

De unione ecclesiarum

musings on Church and State

St. Basil's Sermon to the Rich

Note: The following sermon *To the Rich* was probably delivered in the year 368, when most of Asia Minor was struck by a severe drought which caused great hardship, intensified by the greed of some who held back grain to inflate prices. At this time, St. Basil was a priest in the diocese of Caesarea, overseeing a very active ministry to the poor and ill; St. Gregory the Theologian describes Basil's hospital at the gates of Caesarea as a virtual "city" (or. 43.63). The Greek text of Basil's sermon is found in J.-P. Migne's *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 31, cols. 277C-304C.

St. Basil the Great

(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basil_of_Caesarea)

Ὁμιλία πρὸς τοὺς πλουτοῦντας : Sermon to the Rich

And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honor thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet? Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me. But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions. (Matthew 19:16-22.)

1. We heard about this young man the day before yesterday, and, if you were listening attentively, you should be able now to remember the things we were examining then. First, that this is not the same person as the lawyer we read of in Luke (Lk 10:25). For that man was a tempter, inquiring insincerely; but this one asks soundly, though he fails to accept the answer with a ready obedience. For he would not have gone away sorrowful after receiving such an answer from the Lord if he had put forth his questions cynically in the first place. Hence, it seemed to us that this man's behavior was confused: partly commendable, as the passage shows, and partly wretched and altogether hopeless. For to know the one who is truly the Teacher, and, disregarding the Pharisees' posturings, and the lawyers' opinion, and the mob of scribes, to ascribe this name to him who is the only true and good Teacher, so much is praiseworthy. And moreover it is a worthy endeavor to show concern over how one is to inherit eternal life: this, too, must be accepted. But what in fact proves that his whole intent was not to seek what is truly good, but only to snoop about for what would please the crowd, is this: when he had learned from the true Teacher saving truths, he didn't write them in his heart, nor did he put the teachings to practice, but he went off depressed, clouded by a schooling in avarice. Again, this demonstrates moral inconsistency and self-contradiction. You call him teacher, and you won't do his lessons? You acknowledge him to be good, and what he gives you you throw away? But, surely, he who is good supplies good things; this is obvious. Although what you ask about is eternal life, you give proof of being utterly addicted to the enjoyment of this present life. What, after all, is this hard, heavy, burdensome word which the Teacher has put forward? "Sell what you have, and give to the poor." If he had laid upon you agricultural toils, or hazardous mercantile ventures, or so many other troubles which are incidental to the life of the wealthy, then you'd have had cause for sorrow, taking the order badly; but when he calls you by so easy a road, without toil or sweat, to show yourself an inheritor of eternal life, you are not glad for the ease of salvation, but you go away pained at heart and mourning, making useless for yourself all that you had labored at beforehand. For if, as you say, you've not murdered, nor committed adultery, nor stolen, nor witnessed against someone a false witness, you make such exertions unprofitable to you when you fail to add on the remainder, by which alone you might be able to enter into the kingdom of God. And if a physician had declared to you that he could fully mend you of some physical disfigurement you had by nature or disease, wouldn't you have heard him gladly? But when the great Physician of souls desires to make you whole of your deficiencies in things that matter most, you don't accept the favor, but mourn and put on a gloomy face.

Now, you are obviously very far from having observed one commandment at least, and you falsely swore that you had kept it, namely, that you've loved your neighbor as yourself. For see: the Lord's commandment proves you to be utterly lacking in real love. For if what you've claimed were true, that you have kept from your youth the commandment of love, and have given to each person as much as to yourself, how has it come to you, this abundance of money? For it takes wealth to care for the needy: a little paid out for the necessity of each person you take on, and all at once everything gets parceled out, and is spent upon them. Thus, the man who loves his neighbor as himself will have acquired no more than what his neighbor has; whereas you, visibly, have acquired a lot. Where has this come from? Or is it not clear, that it comes from making your private enjoyment more important than helping other people? Therefore, however much you exceed in wealth, so much so do you fall short in love: else long since you'd have taken care to be divorced from your money, if you had loved your neighbor. But now your money sticks to you closer than the limbs of your body, and he who would separate you from it grieves you more than someone who would cut off your vital parts. For if you had clothed the naked, if you had given your bread to the hungry, if you had opened your doors to every stranger, if you'd become a father to orphans, if you had suffered together with all the powerless, what possessions would now be causing you despondency? Why should you now be upset to put aside what's left, when you'd long since have taken care to distribute these things to the needy? Now, on a market day, no one is sorry to barter his goods and get in return such things as he has need of; but to the extent that he purchases things of greater value with what is cheaper, he rejoices, having gotten a better deal than his trading-partner. But you, by contrast, mourn, in giving gold, and silver, and goods — that is, offering stones and dust — in order to obtain the blessed life.

