

# Basil the Great

## Reading 5 – Soul Care – Freeing the Soul from the Body and the Demands of Pleasure

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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 5

### Soul Care – Freeing the Soul from the Body and the Demands of Pleasure

#### Reading 5

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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 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. Basil 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.*

SO THEN, WHAT are we to do?—someone may ask. What else than to devote ourselves to the care of our souls, keeping all our leisure time free from other things.

[2] For this reason we should not slavishly serve the body any more than is strictly necessary. Instead,

we should provide the soul with the best things. Through the wisdom of philosophy we should free the soul as though from a prison from its association with the passions of the body, and, at the same time, we should cultivate the body so that it becomes the master of the passions.<sup>1</sup>

For instance, we must minister to the belly with what is necessary—but not with pleasant foods, necessarily, those delicacies sought after by those who look everywhere for table servants and cooks, scouring every land and sea, like those hauling tribute to a harsh master. This is a deplorable business in which one suffers things that are as unbearable as the punishments of Hades, where the inhabitants are forced to card wool into a fire or fetch water in a sieve and pour it into a perforated jar, experiencing never-ending suffering and toil.<sup>2</sup>

[3] To spend more time than is necessary on one's hair and clothes is, according to the adage of Diogenes, the sign of those who are unhappy or doing wrong.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the man who pampers his body, making himself pretty, or the one who gets the name of such a man, should be considered just as shameful as the man who sleeps with prostitutes or seduces the wives of other men. [4] For as long as his clothing gives him adequate protection against the cold of winter and the heat of summer, what difference should it make—at least to a sensible man—whether he is dressed in a robe made of fine material or in an inexpensive cloak? [5] Similarly, in all other matters, we must be governed by necessity, only giving to the body as much as is beneficial to the soul. It is no less a reproach to a man—one, at least, who is truly worthy of the name—to be fond of and indulge the body, pampering it and making it pretty, than it is to be sordidly preoccupied with any one of the passions.

[6] To exert oneself zealously in every way so that the body itself may be as beautiful as possible is not the sign of a man who either knows himself or understands the wise precept that “the man is not that which is seen.” Rather, each one of us, whoever he is, requires extraordinary wisdom to recognize and know himself. But unless we have purified our minds, knowing ourselves is more impossible than it is for a man with darkened eyes to look up at the sun.

[7] Now, to speak in general terms and in a manner sufficient for your understanding, purification of the soul includes scorning those pleasures that satisfy the senses—refusing to feast your eyes on the mindless exhibitions of jugglers and the like or on the sight

of bodies that prompt one to seek pleasure, and closing your ears to songs that pour over and utterly destroy your soul. [8] I say this because those passions that are the offspring of cupidity and depravity are naturally produced by this kind of music. On the other hand, we must pursue the other kind of music, which is better in itself and leads to better things. As the scriptures say, David, the composer of sacred songs, freed the king from his madness. [9] And the story is related that Pythagoras too, when he happened upon some drunken revelers, commanded the flute player, who led the band of revelers, to change the mode in order to play in the Doric mode. As a result, these returned to their senses thanks to the new mode. And throwing off their garlands, they went home ashamed. [10] Yet others, when they hear the sound of the flute, rave in Corybantic and Bacchic frenzy. Such is the difference between being filled up with healthy versus worthless music. Since this latter kind of music is now in vogue, you should have less to do with it than with other shameful things.<sup>4</sup>

[11] Furthermore, I am ashamed to even have to forbid filling the air with whole clouds of sweet smelling perfumes that carry pleasure to your nose, or to smear your body with creams and lotions.

And what can be said about the importance of not hunting after those pleasures associated with the senses of touch and taste? Such hunting compels those who are devoted to these pleasures to live like wild animals, giving all their attention to the belly and the members below it.

[12] But, in a word, every part of the body should be despised by everyone who does not care to be buried in its pleasures as if in filth. We should attach ourselves to the body only insofar as we receive support from it in the pursuit of wisdom and philosophy. This is as Plato declares, speaking in a manner similar to Paul, who exhorts us to make no provision for the body as a location to satisfy the desires.<sup>5</sup> [13] Is there any difference between those who are anxious to make the body as beautiful as possible but ignore the purpose of the soul as utterly useless, and those who are zealously concerned for their tools but neglect the art by which they work? [14] On the contrary, we

should discipline the body and hold it in check, even as we do the violent attacks of an untamed animal. We should quiet the restlessness and confusion produced by the body in the soul with the lash of reason, not giving full rein to pleasure. We should do this instead of relaxing the reins and allowing the mind to be swept along like a charioteer carried on by unmanageable and willful horses.<sup>6</sup>

Keep in mind Pythagoras, who, upon learning that one of his followers was putting on extra weight thanks to all his exercise and excessive eating, said to him, “Are you not making your imprisonment more difficult for yourself?”

[15] There’s also the story that Plato, in order to defend against the harmful influence of the body, deliberately occupied the Academy, which is the pestilential part of Attica, so that he could rid himself of excessive bodily comfort even as one prunes the vine of excessive growth. I myself have heard physicians say that one can take “good health” to an extreme, even to the point of danger.

[16] Since, then, such excessive care for the body is not only unprofitable for the body but also an impediment to the soul, the idea that the soul should be subject to the body as its servant is sheer madness!

