

The Cynics

Reading 13 – The Letters of Crates of Thebes

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"Cynicism is . . . a match for the most excellent kind of philosophy." —Julian, the Roman emperor

"The Cynics hold that the goal of life is to live according to virtue. Some have said that Cynicism is a shortcut upon the path of virtue." —Anonymous (reported by Diogenes Laertius)

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Reading 13

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This reading comes from the Cave's

The Best of the Cynics: The Lives, Writings & Teachings of the Ancient Cynics.

The Letters of Crates of Thebes

LETTER 1 To Hipparchia: *Crates admonishes his wife Hipparchia to come back quickly in order to see Diogenes before he dies so that she may come to know what philosophy may do in the most fearful circumstances.*

LETTER 2 To His Students: *Crates gives advice on begging—that Cynics should only beg from those who have been initiated into philosophy. For, he says, it is not right that virtue is supported by vice. Begging is really a matter of asking for what belongs to you.*

LETTER 3 To the Same, His Students: Take care of your soul—but your body only so far as what is necessary,

and externals not even that much. I say this because happiness is not a pleasure that requires external things, nor does perfect virtue require these.

LETTER 4 To Hermaiscus: Whether you want to work hard or you want to avoid working hard, work hard. This way you won't be working hard. Why? Because when you slack off you're not actually avoiding hard work; rather, you're making things harder.

LETTER 5 To His Students: Law is a fine thing, but it is not better than philosophy. I say this because law forces a man to do no wrong, whereas philosophy

instructs him. *Crates explains that philosophy is better than law insofar as acting willingly is better than acting under compulsion.* It is better to know the means by which humans are instructed to do right and act honestly than to know the means by which they are forced to do no wrong.

LETTER 6 To the Same, His Students: Do philosophy more often than you breathe. I say this because living well, which philosophy produces, is more choiceworthy than simply living, which breathing produces. Don't do philosophy as others have done it, but as Antisthenes first practiced it, that which Diogenes brought to fulfillment. But if doing philosophy in this manner is troublesome or difficult, at least it is short. One must go for happiness, as Diogenes used to say, even if the going is through fire.

LETTER 7 To the Wealthy: Hang yourselves! I say this for this reason: although you possess lupine beans and dried figs and water and Megarian tunics, you nevertheless sail the sea to trade, and you farm a great deal of land, and you commit treachery and behave as a tyrant and murder, and you do other such things as these. You should be still and keep quiet! By contrast we Cynics are completely at peace—free from every bad thing thanks to Diogenes of Sinope. Although we have nothing, we have everything. But you who possess everything have nothing thanks to your love of strife and jealousy and fear and vanity.

LETTER 8 To Diogenes: We are in fact already liberated from riches. Still, we have not yet been set free from our enslavement to reputation—though, by Heracles, we are doing everything to be set free from her. *Crates announces his plans to visit and give himself to Diogenes in Athens.* It is your word that delivered us.

LETTER 9 To Mnasos: Do not abstain from the most beautiful adornment, but adorn yourself each day so that you may be different from others. The most beautiful adornment is the one that adorns you most beautifully. But the one that adorns you most

beautifully is the one that produces a well-ordered, regular, moderate life. It is this adornment that produces this well-ordered life. It seems to me that both Penelope and Alcestis adorned themselves in this manner.¹ Even now they are hymned and honored for their virtue. So that you might be a match for their kind, then, try to cling to this advice.

LETTER 10 To Lysis: *Crates exhorts the athlete Lysis, who has been drinking too much and too often, to learn to drink wine in a useful manner. He says, Learn to drink it with self-control together with self-controlled men. The goal is to honor the god's gift of wine and to enjoy its pleasures for their benefit without regrets and toward the ultimate end of speaking and behaving justly in all things.* They say that men become three times happy as three goods multiply in their lives. How could those who have a self-controlled soul, a healthy body, and independence relative to possessions not be three times happy?

LETTER 11 To His Students: Train yourselves to need very little—for this is closest to god, while the opposite is farthest. It is possible for you to become like the superior kind of being rather than the inferior since you are midway between the gods and irrational animals.

LETTER 12 To Orion: *Living in the city or on a farm is not what makes a child good or bad. Rather, Crates argues that it is time spent with good and bad men that makes one good or bad. So it is that Orion should send his sons to spend time with a philosopher, a lover of wisdom.* Virtue enters the soul by means of training—not automatically as happens with vice.

LETTER 13 To Eumolpus: *While a Cynic may not have the luxury of the Carthaginians or Persians, or the easy life of Sardanapalus,² their life is nevertheless freer, healthier, and more secure. And since these latter goods are better than the others, Diogenes' philosophy, which is the short path to happiness, is better than other ways of life.*

LETTER 14 To Young Ones: Get used to eating barley

cakes and drinking water. Don't even give a taste to fish or wine. I say this because the latter two, like the drugs of Circe, turn old men into animals and young males into females.