2. But how do you make use of money? By dressing in expensive clothing? Won't two yards of tunic suffice you, and the covering of one coat satisfy all your need of clothes? But is it for food's sake that you have such a demand for wealth? One bread-loaf is enough to fill a belly. Why are you sad, then? What have you been deprived of? The status that comes from wealth? But if you would stop seeking earthly status, you should then find the true, resplendent kind that would conduct you into the kingdom of heaven. But what you love is simply to possess wealth, even if you derive no help from it. Now everyone knows that an obsession for useless things is mindless. Just so, what I am going to say should seem to you no greater paradox; and it is utterly, absolutely true. When wealth is dispersed, in the way the Lord advises, it naturally stays put; but when held back it is transferred to another. If you hoard it, you won't keep it; if you scatter, you won't lose. For (says the scripture), "He has dispersed, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever" (Ps 112:9).

But it isn't for the sake of clothing or food that riches are a matter of such concern to so many people; but, by a certain wily artifice of the devil, countless pretexts of expenditure are proposed to the rich, so that they strive for superfluous, useless things as though they were necessary, and so that nothing measures up to their conception of what they should spend. For they divide up their wealth with a view to present and future uses; and they assign the one portion to themselves, and the other to their children. Next, they subdivide their expense account for various spending purposes. Hear now what sort of arrangements they make. Let some of our assets be accounted as liquid, others as fixed; and let liquid assets exceed the limits of necessity; let this much be on hand for household extravagance, let that much take care of showy visits to town. Let this tend to whoever goes on exotic voyages, and let that furnish the one who stays at home with

an opulent lifestyle which will be envied by all. It amazes me, how they can pile on notions of superfluities. There are countless chariots, some for transporting goods, others for carrying themselves, covered with bronze and silver. A multitude of horses, and such as have pedigrees of well-bred fathers, as among people. And some of these carry the men about town, dissipating them; others are for hunting; others have been trained for the road. Reins, belts, collars, all of silver, all inlaid with gold. Saddles of genuine purple: they primp up the horses like brides. A plethora of asses, distinguished according to color, with men to hold the reins, some running before, some following after. An unlimited number of other servants striving to fulfill every outlandish wish: stewards, treasurers, gardeners, workers skilled in every art hitherto invented, whether for necessary purposes or for enjoyment and luxury. Butchers, bakers, winepourers, huntsmen, sculptors, painters, artisans of every pleasure. Herds of camels, some bearing burdens, others put to graze; herds of horses and of cattle, flocks of sheep, swine; the herdsmen of these; with land sufficient to feed them all, and which continually augments the wealth with additional revenue; baths in town; baths in the country; houses gleaming round with every variety of marble, in one place Phrygian stone, elsewhere tiles from Laconia or Thessaly. And of these houses, some are heated in winter, others are cooled in the summer. A floor decorated with mosaic gems, gold laid out on the roof. And however much of the walls eludes the marble tiling is adorned with choice works of pictorial art.

