

Basil the Great

Reading 6 – The Importance of Integrity – Matching Words and Deeds

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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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Reading 6

The Importance of Integrity – Matching Words and Deeds

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This reading comes from the Cave's

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

IN BRIEF: *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.*

AND NEARLY ALL those writers who have given us some account of wisdom and philosophy have, to one degree or another and according to the ability of each, discoursed in their writings in praise of virtue.¹

We must obey these men and attempt to exhibit their words in our lives, just as the man does who firmly establishes his pursuit of wisdom with works, while philosophy is a matter of words for other men. "He alone is wise, whereas the others cast about like shadows."

[2] It seems to me that such a correspondence between one's words and deeds is very much as if a painter of live models had represented a man of quite wondrous beauty, and this same man would in reality be as the painter had displayed him on his panels.²

[3] On the other hand, when a man brilliantly praises virtue in public, going on and on about it with long speeches, while in private he values what is pleasant before moderation, and outdoing others before justice, I would say that such a man resembles those stage actors who put on dramas, often

appearing on stage as kings and masters even though they are neither kings nor masters, and perhaps not even free men at all. [4] Again, a musician would not readily play a lyre that is out of tune. Nor would a chorus leader have a choir that sings together without very much harmony. What? Should each man form factions and war within himself? Should his life not agree with his words?

[5] Nevertheless, quoting Euripides, one will say, “The tongue has sworn, but the mind is not bound by the oath.”³ Such a man seeks the appearance of being good rather than actually being good. Even so, this is the height of injustice—if we must obey the words of Plato, which forbid the appearance of being just without actually being so.⁴

So ends Reading 6. See you in **another Cave reading or item.**

NOTES

¹ For a comprehensive presentation of how the ancient Greeks spoke about and understood virtue (or excellence) from Homer to Plotinus, see *Aretē (Excellence or Virtue): What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Aretē* (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2020).

² Though somewhat different, compare to Basil’s *Letter 2*: “Generally, as painters, when they are painting from other pictures, constantly look at the model, and do their best to transfer its lineaments to their own work, so too must he who is desirous of rendering himself perfect in all branches of excellence, keep his eyes turned to the lives of the saints, as though to living and moving statues, and make their virtue his own by imitation.”

³ Euripides, *Hippolytus* 612.

⁴ See Plato, *Republic* 2.361a and *Gorgias* 527b.

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