

Basil the Great

Reading 1 – The Goal – How to Benefit from Ancient Literature

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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 1

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

IN BRIEF: *Given his life experience and his warm relationship with his students, Basil declares his wish to offer them direction in life by showing them how to benefit from reading ancient literature. His intention is to explain how they may maintain control of their own minds while determining what is useful and what is not.*

THERE ARE MANY considerations that summon me to advise you, young people, on what I judge to be the most excellent things—those things which I am sure will benefit you if you accept them. First, I am able to map out the safest road for those who are just beginning the journey of life. Thanks to my own age, I am in the position to do this since I have already been trained by many experiences and have participated well enough in the all-instructing vicissitudes

of life, both good and bad.¹ Consequently, I am experienced in human affairs. [2] Second, inasmuch as I come directly after your parents in natural relationship to you, I myself have for you the same feelings of kindness and goodwill that your own fathers and mothers have. And unless I am utterly wrong in my reading of you, I believe that you do not yearn for your parents when you are with me.

[3] So then, if you eagerly receive my words, you

will belong to the second category of men praised by Hesiod. And if you do not—well, I should say nothing unfriendly—so remember for yourselves the passage in which he says, “The best man is the one who sees for himself what must be done. The one who follows the road mapped out by others is also good and noble. But the one who does neither is useless in everything he does.”²

[4] Do not be surprised, then, if I say that I have discovered something profitable for you who go to school every day and encounter the famous thoughts

of ancient men through the words they have left behind. [5] Here is my advice for you, then: 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.³ Instead, you should accept from them only what is useful and know what to disregard.

From this point on, therefore, I will instruct you in what these useful things are, and how we should go about separating them from the rest.

So ends Reading 1. **See you in Reading 2,**
“How to Engage with Literature – Seeking What is Useful, Like a Bee or Gardener.”

NOTES

¹ Compare with what the historian Polybius has to say regarding the study of history and the recollection of the “catastrophes of others”—it is “the only method of learning how to bear with dignity the vicissitudes of fortune” (*Histories* 1.1.2).

² Hesiod, *Works and Days* 293-297.

³ The notion of handing over the rudder of the mind to others appears in *Clitophon* 408b, a dialogue attributed to Plato but not likely by him.

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