3. Since, then, the wealth still overflows, it gets buried underground, stashed away in secret places. For (they say), "what's to come is uncertain, we may face unexpected needs." Therefore it is equally uncertain whether you will have any use for your buried gold; it is not uncertain, however, what shall be the penalty of inveterate inhumanity. For when you failed, with your thousand notions, wholly to expend your wealth, you then concealed it in the earth. A strange madness, that, when gold lies hidden with other metals, one ransacks the earth; but after it has seen the light of day, it disappears again beneath the ground. From this, I perceive, it happens to you that in burying your money you bury also your heart. "For where your treasure is," it is said, "there will your heart be also" (Mt 6:21). This is why the commandments cause sorrow; because they have nothing to do with useless spending sprees, they make life unbearable for you. And it seems to me that the sickness of this young man, and of those who resemble him, is much like that of a traveller, who, longing to visit some city and having just about finished his way there, lodges at an inn outside the walls, where, upon some trifling impulse, he is averted, and so both makes his previous effort useless, and deprives himself of a view of the wonders of the city. And of such a nature are those who engage to do the other commandments, then turn around for the sake of gathering wealth. I've seen many who will fast, pray, groan, and display every kind of pious exertion, so long as it costs them nothing, but who will not so much as toss a red cent to those who are suffering. What good do they get from their remaining virtue? For the kingdom of heaven does not admit them; for, as it says, "It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Lk 18:25). But, while this statement is so plain, and its speaker so unerring, scarcely anyone is persuaded by it. "So how are we supposed to live without possessions?" they say. "What kind of life will that be, selling everything, being dispossessed of everything?" Don't ask me for the rationale of the Master's commandments. He who lays down the law knows how to bring even what is incapable into accord with the law. But as for you, your heart is tested as on a balance, to see if it shall incline towards the true life or towards immediate gratification. For it is right for those who are prudent in their reasonings to regard the use of money as a matter of stewardship, not of selfish enjoyment; and those who lay it aside

ought to rejoice as though separated from things alien, not be embittered as though deprived of what is nearest and dearest. So why become depressed? Why are you so sick at heart, when you hear the words, "Sell your possessions"? For if, on the one hand, these possessions could follow you into the afterlife, they should not therefore be highly valued, when next to the prizes that await there they should be thrown into the shade; on the other hand, if they must stay here, why don't we sell them and get back from them what can be gained? When you give up gold, and acquire a horse, you are not in poor spirits; but when it comes to giving up things corruptible, and receiving in return the kingdom of heaven, you weep, and deny the asker, and shake your head at the gift, having your mind set upon a thousand and one ways of spending money.

4. What answer shall you make to the judge, you who dress walls, but will not clothe a man; who spruce up horses, and overlook an unfashionable brother; who leave grain to rot, but will not feed the starving; who bury your money and despise the oppressed? And truly, if you dwell with a covetous wife, the sickness is redoubled: she turns up the flame on luxuries, she multiplies hedonisms, and provokes overactive longings, while she sets her fancy upon various stones: pearls, and emeralds, and sapphires; as also gold, some forged, some woven: aggravating the disease with every form of bad taste. For it's not a part-time occupation, these concerns, but night and day are caught up in their cares. And a thousand parasites, worming themselves in via these lusts, bring in the dyers, goldsmiths, perfumers, weavers, embroiderers. They give a man no time to breathe, by reason of his wife's continual demands. No money can suffice to serve womanly desires, not if rivers should overflow with it. They hunt for exotic foreign perfumes, like that from the woodland olive, or from sea flowers, the shell-fish, the pinna, more plenteous than the wool of sheep. And gold, festooned with highly precious stones, is made for them into a pendant for the forehead or for the neck; and other gold is for belts, and other binds the hands and feet. For lovers of gold are happy to be bound in handcuffs, so long as it's gold that binds them. When therefore will he find time to care for his soul, he that is a servant to a woman's lusts? For, like storms and tempests to somewhat rotten boats, so the evil dispositions of wives cause the weak souls of their husbands to go under.

Accordingly, when a man and his wife drag their wealth about, this way and that, to such ends, winning each other over in the discovering of vanities, no wonder the wealth hasn't the opportunity to stoop aside to other people. When you hear it said, "Sell your possessions, and give to the poor," so that you might have provisions for heavenly enjoyment, you go away grieving; but if you should hear, "Give money for pampering your wife, give to stonemasons, carpenters, mosaic pebble-layers, portrait-painters," you rejoice as though you had acquired some high-rated annuities. Do you see these walls here, broken down by time, whose remnants, like watchtowers, peer out across the length of the city? How many paupers were there in town when these were being raised, who, because of the attention given to such things, were ignored by the wealthy of that day? Where then is now the wonderful monument of their labors, and where is the man who devoted himself to such great works? Isn't the one now buried and dissolved, like sandcastles children love to build, while the other lies in hell, regretting his care for nullities? Let your heart be big: but as for walls, both small and large fulfill the same function. When I enter the house of a man who is tasteless and nouveau-riche, and see it shimmering with every kind of flowery crass trinket, I apprehend that this man has acquired nothing more valuable in his life than visible things, but, while he gives what is soulless a facelift, he possesses an unbeautified soul. Tell me, what better service do silver beds and silver tables, ivory sofas and ivory chairs