LETTER 15 To His Students: Flee not only from the worst of the vices, injustice and a lack of self-control, but also what produces them, pleasure and enjoyment. . . . Pursue not only the best of goods, self-control and endurance, but also what produces them, hard work and toil. *In doing the latter you will exchange what is inferior for what is superior, as you would bronze for gold. Consequently, you will exchange hard work and toil for virtue.*

LETTER 16 To His Students: *Crates advises those who are upset at being accused of living like a dog and being called dogs to let go of their distress. Just as a good man is not upset when he is called bad, so too should those who practice Cynicism—the doggish philosophy and the shortcut in doing philosophy—not be upset when they are called dogs. The latter is merely opinion.*

LETTER 17 To the Same, to His Students: *Just as it is not dishonorable to ask a doctor for medicine in order to treat indigestion, so too it is not shameful to beg others for bread to treat hunger, which is, according to Diogenes, another stomach condition. Indigestion is caused by gluttony and vice, whereas hunger is caused by a lack of resources.*

LETTER 18 To Young Ones: Get used to washing in cold water, drinking water, eating nothing that has not come to you by means of toil and sweat, wearing a tattered cloak, and spending your time on the ground. *That way, Crates continues, you will never be without warm baths, wine and meat, clothes died purple, and a bed.*

LETTER 19 To Patrocles: *Do not call Odysseus the father of Cynicism simply because he put on the clothing of the Cynic. The clothing does not produce a Cynic; rather, the Cynic the clothing. Although Odysseus put on the typical outfit of the Cynic, his behavior was often not that of*

a Cynic since he honored pleasure above all else. Instead, we should call Diogenes the father of Cynicism and imitate him since he behaved like a Cynic throughout his life, conquering both toil and pleasure, and freeing many from evil to virtue. He was courageous in his practice of virtue.

LETTER 20 To Metrocles: *Crates advises the Cynic Metrocles to exercise and run where there are young men in order to teach them how to be healthy. The reason: deeds teach endurance more quickly than words. Crates relates his own experience of exercising before young men. At first they laughed at me for running. But soon, seeing my determination, they too began to run and exercise rather than merely rubbing themselves down with oil. Soon, he says, they thanked me for being the cause of their health. And they followed me around, listening to me and imitating me.*

LETTER 21 To Metrocles the Cynic: *The Cynic way is not a way of words alone. On the contrary, it is a practice, a regimen, a doing rather than merely a saying. Long is the path that leads to happiness through words alone. But the path that leads to happiness through the practice of daily deeds is short.*³

LETTER 22 To Metrocles: *Metrocles should beg from the worthy. Moreover, he should accept less from those who are sensible and moderate (since they will be in the position to give again) and more from the profligate (since they will spend all their money before the next time comes around).*

LETTER 23 To Ganymedes: For as long as you fear the tattered cloak and the leather bag and the staff and the long hair *of the Cynic*, and as long as you are fond of clothing died with purple and luxury, you will not stop leading on your lovers, just as Penelope led on her suitors. *That said, when you realize how troublesome they are to you, put on the armor and carry the weapons of Diogenes. With these you will be able to drive away every lover.*

LETTER 24 To the Thessalians: Humans did not come into being as a boon for horses, but horses as a boon for humans. *The Thessalians, who are famous for their*

horses, should take care of themselves more than their horses so that they will be worth more than their horses.

LETTER 25 To the Athenians: *The Athenians should do what it takes to satisfy their needs rather than merely satisfying them with a vote. If they need money, then they should sell their horses. On the other hand, if they need horses (something they may not need as much), then they may resort to a vote—in this case they can vote that their asses are horses.*

LETTER 26 To the Same, to the Athenians: *Understand that when Diogenes demands from you what is owed him, he does so as a wise man, who is friends with god. You have no problem when a god demands anything from you. Neither, therefore, should you be bothered by Diogenes' claim. The reason? Since all things belong to god, and friends hold all things in common, it follows that the wise man, who is friends with god, is owed all things.*

LETTER 27 To the Same, to the Athenians: *Crates once again makes the argument—following Diogenes—that all things belong to the wise man thanks to his friendship with god.*

LETTER 28 To Hipparchia: *Women are not by nature worse than men. Consider the deeds of the Amazons, who are not inferior to men in anything. Therefore, do not forsake the Cynic way of life you have taken up with me, your husband. It would be shameful . . . now to change your mind and turn back when you are halfway down the path.*

LETTER 29 To the Same, to Hipparchia: *We are called Cynics not because we are indifferent to things but because we doggedly stick with things that are unbearable to others on account of softness and mere opinions. . . . Stand your ground, therefore, and practice Cynicism with me (since you are not by nature worse than we male Cynics are, since female dogs are not inferior to male dogs). Do this so that you may be liberated from nature insofar as all slaves are enslaved either through the law or by means of vice.*

