

Points of Wisdom from Homer

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"Homer enthusiasts say that Homer has been the educator of Greece, and for the education and government of humans, we should build up our entire lives with the assistance of this poet." —Socrates of Athens

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Note • The following points of wisdom come from Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The person speaking is Homer unless otherwise indicated. Each begins in *italics* with a single word or more indicating the point's topic or meaning. For more points of wisdom from Homer organized by topic, buy the Cave's *The Wisdom & Way of Homer*.

Points of Wisdom from Homer

Human delight. "Different men delight in different things."

True delight. *Odysseus said,* "There is nothing sweeter to a man than his own homeland and his parents. . . . I declare that there is nothing better or more delightful than when a whole people join in merry festivity, with the guests sitting side by side listening to the singer, while before them the table is loaded with bread and meats, and the cupbearer draws wine from the mixing bowl and pours it into all the goblets. In my mind, this seems to be the most beautiful thing."

Fulfilment. *Menelaus said,* "I declare that all things find satisfaction—sleep, love, sweet song, and the stately dance. With these things a man hopes to find fulfilment."

Happiness. *Odysseus said,* "Lord Zeus, may Telemachus be happy among men, and may everything happen as he desires in his heart."

The happiness of marriage. *Odysseus said to Nausicaa,* "May the gods grant you as much as your heart eagerly desires—a man for a husband, and a house. And may a noble unity of mind and feeling accompany these. For nothing is greater and nothing better than when a man and woman dwell in their household with the same feelings, thoughts, and mind—a huge pain to their enemies and joy to their friends. Their glory is very well known."

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The excellence imperative. Nestor said, "Old Peleus insistently ordered his son Achilles to always be the best and to stand out among other men."

The glory imperative. Hector said, "I have learned always to be brave and to fight in the front ranks among the Trojans, winning great glory for my father and myself. . . . Let me not then die ingloriously and without a struggle, but let me first do some great thing that men to come will hear about!"

True glory. Laodamas said, "There is no greater glory than that which a man has from the accomplishments of his own hands and feet."

The human condition. Glaucus said, "Men come and go as the leaves do year after year upon the trees. The wind sheds the autumn leaves upon the ground, but when the spring returns, the forest buds again with fresh ones. The generations of mankind are like this. The new generation springs up as the old is passing away."

The human condition. Apollo said, "Miserable mortals flourish now like green leaves in springtime, eating whatever the earth provides, but soon waste away and decay, falling lifeless to the ground."

Human variety. Polydamas said to Hector, "Some god has granted you skill in war, but . . . you can't win in everything. The gods have given to one man skill in war and to another skill in the dance. To others they've given the ability to play the lyre or sing. To still others far-seeing Zeus gives a noble mind."

Death. Athena said to Telemachus, "Death that is common to all men is certain. Not even the gods have the power to defend a loved man against it when the destructive fate of death finally drops a man to the dust."

The gods. Menelaus said, "The gods know all things. . . . Father Zeus—you are, they say, above all the other gods and men in wisdom, and by whom all these things have come into existence."

The human need for the divine. Peisistratus said, "All men need the gods."

God-dependent life. Hector said, "Everything rests with the gods."

God-dependent delight. Eumaeus said, "Eat and enjoy the food we have. The god gives on the one hand and withholds on the other depending on his spirit's wish, for the god is able to do all things."

God-dependent happiness and wealth. Odysseus said, "As for the happiness of wealth, it's up to the gods to give it or not."

Inescapable fate. Hector said, "No man has gone down to Hades beyond what Fate had decreed. But I declare that from the moment of his birth, no man has ever been able to run away from his own fate, neither the coward nor the brave man."

Zeus' two jars of fortune. Achilles said to Priam, the king of Troy, "On the floor of Zeus' house, there are two jars from which he gives gifts. The one is filled with evil and the other with good. To whomever Zeus, who delights in thunder, mixes and gives out both, that man will meet now with good and now with evil fortune. But for the

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man who only receives evil gifts—ah, that man will suffer shameful treatment. Evil poverty and hunger will drive him back and forth over the earth, and neither the gods nor men will honor him.”

Life's great value. Achilles said, “My life is worth more to me than all the wealth of Ilium, the riches it had before the Achaeans attacked it, when there was yet peace. It is worth more than all the treasure that lies on the stone floor of Apollo's temple beneath the cliffs of Pytho. Cattle and fat sheep may be carried off as booty, and tripods and yellow-headed horses may be acquired, but when a man's life has once left him, it cannot be brought back again or won by force.”

The high price of excessive riches. Menelaus said, “I have wandered and suffered much over eight years to bring these riches home in my ships. . . . If only I had stayed home! I wish that I had only a third of my possessions and that all those who perished on the plain of Troy, far from horse-nourishing Argos, were still safe and alive.”

Simple life is better than death. Achilles said, “Do not speak to me lightly about death, glorious Odysseus. If only I could, I would choose to live upon the earth, working as a day laborer for some other man, some landless man who doesn't have much of what it takes to live. I'd rather be that man, Odysseus, than rule over all the rotting dead.”