provide, when because of these things wealth fails to pass over to the poor, and thousands huddle about the door, all of them letting loose a miserable howl? You, however, refuse to give, declaring that it's impossible to satisfy those who ask. With your tongue you excuse yourself, but by your own hand you're convicted; for even in silence your hand proclaims your falsehood, sparkling round from the ring on your finger. How many people could one of your fingers release from debt? How many broken-down homes could be rebuilt? One box of your clothing would be able to dress the whole shivering populace; but you, unfeeling, dismiss the needy, not fearing the just repayment of the Judge. You have not shown mercy, you shall not receive mercy; you've not opened your home, you shall be evicted from the kingdom. You haven't given of your bread; neither shall you receive eternal life.

5. "But I'm poor!" you say, and I'll vouch for you. For he is poor who lacks much. And much are you lacking, because of unfulfillable desire. To ten talents you seek to add another ten, and when there are twenty, you seek to add so many more; and always the addition, far from putting the urge to rest, whets the appetite. For just as with alcoholics a fresh bottle of wine becomes an excuse for drinking, so also those who are recently grown rich, and have acquired great possessions, desire more of the same, nursing the sickness with perpetual addition; and in their love they are carried to opposites. For having so much here and now fails to bring them happiness, since what they don't have they grieve over, thinking they lack it; so that their soul is forever being worn away by cares born of a struggle for superiority and excess. They ought to be happy and contented, being well-off in so much; but they bear it ill and are pained that they still fall short of one or two of the super-rich. When they catch up with this tycoon, immediately they yearn to be made equal to somebody richer; and if they outdo him, the desire is transferred to another. Just as those who climb a ladder lift their foot always one step above and do not stop till they've reached the top, in the same way these people do not cease from their drive for power, till, having risen very high, a fall from their sublimity dashes them to the ground. For human benefit, the Creator of all things made the red starling an insatiable bird; but you yourself, to the injury of many, have made your own soul insatiable. So much as the eye sees, so much does the covetous man desire. "The eye is not filled with seeing" (Eccles 1:8), and the moneylover is not satisfied with getting. "Hell does not say, Enough" (Prov 27:20; 30:16); neither does the covetous man ever say, Enough. When will you make use of your present things? When will you enjoy them, you who are forever involved in a struggle to acquire? "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field," so that they may take from their neighbor (Isa 5:8). But what do you do? Don't you seek a thousand quarrels, in order to take what belongs to your neighbor? My neighbor's house, they say, blocks the sunlight; they make too much noise; they hold strange views; or on the grounds of some other chance accusation, you harass them, and kick them out, and drag them into court, and hound them, never ceasing till you have succeeded in turning them into vagabonds. What was it that killed Naboth the Jezreelite (cf. 1 Kgs 21)? Was it not Ahab's desire for his vineyard? He's a wicked neighbor in the country, and a wicked neighbor in town, the covetous man. The sea knows its bounds, and night doesn't overstep its ancient limits; but the covetous man has no respect for time, acknowledges no boundaries, yields not to order and succession, but mimics the force of fire: he catches hold of everything, he feeds on everything. And just as rivers, flowing out a ways from their first beginnings, little by little receive irresistible augmentation, and with violent onrush sweep away whatever stands in their course: so also those who have come into great power, taking from those already oppressed the ability to do more injustice, enslave those remaining together with those already wronged; and the profit of

wickedness provides them with additional power. For when those already hurt are constrained to make good their losses, they bring harm and injury upon others. Nothing withstands the force of wealth: all things succumb to its tyranny, all things cringe before its dominion — since each wronged person has a greater incentive not to be afflicted by some additional wrong than to seek redress of prior damages. It drives the yoke of oxen, it ploughs, sows, reaps the things that don't belong to it. If you dissent, look for thrashings; if you howl, and write of enormities, you're apt to be seized, and to end up behind bars; hired stooges stand waiting, ready to bring your life in danger. And you account it a favor when, as they add yet more along these lines, you're left out of the operation.

