even though Christian writings are superior to these, he affirms that the many small advantages coming from such non-Christian writings can add up to a great benefit. The goal is to gather supplies for the journey of life—not only for this

SUMMARY OF BASIL'S ADDRESS

present life, as with Bias, but for eternity. In short, his students should always choose what is best. They should act now rather than letting the condition of their souls become so bad that they despair.

So ends this item. See you in **another Cave reading or item.**

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