Hunger. Odysseus said, “There is nothing more shameful and doglike than one's hateful belly. It calls upon a man to remember it by absolute necessity, even if he is very oppressed and is bearing much grief and misfortune in his heart and mind, as I am now carrying all the sorrow in mine. My belly always insists that I eat and drink, and bids me lay aside all memory of my sorrows and dwell on replenishing itself. . . . There is no hiding a hungry belly. It is an accursed, destructive thing, which introduces many evils to all men. It is because of hunger that well-benched ships are made ready to sail the barren sea and carry misery and sorrow to hostile men.”

Human responsibility. Zeus said to the gods, “How shameful it is that the mortals even now blame the gods! From us, they say, come all sorts of bad things. But it is through their own recklessness that they have sorrows beyond those which are fated.”

The need to restrain desire to return home. Tiresias said to Odysseus, “You may still reach home, though suffering misfortune, if you will choose to restrain your own desires and curb those of your comrades when you reach the island of Thrinacia. . . . There you will find the grazing cattle and fat sheep of Helios the Sun If you leave these alone, . . . then you may still reach Ithaca, though suffering hardship and misfortune. But if you hurt them, then I predict ruin—destruction—for your ship and death for your comrades.”

The endurance rule. Odysseus said, “But pity me, . . . I have come upon you first after much suffering and toil.” In reply, Nausicaa said, “Stranger, . . . since Olympian Zeus himself dispenses fortune and happiness to men, to both the good and the bad as he wills, whether he be brave or a coward, noble or base—so I believe that surely he has given misfortune to you. Regardless, you must endure it either way.”

The need to endure. Athena said to Odysseus, “You must endure the trouble and pain—you have no choice. . . . In silence suffer all the pain and distress, and patiently bear the violent abuse of men.”

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Being weak, humans must endure. Odysseus said to Amphinomus, “Of all things that breathe and move along the earth, there’s nothing weaker than a human being—I tell you, the earth nurtures no frailer thing. For as long as the gods give him excellence, and as long as his knees stand strong, he thinks he’ll never suffer misfortune in the days to come. But when the blessed gods send him misery, he must bear it with an enduring spirit even though it is against his will.”

Craft over strength. The gods . . . beheld the artful skill of inventive Hephaestus. And glancing at the other one would say, “Bad deeds do not thrive. The slow overtakes the swift—just as now Hephaestus, slow as he is, has seized Ares, even though he is the swiftest of the gods who hold Olympus. Lame, he has seized him by cunning craft. Ares must pay the fine for adultery.”

Wisdom and cunning versus strength. Nestor said to Antilochus, “The horses making up the other teams are swifter than yours are, but the other men do not know how to plan a race better than you do. Therefore, dear son, fill your mind with wisdom and cunning of every sort so that you don’t lose out on winning a prize. The wood-cutter is far better because of wisdom and cunning than he is because of strength. And by wisdom and cunning, too, does a steersman rightly guide a swift ship that is buffeted by the winds on the wine-faced sea. And by wisdom and cunning does one charioteer prevail over another.”

Act! Patroclus said to Meriones, “Why do you . . . speak in this way? The Trojans will not fall back from the corpse just because you speak words of reproach to them. . . . Rather, in our hands is the battle’s outcome. . . . So, we must not multiply words, but we must fight.”

Act! Nestor said to the Achaeans, “Talking will get us nowhere. Stand, therefore, son of Atreus, and lead the Argives into battle.”

Strife. Strife, who causes much sorrow, rejoiced as she beheld the two armies. . . . Strife is man-slaying Ares’ sister and comrade. She starts small and grows bigger and taller until her head is sky-high and her feet drag along the earth. Strife lobbed distressful contention between them, and when it came among them, it increased their lamentation.

May strife perish! Achilles said to Thetis, “May strife utterly perish from among both the gods and men, and anger that incites a wise man to be savagely upset—an anger that drips like very sweet honey and expands like smoke in the breast of a man, growing ever larger. Even so has the lord of men Agamemnon now provoked me to anger.”

Conquering anger. Phoenix said to Achilles, “You must conquer your great and angry temper, Achilles. It is not fitting to have a ruthless heart. No, even the gods are able to bend, the gods who are better.”

Courage. “The bold and courageous man does better in all things.”

Be brave! The son of Atreus, Agamemnon, ranged among the throng of men and called out, “Be men, friends! Have a brave heart! And feel shame before one another when you are fighting. More men live when there’s such shame. But when men shamelessly flee, there’s neither glory nor strength to avert danger.”

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Cooperate for strength. “Remember, battle excellence comes even for very weak and cowardly men when they band together.”

Two is better than one. Diomedes said “If some other man were to go along with me, there would be greater hope and confidence. When two go together, one apprehends before the other whatever advantage there may be. On the other hand, if one is alone, even when he discerns something, his mind is slow, and his cunning is inadequate.”

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