6. I would like you to take a short vacation from works of iniquity, and give your calculations a rest, so that you might seriously consider the kind of end towards which these preoccupations are heading. You have such and such an amount of arable land, and of wooded land so much more: hills, plains, valleys, rivers, streams. What, then, comes next? Don't six feet of earth, in all, await you? Won't the weight of a few stones suffice to keep your weary flesh? What is it that you toil over? To what end do you work iniquity? Why do your hands glean a thing that yields no fruit? Yes, and if only it were merely fruitless, and not also fuel for eternal fire! Will you never sober up from this intoxication? never heal your reasonings? never come to yourself? Won't you set before your eyes the judgment seat of Christ? What will you have to say for yourself, when there shall stand about you in a circle those you have wronged, all of them crying against you before the righteous Judge? What will you do? What lawyers will you bribe? What witnesses will you produce? How will you corrupt that wholly undeceivable Judge? You'll find no slick talker there, no verbal spin, to steal the strength of the Judge of truth. No lackeys follow you, nor money, nor dignity of place; deserted by friends, deserted of helpers, without an advocate, without defense, you will be left utterly ashamed, abashed, dejected, abandoned, speechless. For all around, in whatever direction you turn your gaze, you clearly see the images of your misdeeds: here the tears of orphans, there a widow's groanings, elsewhere the poor you stepped on, servants you tore to shreds, neighbors you enraged: all will withstand you; the wicked choir of your evil deeds will tangle you in snares. For just as the shadow trails the body, so do sins trail souls, giving a precise outline of their actions. Thus there is no prevarication there, but the mouth and every shameless thing are stopped. Each man's own actions are called to witness against him, not by sounding a voice, but according to the very appearances of whatever was done. How should I set before your eyes these horrors? If you hear, if you are stirred, be mindful of that day in which "the wrath of God shall be revealed from heaven" (Rom 1:18). Bear in mind Christ's glorious coming, when the dead shall arise, "they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (Jn 5:29). Then shall there be eternal shame to sinners, "a fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries" (Heb 10:27). Let these things cause you to mourn, and do not mourn because of the commandment. How should I put you out of cheer? What should I say? You don't desire the kingdom? You don't fear hell? Where shall a healing be found for your soul? If horrors don't terrify, if glories don't attract, we are talking to a heart of stone.

7. Man, look straight at wealth, behold its nature. Why should you get excited about gold? Gold's a stone, silver's a stone, a pearl's a stone: each one of these stones is a stone: chrysolith, the beryl, agate, hyacinth, amethyst, the jasper. This, then, is wealth's bouquet; and of these flowers you stash some away, hiding them, covering the stones' brilliance in darkness; others you wear,

looking effeminate with your glimmering gems. Tell me, what good does it do you to bind up your hand with stones, in haute couture? Aren't you embarrassed to be craving little stones, like women in labor? They also gnaw on small stones; and you, too, want to lick up gems, seeking sardonyx, and jasper, and amethyst. What trendy dresser ever managed to extend his life a single day? For whom did death ever show consideration, in deference to wealth? Or what disease is kept off by money? How long, gold? thou reel of souls, fish-hook of death, and bait of sin? How long, wealth? thou pretext of war, for whose sake arms are forged, and swords are sharpened? For love of it relatives ignore nature, brothers eye each other murderously; for love of wealth the wilderness breeds bandits, the seas, pirates, the cities, sycophants. Who is the father of lies? Who creates forgery? Who is the parent of perjury? Isn't it wealth, the compulsion for this?

People, what's the matter with you? Who has done this to you, to turn your things into a conspiracy against you? "I need them for my life-style." Well, and hasn't your money furnished provisions for wrongdoing? "It's a form of insurance." Isn't it rather a means of self-destruction? "But money's a necessity, on account of the children." A fine excuse for greed: you parade your kids, but gratify your own desires. I do not accuse the innocent man: he has his Master, and his responsibilities; from another he received life, from himself he finds means of staying alive. But wasn't this Gospel passage written also for married folk: "If you want to be perfect, sell your belongings, and give to the poor" (Mt 19:21)? When you asked the Lord for a large family, when you prayed that you might be a father of children, did you then add the following: "Give me children, so that I may ignore your commandments. Give me children, so that I might not attain to the kingdom of heaven"? And who will guarantee you of your child's intentions, that what you give will be rightly used? For wealth turns out to be, for many people, a minister of impurity. Or don't you hear Ecclesiastes, who says, "I have seen a sore malaise, riches kept in store for one who comes after a man, to his hurt" (Eccles 5:13). And again, "I left it for the man who should come after me. And who knows if he shall be a wise man or a fool?" (Eccles 2:18 f.) See to this, then, lest, having accumulated your wealth through countless pains, you prepare it for others as material for sins, and then find yourself doubly punished, both for what you did yourself, and for the means you gave to others. Doesn't your own soul belong to you more intimately than any child? Isn't it joined to you by a more intimate closeness than anything else? Give to it the first privileges of inheritance, provide it with a richer living; and afterwards distribute to your children what they need to get by in life. Often it happens that children who have received nothing from their parents have gone on to establish estates for themselves; but as for your soul, if you don't take care of it, who will pity it?

