

Classics, Ancient and Modern: A Historian's Recommendations for Thoughtful Christian Living

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"Into the life eternal the Holy Scriptures lead us, which teach us through divine words. But so long as our immaturity forbids our understanding their deep thought, we exercise our spiritual perceptions upon profane writings, which are not altogether different, and in which we perceive the truth as it were in shadows and in mirrors. Thus we imitate those who perform the exercises of military practice, for they acquire skill in gymnastics and in dancing, and then in battle reap the reward of their training. We must needs believe that the greatest of all battles lies before us, in preparation for which we must do and suffer all things to gain power. Consequently we must be conversant with poets, with historians, with orators, indeed with all men who may further our soul's salvation. Just as dyers prepare the cloth before they apply the dye, be it purple or any other color, so indeed must we also, if we would preserve indelible the idea of the true virtue, become first initiated in the pagan lore, then at length give special heed to the sacred and divine teachings, even as we first accustom ourselves to the sun's reflection in the water, and then become able to turn our eyes upon the very sun itself."

Basil of Caesarea, *Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature*
(trans. F. Padelford)

Practice 1

The famous runner Achilles rose to his challenge:
"Royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, great tactician...
I must say what I have to say straight out,
must tell you how I feel and how all this will end—
so you won't crowd around me, one after another,
coaxing like a murmuring clutch of doves.
I hate that man like the very Gates of Death
who says one thing but hides another in his heart.
I will say it outright. That seems best to me.
Will Agamemnon win me over? Not for all the world,
nor will all the rest of Achaea's armies.
No, what lasting thanks in the long run
for warring with our enemies, on and on, no end?
One and the same lot for the man who hangs back
and the man who battles hard. The same honor waits
for the coward and the brave. The both go down to Death,
the fighter who shirks, the one who works to exhaustion.
And what's laid up for me, what pittance? Nothing—
and after suffering hardships, year in, year out,
staking my life on the mortal risks of war.

Iliad 9:372-391 (trans. R. Fagles)

The voice of his spirit paused, and I was quick to answer:
 ‘Achilles, son of Peleus, greatest of the Achaeans,
 I had to consult Tiresias, driven here by hopes
 he would help me journey home to rocky Ithaca.
 Never yet have I neared Achaea, never once
 set foot on native ground...
 my life is endless trouble.

But you, Achilles,
 there’s not a man in the world more blest than you—
 there never has been, never will be one.
 Time was, when you were alive, we Argives
 honored you as a god, and now down here, I see,
 you lord it over the dead in all your power.
 So grieve no more at dying, great Achilles.’

I reassured the ghost, but he broke out, protesting,
 ‘No winning words about death to me, shining Odysseus!
 By god, I’d rather slave on earth for another man—
 some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—
 than rule down here over all the breathless dead.

Odyssey 11:541-558 (trans. R. Fagles)

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Heidelberg Catechism 1

Practice 2

Athenians: “Then we will not make a long and unconvincing speech, full of fine phrases, to prove that our victory over Persia justifies our empire, or that we are now attacking you because you have wronged us, and we ask you not to expect to convince us by saying that you have not injured us, or that, though a colony of Lacedaemon [Sparta], you did not join her. Let each of us say what we really think and reach a practical agreement. You know and we know, as practical men, that the question of justice arises only between parties equal in strength, and that the strong do what they can, and the weak submit.”

Melians: “As you ignore justice and have made self-interest the basis of discussion, we must take the same ground, and we say that in our opinion it is in your interest to maintain a principle which is for the good of all—that anyone in danger should have just and equitable treatment and any advantage, even if not strictly his due, which he can secure by persuasion. This is your interest as much as our, for your fall would involve you in a crushing punishment that would be a lesson to the world.”

Athenians: “We have no apprehensions about the fate of our empire, if it did fall; those who rule other peoples, like the Lacedaimonians, are not formidable to a defeated enemy. Nor is it the Lacedaimonians with whom we are now contending: the danger is from subjects who of themselves may attack and conquer their rulers. But leave that danger to us to face. At the moment we shall prove that we have come in the interest of our empire and that in what we shall say we are seeking the safety of your state; for we wish you to become our subjects with least trouble to ourselves, and we would like you to survive in our interests as well as your own.”

Melians: “It may be your interest to be our masters: how can it be ours to be your slaves?”

Athenians: “By submitting you would avoid a terrible fate, and we should gain by not destroying you.”

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 5:89-93 (trans. R. Livingstone)

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Matthew 5:1-11 (NRSV)

Kindly remember that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives, and dies. It is just as possible for you to see in him a free-born man as for him to see in you a slave. As a result of the massacres in Marius’s day, many a man of distinguished birth, who was taking the first steps toward senatorial rank by service in the army, was humbled by fortune, one becoming a shepherd, another a caretaker of

a country cottage. Despise, then, if you dare, those to whose estate you may at any time descend, even when you are despising them.

I do not wish to involve myself in too large a question, and to discuss the treatment of slaves, towards whom we Romans are excessively haughty, cruel, and insulting. But this is the kernel of my advice: Treat your inferiors as you would be treated by your betters...

Seneca, *Moral Epistle 77* (trans. R. Gummere)

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.

Galatians 5:13-15