LETTER 30 To the Same, to Hipparchia: *Returning a fine tunic that she has made for him to Hipparchia, his wife, Crates explains that their life is not about appearances. Consequently, there is no need to appear to the many to care for him, her husband, by means of such a gift. Rather, she should embrace the Cynic philosophy for which you yourself have yearned. In this way, he finishes, she will be of greater benefit to human life.*

LETTER 31 To the Same, to Hipparchia: *Reason is commander of the soul, a noble thing, the greatest good for human beings. So then, seek how to acquire this good for yourself, for then you will cling to a happy life along with this possession. And seek wise men, even if you have to go to the ends of the earth.*

LETTER 32 To the Same, to Hipparchia: *Once again, Crates calls on his wife to give up weaving and giving him tunics for the sake of pride. She should do this in order to practice philosophy—the whole reason she married him. Leave the wool-spinning, which profits little, to other women, to those who have not yearned for the things you do.*

LETTER 33 To the Same, to Hipparchia: *I hear that you have given birth without any trouble. . . . I'm grateful to god and to you.*

You are persuaded that working hard is the reason why one does not have to work hard. I say this because you would not have given birth without any trouble if you had not, while pregnant, continued to work hard and toil as athletes do. This approach is contrary to most women who are debilitated when pregnant and give birth to unhealthy babies.

Anyway, Crates goes on, now you should take care of our baby with due concern. Bathe him in cold water; dress him in a tattered cloak; give him a moderate amount of milk; let him sleep in a tortoise shell. And when he is older, offer him the usual staff, tattered cloak, and leather bag—all these are far better than a sword.

LETTER 34 To Metrocles: *Crates conveys his relief upon hearing the story about how Diogenes handled himself when he was taken by pirates.*

First—said the man who told the story, one who had been captured with Diogenes but had escaped—Diogenes pointed out the contradiction in the pirates’ behavior. When they sell hogs for the use of their bodies, he said, they first fatten them up. But when they sell humans, who are also wanted for their bodies and not their souls, they give them nothing at all.

Hearing this point, the pirate slavers gave their captives bread to eat. But many refused to take it because they were so upset about their impending enslavement. Laughing, Diogenes pointed out that they had not been free to begin with but were dominated by even worse masters. He went on to suggest the possible good of being enslaved. “Now, perhaps, you may be allotted moderate masters, ones who will eliminate the luxury in your lives by which you are ruined. Rather, they will produce endurance and self-control, the most honored goods.”

Hearing Diogenes speak, the buyers were amazed at his freedom from emotion. When queried about his skills, he claimed he was skilled at ruling human beings. So, he said, if anyone needs a master, let him come forward. They laughed at this, asking him what free man would require a master. Diogenes replied, “All base men who honor pleasure and dishonor hard work and toil, the greatest incitements to vice.”

Because of these remarks, Diogenes was highly valued. Rather than selling him, the pirates took him home to learn more. Hence, finishes Crates, we should not provide a ransom for him, but we should instead rejoice at his victory.

LETTER 35 To Aper, Do well: To the point and suitable in every circumstance, my honored man, is the oracle of the ancients that says, “Do not flee from those things that are necessary.” I say this because the one who flees from what is necessary is inevitably unhappy. *This may seem pedantic, admits Crates. Fine.* Still, hold fast to the ancients. I have concluded from my own life that we human beings are distressed whenever we wish to live a problem-free life. But this is impossible! For by necessity we live with the body, and by necessity we also live with human beings. The truth is that most problems arise from the folly of those who live together and—again—from the body.

So then, if a man with knowledge conducts himself by these points, then he is free from pain and disturbance, a blessed man. But if he is ignorant about them, then he will never stop being taken by empty hopes and warped by yearning.

Accordingly, says Crates, either give yourself over to the counselors of the many, the tragic poets, or, if you wish for a different kind of life, then imitate men like Socrates and Diogenes.

LETTER 36 To Dinomachus: *Crates counsels Dinomachus to beg from the good and excellent man alone, for we say that this man and none of the others is called happy.*

So ends Reading 13. See you in the **next reading**.

NOTES

¹ In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Penelope is the faithful wife of Odysseus. About her, king Agamemnon exclaims, “Happy son of Laertes, much-able Odysseus! You acquired for yourself an excellent wife, one of great worth. How good was the heart in blameless Penelope, the daughter of Icarius! How faithful in mind to Odysseus, her wedded husband! The glory of her virtue will never fade, but the immortals will make among men on earth a graceful song for thoughtful Penelope” (24.191-198). In Greek mythology, and particularly in Euripides’ tragedy the *Alcestis*, the wife of Admetus, Alcestis, agrees to die in Admetus’ place when no other of his loved ones will do so. To the Chorus she “appears noble beyond all women.” Like Penelope, she is a most faithful and virtuous wife.

² In the ancient world, the Carthaginians and Persians, as well as the Assyrian king Sardanapalus, had the reputation for fabulously luxurious lifestyles.

³ Crates also advises Metrocles not to fear being called a Cynic—that he should not be afraid of words.

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