

Basil the Great

Reading 7 – Outstanding Deeds – Exemplary Models by Which to Live

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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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This reading comes from the Cave's
The Best of Basil the Great on Reading Literature and Education.

IN BRIEF: *Basil counsels his students to take into account and imitate the examples of noble conduct and outstanding deeds from the past. These examples may serve as models. Among those on display are Pericles of Athens, Eucleides of Megara, the philosopher Socrates, Alexander the Great, and Cleinias, the disciple of Pythagoras. Basil asserts that these men exemplify a handful of Christian principles: turning the other cheek; enduring another man's anger with patience and wishing for his good; avoiding lust in one's heart; and refusing to swear an oath.*

AS FOR THE literature, then, 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.¹

[2] For example, a certain man from the market kept railing at Pericles. But the latter paid no attention to him. Still, the man kept it up all day long, mercilessly abusing him. And yet he just went on ignoring it. Then, when it was already evening and dark, Pericles escorted the man home with a light even though the man kept it up. He did this so that his

training in philosophy might not be utterly spoiled.²

[3] Yet again, a certain man who was provoked to anger by Eucleides of Megara threatened him with death and vowed to kill him. Eucleides, however, took a counter-oath. He swore that he would appease the man and make him put an end to his angry feelings against him.³

How valuable it is to have such exemplary models in mind when a man is seized by anger! [4] For one must not simply trust in and rely upon the tragedy when it says, “Against enemies, anger arms the hand.”⁴ On the contrary, we should desist from anger altogether. If this is not easy to achieve, we should at least employ reason as a kind of bridle so as not to allow anger to carry us beyond what is appropriate.⁵

[5] But let us bring our discussion back again to the exemplary models of outstanding deeds. 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. [6] 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.⁶

[7] Since these exemplary models are close to the teachings found in our own writings, I declare that it is quite valuable for people your age to imitate them. For 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. [8] And the example of Pericles or Eucleides is akin to the precept that we should submit to those who persecute us and gently endure their anger. And this other precept too—that we should pray for our enemies, wishing the good for them instead of cursing them.⁷ Whoever has been first instructed with the exemplary models found in these writings will not afterwards distrust those precepts found in our writings as impossible or impracticable.

[9] I should not pass over the example of Alexander, who would not even look at the captured daughters of Darius, who had a reputation for stunning beauty.⁸ He judged it shameful for one who had conquered men to be a slave to women. This example accords with our own precept that he who looks at a woman for the sake of pleasure, even though he is not actually committing the act of adultery, is not cleared of every charge since he has received the desire into his soul.⁹

[10] As for the example of Cleinias, one of the disciples of Pythagoras, it is difficult to believe that it is by mere chance that it coincides with the precepts found in our own writings, rather than an intentional imitation of them. What, then, did Cleinias do? Although it was possible to escape a fine of three talents by taking an oath, he paid the fine rather than swearing—even though he could have sworn truthfully.¹⁰ It seems to me that he must have heard the command that bars us from taking an oath.¹¹

So ends Reading 7. See you in **another Cave reading or item.**

NOTES

¹ We should note that Basil is not praising the whole life, with its every deed and dimension, of the following examples, but only that which is wise and virtuous.

² For the story about Pericles (though slightly different), see Plutarch, *Pericles* 5.

³ For the account regarding Eucleides the Socratic, see Plutarch, *On the Control of Anger* 14 (*Moralia* 462c) and *On Brotherly Love* 18 (*Moralia* 489d).

⁴ The reference appears to be to Euripides, *Rhesus* 84.

⁵ For the notion of using reason as a bridle (as a charioteer would rein in a troublesome horse), see Plato, *Phaedrus* 254c-e.

⁶ Diogenes Laertius relates similar stories about the Cynics Diogenes of Sinope and Crates of Thebes (*Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* 6.33 and 6.89).

⁷ For the scriptural foundation of the precepts, see Matthew 5.39: “But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also”; and 5.44: “I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”

⁸ For similar accounts, though not identical in details, see Arrian, *Anabasis* 4.19.6 and Plutarch, *Life of Alexander* 21.

⁹ See Matthew 5.27-28: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”

¹⁰ For the story about Cleinias (though Iamblichus does not mention him by name), see Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras* 144.

¹¹ Matthew 5.34-37: “But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. All you need to say is simply ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.”

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