[17] But surely, if we make it our practice to look down on the body, taking no notice of it, we will hardly admire anything other men possess. After all, what use will we have for wealth if we scorn the pleasures that come through the body? As for me, I see no use—unless there is, as with the dragons found in legends, some pleasure in guarding hidden treasure!

[18] Surely, however, the man who has been brought up to be free of this sort of thing will not likely prefer anything base or shameful in word or deed. For such a man will scorn that which surpasses need—even if it is the gold dust of Lydia or the product of the gold gathering ants.<sup>7</sup> As his need for the thing decreases, his scorn for its excessive use will increase. And doubtlessly he will define “need” itself in terms of the necessary requirements of nature, and not in terms of pleasure.

[19] Those who go beyond the bounds of necessity resemble people who rush headlong down a slope.

They are unable to grab hold of anything to stop their precipitous fall. No, the more they grasp at things, the more things they need to satisfy the desires.

This accords with Solon, the son of Execestides, who declares, “As for wealth, no one has made its limits clear to men.”<sup>8</sup>

[20] We should also resort to Theognis as a teacher on this point, when he says, “I do not desire wealth, nor do I pray for it; rather, may it be mine to live on little, suffering no misfortune.”<sup>9</sup>

I also admire the disdain that Diogenes had without exception for every human good. He declared himself wealthier than the Great King since he needed less for living.<sup>10</sup> [21] Even so, for those of us alive today, it would seem that nothing is enough to satisfy us apart from the money of Pythias the Mysian, and such a great quantity of land, and cattle herds beyond counting.<sup>11</sup>

Nevertheless, I believe that we should not yearn after wealth when it is absent. And if it is nearby, we should not make it our purpose to possess it as much as we should to dispose of it well.<sup>12</sup> [22] In this regard, Socrates’ saying is well put. When a wealthy man was expressing great pride in all his possessions, Socrates told him that he would not admire him before he had learned whether or not the man knew how to use his wealth.<sup>13</sup> [23] Would not Pheidias and Polykleitos—the one who made the Zeus for the Elians, and the other the Hera for the Argives—have been the objects of derision for glorying in a wealth not their own if they had greatly prided themselves on the gold and ivory in the statues rather than the art that enabled them to render the gold both more pleasing and valuable? In view of that, do we not deserve just as much shame if we believe that human virtue is insufficient in itself to serve as an adornment for us?

[24] Moreover, are we to despise wealth and scorn the pleasures of the senses and yet go on seeking after flattery and adulation, vying with the fox of Archilochus in cunning and craft?<sup>14</sup> [25] On the contrary, there is nothing that a prudent man should flee more than living for praise and worrying about what everyone thinks. Instead, he should make sound reason

the guide of his life so that—even if he must speak against all other men and risk their contempt for the sake of what is noble—he will not at all shift away from that which he knows to be right. [26] Otherwise, how will we say that he differs from the Egyptian sophist, who, whenever he wished, became a plant, or a wild animal, or fire, or water, or anything else?<sup>15</sup>

[27] Just as the flatterer does, such a man now praises justice to those who honor it, and now goes on in an opposite manner when he senses that injustice is popular. And just as the octopus, they say, changes its color to match the ground upon which it rests, so does this man change his mind according to the opinions of those around him.

So ends Reading 5. **See you in Reading 6**, which is on the way.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the idea that the body is the prison of the soul, and for the soul's release, see Plato's *Phaedo* 64b-c, 67c-d, and 82e-83a.

<sup>2</sup> According to N.G. Wilson, these are "three proverbial expressions describing the punishments . . . in Hades" (*Saint Basil on Greek Literature*, 64). See Plato, *Laws* 6.780c-d, and Lucian, *Dialogue of the Dead* 11.4.

<sup>3</sup> The "Diogenes" here is the Cynic Diogenes of Sinope. See Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* 6.54: "Seeing a young man beautifying himself, [Diogenes] said, 'If it is for men, you are unfortunate. If it is for women, you do wrong.'" For an introduction to Cynic teachings, themes, and ideas, see *The Best of the Cynics: The Lives, Writings & Teachings of the Ancient Cynics* (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> For David, see 1 Samuel 16.14-23. For Socrates' discussion of music and its different modes and moral effects, see Plato, *Republic* 3.398 ff.

<sup>5</sup> See Plato, *Republic* 6.498b-c; and Romans 13.14: "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

<sup>6</sup> Compare Plato's *Phaedrus* 253c-e.

<sup>7</sup> Herodotus tells the story of the gold gathering ants in *Histories* 3.102 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Solon, *Elegies* 13.71.

<sup>9</sup> Theognis 1155-6.

<sup>10</sup> The reference is to the Cynic Diogenes of Sinope. See Plutarch, *On the Fortune and Virtue of Alexander* 1.10.

<sup>11</sup> According to Herodotus, Pythias was a Lydian of great wealth (*Histories* 7.27 ff.).

<sup>12</sup> For a similar early view on the use of wealth, see Clement of Alexandria's *The Rich Man's Salvation*.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Dio Chrysostom, *Oration* 3.1 ff., where Socrates reserves judgment regarding "the Persian king" Darius. See also, Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 5.12.

<sup>14</sup> The reference is to the seventh century BC poet Archilochus of Paros and the fable he told about the fox and the eagle. See Plato, *Republic* 2.365c.

<sup>15</sup> The reference is to the shapeshifter Proteus in Homer, *Odyssey* 4.384-386; 417-418. Proteus is called "the Egyptian sophist" in Plato, *Euthydemus* 288b.



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