

Basil the Great

Reading 8 – Keeping in Mind the Final Goal – Train Hard, Taking in What Is Useful

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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 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.*

LET US RETURN again to the same point we were discussing at the beginning. We should not admit everything without discrimination; instead, we should only accept what is useful. For it is shameful to reject foods that are harmful yet to take no thought about the learning that nourishes the soul and, instead, to rush on like a mountain torrent, sweeping everything it happens upon.

[2] And consider: if a ship's captain does not randomly deliver his vessel over to the winds without a plan, but he steers the ship directly to port, or if an archer shoots at a target, or, also, if some bronzesmith or carpenter strives for the end proper to his craft, then what reason would there be for us to be less than such practitioners in terms of the ability to generally perceive our own interests?

[3] For how is it possible that those who work with their hands have some end in view in their own work, but when it comes to human life, there is no goal for which a man should do and say everything in order not to wholly resemble irrational animals? If there were no intellect guiding our souls, then we would be like ships without ballast, carried everywhere and nowhere throughout life, without a plan or a purpose.

[4] But that's not the way it is. Instead, we should see our lives more in terms of athletic contests, or, if you prefer, music competitions. The competitors prepare themselves with practice exercises for the former contests in which crowns are offered. No one training for a wrestling or a pankration match would practice for a lyre or flute playing competition. [5] Certainly Polydamas did no such thing. Rather, before the contest at Olympia, he practiced bringing speeding chariots to a stop, and by this means he built up the strength of his body.¹ And even though he was pushed and shoved, Milo could not be driven away from his oiled shield. Instead, he firmly held on to it even as a statue is fastened to its base with lead.² [6] In short, the training prepared them for their contests. Would these men have soon won crowns or a glorious reputation, or would they have escaped the ridicule of people laughing at their physical condition if they had abandoned the dust and exercises of the gymnasium and wasted their time on practicing the flute of Marsyas or Olympus the Phrygian?

[7] On the other hand, Timotheus the musician certainly did not quit singing in order to spend his time in the wrestling schools. If he had, there's no way he could have surpassed everyone in music in such a way that whenever he wished to he could stir the feelings of a man with an intense and harsh mode or relax them once again with a mode that was serene and calm. [8]

It was with this skill that once, when Timotheus was playing the Phrygian mode on his flute to Alexander, he caused the general—as it is said—to leap up and rush to his arms in the middle of a feast. And then, by relaxing the mode, he brought him back again to his drinking friends.³ That's how great the power is that is supplied by goal-oriented practice, both in terms of music and athletic competitions.

[9] Since I have mentioned crowns and athletes, let me add that these men endure countless hardships, and increase their strength by every possible means, and shed rivers of sweat while toiling in the gymnasium, and suffer many blows in the trainer's school, and choose not the tastiest food but that selected by the professional trainer, and so pass their days in every other way, so that before the contest their lives are a preparation and training for the contest. Then, when the moment comes, they strip for the race and undergo every hardship and run every risk in order to win a crown of wild olive or of parsley or of some such thing—all so that they may win the victory and have their name announced by the herald.

[10] And yet prizes so extraordinary in terms of their extent and sublimity are set before us for the life we lead that it is impossible to describe them in words.⁴ Will it be possible, then, for us to reach out and take hold of these if we are sleeping day and night and living luxurious lives? [11] To be sure, if laziness were valuable for life, then Sardanapalus would carry off the highest prizes of all when it comes to happiness.⁵ Or even Margites would carry them off, if you will, the man who was neither a plowman nor a digger nor anything else useful in life, as Homer has it—if, in fact, the poem is by Homer.

[12] Is there not rather truth in the saying of Pittacus, that "It is hard to be good"?⁶ For even though we pass through a great deal of toil and suffering, we nevertheless just barely obtain those goods for which, as I said before, no human goods can serve as a model.

[13] Therefore, we should not be careless or lazy, nor should we exchange our great hope for an ephemeral life of ease—that is, if we do not intend to incur reproach and suffer retribution. By the way, I do not mean some punishment here among human

beings—even though that is no small matter to a sensible man. No, I refer to the houses of punishment and correction, whether they are beneath the earth or wherever they may happen to be. [14] In the case of the man who does wrong against his will, some

allowance and forgiveness may possibly come from God. But for the man who has deliberately and maliciously chosen an inferior life, there is no excuse or begging off. That man has much more punishment and correction to undergo.⁷

So ends Reading 8. See you in **another Cave reading or item.**

NOTES

¹ For Polydamas, see Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 6.5. Among other fabulous stories (including his barehanded killing of a lion on Mount Olympus), Pausanias reports Polydamas' victory in the pankration in the Olympic games of 408 BC.

² For Milo, see *ibid* 6.14 (though Basil's details are slightly different). Milo won in wrestling six times at the Olympic games and seven at the Pythian games.

³ See Dio Chrysostom *Oration* 1.1. See also Plutarch, *On the Great Fortune or Virtue of Alexander* 2.2—though here Plutarch tells the story about the musician Antigenides rather than Timotheus.

⁴ See 1 Corinthians 9.24-25: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever."

⁵ Sardanapalus, a late Assyrian ruler (possibly Asshurbanipal), had the reputation in the ancient world for great licentiousness, effeminacy, and laziness. See, for example, Dio Chrysostom's contrast of Alexander (a high-energy man oriented to action) with Sardanapalus (an indulgent man oriented to inaction) in *Oration* 1.2-3.

⁶ Pittacus was one of the seven wise men of ancient Greece. See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* 1.4. The saying, or something very similar, is also found in a fragment of the poet Simonides. See Plato, *Protagoras* 340b-d for a discussion of the saying.

⁷ Aside from the locations of punishment mentioned in the Bible (for example, Gehenna and Tartarus in the New Testament—whereas Sheol and Hades, though they appear in the Old and New Testaments, are merely locations of the dead rather than clear places of punishment), Basil may have in mind those locations mentioned by Plato. See, for example, *Gorgias* 523a ff. and *Phaedo* 113d ff.

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