8. So much for fathers: what's been said has been said. Now, what plausible causes of stinginess shall the childless fling at us? "I don't sell my possessions, neither give to the poor, on account of life's necessities." Therefore the Lord is not your teacher, neither does the Gospel direct your life, but you are yourself your own lawgiver. See into what a danger you fall, when reasoning like this. For if the Lord has ordered these things as necessary to you, and you, for your part, write them off as impossible, you say nothing less than that you yourself are more intelligent than the Lawgiver. "But," you say, "after I've enjoyed these things all my days, when my life is over I will cause the poor to inherit the things I formerly possessed, and in a written testament I will declare them to be the owners." When you no longer exist among human beings, then you become a lover of humanity. When I see you dead, then I shall be able to say that you love your brother. A great many thanks to you for this noble gesture, that, when you are lying in the tomb, and decomposing

into earth, then you grow substantial with spending, and become big-hearted. Tell me, which years will you be looking to receive wages for, those during your life, or those when you're dead? But when you were alive you passed your time wallowing in life's luxuries, floating along with your delicacies, and wouldn't bear to cast a glance to the poor. When you die, then, what sort of action is ascribed to you? What sort of wage is owed you for labor? Show the works, then ask for the returns. Nobody does business after the market closes, neither after the games end does anyone come up to be crowned, neither after a war does anyone prove his valor. Neither, then, is godliness to be postponed till after life, as is obvious.

Again, you promise to write up your benefactions in black and white. So who shall announce to you the time of your departure? Who will be your actuary, to guarantee the mode of your death? How many have been snatched away in violent accidents, not even able to let go a cry in their pains? How many have been made delirious by fever? Why then do you wait for a time when you may no longer be in command of your faculties? The night is deep, the sickness is crushing, and there is no one to help; and he who sits by, waiting for an inheritance, is ready to manipulate everything towards his own profit, turning all your intentions to no purpose. At that time, turning your gaze here and there, and seeing the void that surrounds you, you will perceive your foolishness: then you will groan for the mindlessness you showed in putting off the commandment, at that hour when your tongue lies slack, and your trembling hand is jerked by spasms, since neither by voice nor in writing shall you be able to indicate your intent. And indeed, even if you've written everything clearly, and have expressly declared all things by voice, a single letter interpolated into the text suffices to change its meaning: one counterfeit seal, two or three false witnesses, and the whole inheritance is passed over to others.

9. Why then do you deceive yourself, misusing wealth now for carnal enjoyment, and promising for the future things which will no longer be under your control? As this sermon has shown, it is an evil counsel that says: Living, I'll enjoy my pleasures; dead, I'll do what's been commanded. Abraham also says to you, "You received your good things during your life" (Lk 16:25). The narrow, straightened way does not admit you, since you haven't put off the bulkiness of your wealth. You departed still carrying it; you didn't toss it aside, as you'd been directed. While you lived, you set yourself above the commandment; after death and decomposition, then you value the commandment above your enemies. For, in order that so and so should receive nothing, it says, "Let the Lord receive...." And what should we call this, revenge against your enemies, or love of your neighbor? Read what it says in your will: "I wanted to continue to live and enjoy the things that were mine." So death deserves the thanks, not you. For if you were immortal, you would never have remembered the commandments. "Be not deceived: God is not mocked" (Gal 6:7). Dead things are not brought to a sacrificial altar: bring forth a living sacrifice. Unacceptable is the one who makes an offering from his superfluity. But in your case, those things you had in excess all your life are what you present to your benefactor. If you dare not welcome honorable men to your home with kitchen leftovers, how dare you offer leftovers to appease God?

