

Points of Wisdom from Basil the Great

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"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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Note • The following points of wisdom, some slightly modified, come from Basil the Great's *How to Benefit from Reading Greek Literature* (found in the Cave's *The Best of Basil the Great on Reading Literature and Education*). Each point begins in *italics* with a single word or more indicating the point's topic or meaning. For more points of wisdom from Basil the Great organized by topic, buy the Cave's *The Wisdom & Way of Basil the Great on Living, Education & Living* (forthcoming).

Points of Wisdom from Basil the Great

Know what is useful. My advice for you is that you should accept from the famous thoughts and words of ancient men only what is useful and know what to disregard. . . . You should not once and for all hand over the rudder of your mind to these men—as one might hand over the rudder of a ship to another—to follow along with them wherever they steer you. *Again*, you should accept from them only what is useful and know what to disregard.

Have a plan. 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?

Let your intellect be the guide. 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.

Let reason be your guide. A prudent man . . . 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.

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Look for soul benefit. We must associate with poets, prose writers, orators, and all other men . . . with whomever and wherever we may expect to find some benefit relative to the care of our souls.

Heed the words and deeds of good men; beware of bad men. Whenever poets recount for you the words or deeds of good men, you should be pleased with them and admire them, earnestly trying to imitate such as these. Whenever poets go through the words and deeds of wicked men, you should avoid such imitation, stopping up your ears just as much as Odysseus did . . . when he avoided the songs of the Sirens.

You behave as you read. Habitual contact with the bad words and deeds of *certain* writings is a road leading to bad behavior.

Be a critic; know what to praise. We will not praise the poets when they portray people engaged in passionate love affairs or drinking to the point of intoxication. Nor when they define happiness in terms of tables brimming with food and depraved songs.

Let need correspond to nature. The man who has been brought up to be free of *admiration for anything other men possess and the pleasures that come through the body* will not likely prefer anything base or shameful in word or deed. Such a man will scorn that which surpasses need. . . . He will define “need” itself in terms of the necessary requirements of nature, and not in terms of pleasure.

Guard your soul. We must watch over our souls with every safeguard, so that we may not unknowingly accept something of the worse kind through the pleasure of the poets’ words, like those who ingest poisons sweetened with honey.

Collect what is beneficial. Those who make it their business to collect whatever is beneficial from every writing are like rivers that grow larger by taking in the flow of streams from every side. The poet *Hesiod’s* saying about “adding little to little” is true not only for the accumulation of money but also for gathering together every kind of knowledge.

Read like a bee. We should engage with literature in a way that follows the image of the bees. For bees neither approach nor land upon every flower without discrimination. Nor do they attempt to carry off the whole flower. Instead, taking only as much as is useful for their work, they are glad to give up the rest.

Gather soul benefit like a bee. Just as bees know how to extract honey from flowers, which to men are enjoyable only for their sweet fragrance and color, even so with literature, those who look beyond the sweet and agreeable aspects of such writings may gather from them some benefit for their souls.

Read wisely. If we are wise and moderate, we will acquire from literature whatever is suitable to us and akin to the truth, while passing over the rest.

Only accept what is useful. 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.

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Gather what is beneficial like a gardener. Just as we avoid the thorns while picking flowers from a rose garden, let us guard against what is harmful when gathering whatever is useful from writings such as these.

Pay attention to virtue and vice in your reading; practice virtue. We will certainly accept those passages in literature in which authors praise virtue and condemn vice. . . . It is through virtue that we must enter upon this life of ours. . . . Virtue is the only possession that cannot be taken away. . . . Virtue remains while we are living and when we have completed this life.

Choose the best life. Let us remember the words of the man who urged everyone to choose the life that is in itself best, in the expectation that this life will become agreeable when we make a habit of it.

Associate with virtue. Much has been said in celebration of virtue by the poets and prose writers, and even more by the philosophers. We must particularly turn our attention and apply ourselves to such literature. It is no small advantage for a certain friendliness and habitual association with virtue to be produced in the souls of the young.

Read Homer in light of virtue. The interpreter of the poet's meaning said that Homer practically shouts it aloud in these passages, saying, "You must care for virtue, men—virtue, which swims ashore with the shipwrecked man and makes him, when he comes naked to dry land, more honored than the prosperous Phaeacians."

Travel the way of virtue. The road that leads to virtue is more pleasant than the other road that leads to wickedness—which one may have in abundance from near at hand, as *Hesiod* says. *Hesiod* had no other purpose in making these points about the roads to virtue and to wickedness than to turn us toward virtue and summon all men to be good, and so that we might not become weak and cowardly when faced with suffering and toil, quitting before we reach the goal. If any other man has celebrated virtue in the manner of *Hesiod*, let us favorably receive his words as leading to the same goal as our own.

Take note of outstanding deeds. As for the literature that contains counsel regarding noble conduct, let us receive it in this manner. And since the outstanding deeds of the men of old have also been preserved for us, either by means of an ongoing oral tradition or safeguarded in the words of the poets and prose writers, then let us not overlook this source in terms of benefit.

Observe the example of the philosopher Socrates of Athens. A certain man kept striking Socrates, the son of *Sophroniscus*, in the face, attacking him without mercy. Even so, he did not oppose the man. Rather, he allowed the man, who was drunk with wine, to take his fill of anger, so that his face ended up swollen and bruised thanks to the blows. Now, when the man stopped striking him, Socrates, it is said, did nothing more than write on his forehead in the manner of a sculptor signing a sculpture, "So-and-so made this." So far did Socrates defend himself. . . . This example of Socrates is akin to that precept of ours which says that we should not defend ourselves against the man who strikes us on the cheek; rather, we should also offer the other cheek.

Know that you are training for a great contest. We should see our lives in terms of athletic contests. . . . The competitors prepare themselves with practice exercises for the contests in which crowns are offered. . . . In short, the training prepares them for their contests.

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Practice! Great is the power that is supplied by goal-oriented practice, both in terms of music and athletic competitions.

Observe the example of athletes in training. Athletes 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. When the moment comes, *athletes* strip for the race and undergo every hardship and run every risk in order to win.

The challenge of being good. There is truth in the saying of Pittacus, that "It is hard to be good."

Observe the example of the hero Heracles. When Heracles was quite young, just about your age right now, he was considering which road he should take—the one leading through suffering and toil to virtue or the easiest road. Just then, two women approached. These were Virtue and Vice. . . . Virtue promised nothing relaxed or pleasant. Instead, she offered him a whole ocean of sweat—countless sufferings and toils and dangers through every land and sea.

Know what is truly valuable. Do not assume . . . that this human life of ours is altogether something valuable. Do not consider or call something entirely good which merely contributes to this life alone.

Care for your soul. The soul is more valuable than the body in all things. What are we to do? . . . What else than to devote ourselves to the care of our souls, keeping all our leisure time free from other things. We should provide the soul with the best things.

Free your soul. Through the wisdom of philosophy we should free the soul as though from a prison from its association with the passions of the body.

Purify your mind; know yourself. Each one of us, whoever he is, requires extraordinary wisdom to recognize and know himself. 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.

Scorn certain pleasures. Purification of the soul includes scorning those pleasures that satisfy the senses.

As is necessary, take care of your body. In all . . . matters regarding the body, we must be governed by necessity, only giving to the body as much as is beneficial to the soul.

Control your body. 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. 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. . . . Excessive care for the body is not only unprofitable for the body but also an impediment to the soul.

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Much wealth is unnecessary. 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!

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