Consider then the end of covetousness, you who are rich, and cease from your passionate affection towards legal tender. However much you adore wealth, to that very extent you should rather leave not one thing behind that belongs to you. You want everything to be your own, you want to bring everything with you. But possibly your own servants will not clothe you for the world to come, but will skimp on your burial, cheerfully bestowing the savings upon your

inheritors. Or perhaps they will philosophize against you then: "How tasteless and inappropriate," they'll say, "to beautify a corpse, and to give expensive burial to someone who can no longer perceive. What? should we not in fact accessorize present company with expensive, swanky apparel, rather than bury a dead person's most valuable garments along with him? What good is a monument over the grave, and a pompous burial, and useless expenditure? It is right that things needful for life be made use of by the living." Such things they'll say, getting back at you for your meanness, and using your effects to ingratiate themselves with your heirs.

Get a head start on them, then. Prepare your own self for burial. Piety makes a lovely winding-sheet. Come away fully dressed: make wealth your peculiar beauty. Take it with you. Believe in the good counsel, in Christ who loves you, who for us became poor, so that through his poverty we might become rich, who gave himself as a ransom for us. Whether, then, because, as he is wise, he immediately sees what is helpful to us, let us trust in him; or because he loves us, let us pray to him; or because he does us good, let us do good in turn. And let us, in any case, do the things he has directed us to do, so that we may become inheritors of the everlasting life which is in the same Christ, to whom be glory and power, world without end. Amen.

10 Responses to "St. Basil's Sermon to the Rich"

St. Basil the Economist « De unione ecclesiarum Says:

October 25, 2008 at 12:52 pm

[...] is of St. Basil the Great's Ὁμιλία πρὸς τοὺς πλουτοῦντας, his Sermon to the Rich; because of its length, I have given it a page by itself. It stands, along with the sermon On the [...]

Saint Cyprian on rich and poor « A vow of conversation Says:

November 24, 2008 at 10:11 am

[...] against the rich remind me of the equally harsh words of Saint Basil in his Sermon to the Rich, a translation of which Peter Gilbert posted and commented on a while back. There are interesting parallels [...]

Gunabalan Says:

December 8, 2008 at 9:35 am

A challenging and outspoken message that speaks directly to the 'global meltdown' proponents.

Fr. John Santor Says:

October 7, 2009 at 12:08 pm

Thank you for publishing this on the Web.

Can you direct me to the exact quotation for St. Basil, which I'll paraphrase: "You with a second coat in your closet, it does not belong to you. You have stolen it from the poor man who is shivering in the cold."

Thank you.

bekkos Says:

October 8, 2009 at 3:53 pm

Dear Fr. John,

I looked today for the passage you mention. I think I have found it; it is at PG 31, 277A, in St. Basil's homily "On the saying of the Gospel According to Luke, 'I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones,' and on greed." At least, Basil says there something very much like what you paraphrase above; I'd be surprised if it weren't the correct passage.

Instead of citing the passage here, I will post it to the blog, to make sure as many people read it as possible. Thanks for directing me to this text.

Peter

C. Paul Schroeder Says:

November 12, 2009 at 11:01 am

Dear Peter,

In searching for something else, I inadvertently stumbled upon your translation of Basil's *To the Rich*. I had no idea another English translation was out there! I just published a translation of this homily, with several others (I Will Tear Down my Barns, In Time of Famine and Drought, Against Those who Lend at Interest, and the Pseudo-Basilian homily On Mercy and Justice), in a new volume *On Social Justice: St. Basil the Great*. It is #38 in the SVS Press Popular Patristics series. Thought this might interest you.

Peace and Blessings,

C. Paul Schroeder

bekkos Says:

November 12, 2009 at 1:00 pm

Dear Paul,

It interests me very much! Congratulations on your new book; I will want to purchase a copy of it. Many thanks for telling me about it, and for giving the English-speaking public a better idea of what the early Church taught about our economic and social responsibilities.

In Christ,
Peter Gilbert

Joel Says:

December 13, 2009 at 11:24 pm

Peter,

Thank you for this valuable translation. It is great for people like me who don't read Greek.

Would you consider releasing this into the public domain so that it can be freely redistributed? I have a newsletter that I produce that I would like to put it into.

Joel

bekkos Says:

December 15, 2009 at 6:29 pm

Joel,

If you want to reprint it in your newsletter, I promise you I won't sue. Just give proper notice of the translator and of the website where you found it.

Peace.

Peter Gilbert

Joel Says:

December 18, 2009 at 8:29 pm

Peter,

Great! Thanks for that.

Joel

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