

Homily on the Words "Be Attentive to Yourself"

By Saint Basil the Great

1. God who has created us has given us the use of language, that we may reveal the plans of our heart to each other and through our shared nature we may each give a share to our neighbor, as if from some treasury, showing forth our intentions from what lies hidden in our heart. For if we spent our lives with naked soul, we would immediately communicate with each other through our thoughts; but since our soul is concealed under veils of flesh as it produces thoughts, words and names are necessary to make public the things lying in the depth. Accordingly, since when our thought takes meaningful voice, as if carried in a ferry by our discourse, crossing the air it passes from the speaker to the hearer; and if it finds the sea calm and quiet, the discourse comes to anchor in the ears of the students as if in tranquil harbors untroubled by storms; but if as a kind of rough upsurge the clamor of the hearers blows adversely, it will be dissolved as it is shipwrecked in the air. Therefore make it calm for the discourse through silence. For perhaps something may appear useful, having things you can take with you. The word of truth is hard to catch and is easily able to escape those who do not examine it attentively, so the Spirit directs that it be brief and modest, to signify much in a few words, and through conciseness be easy to retain in the memory. For indeed the excellence proper to discourse is neither to hide the things signified in obscurity~ nor to be redundant and empty, turning in all directions while overflowing randomly.

So what we have just read from the books of Moses is truly of this kind, which all of you who are diligent have remembered, unless possibly through brevity it has escaped your notice. The reading is as follows: *"Be attentive to yourself, lest an unlawful word come to be hidden in your heart"* [Deut 15-9]. We human beings are easily led toward sins of the mind. Therefore he who has formed our hearts individually, knowing that the greatest part of sin is accomplished in impulse through what is in our intention, has prescribed purity in our directive faculty as primary for us. For that by which we most readily sin was worthy of the most guarding and care. For as the physicians with greater foresight safeguard the weaker parts of bodies by precautionary advice ahead of time, so the universal protector and true physician of souls, who knows most of all where we are more liable to slide toward sin, has anticipated this with stronger guarding. For actions done through the body need time and opportunity and labors and co-workers and other requirements. But the movements of the mind operate timelessly, are completed without weariness, are constructed effortlessly, and are convenient on every occasion. Perhaps someone haughty who looks down on propriety, though clothed in the outward appearance of sobriety and sitting among many who call him blessed for his virtue, has run away in his mind to the place of sin in a hidden movement of his heart. He sees in imagination the things he seeks, he again imprints there some indecent liaison, and entirely within the secret workshop of the heart he paints a clear picture of the pleasure for himself. He has accomplished the sin inwardly and is without witness, unknown to all, until there comes the revelation of the hidden things of darkness and the disclosure of the intentions of hearts. Therefore be on guard lest at any time there come a lawless hidden word in your heart [Deut 15-9]. For one who looks at

a woman with desire has already committed adultery in his heart [Mt 5.28]. Hence the actions of the body are impeded by many things, but those who sin by an intention brought about by the swiftness of thoughts still have the sin. Therefore, where the sharp point of transgression is, a safeguard has swiftly been given to us. For Scripture has testified, "lest at any time there come a lawless hidden word in your heart." However, let us return to the starting point of our discourse.

2. "Be attentive to yourself," it says. Each of the animals by nature has from the God who has constructed all things the resources to guard its own structure. And you would find, if you observed carefully, that most of the non-rational animals have without training an aversion to what is harmful, and again by a certain natural attraction-.they hasten toward the enjoyment of beneficial things. Therefore also God who is educating us has given us this great precept, that as this comes to them by nature, it comes to us by the help of reason, and as they are set right without reflection, we may accomplish this through the attentive and continuous care of thoughts. And guarding strictly the resources given us by God, let us flee sin as the non-rational animals flee harmful foods but pursue justice as they pursue nourishing grass. So be attentive to yourself, that you may be able to distinguish what is harmful from what is healthful. But attentiveness is of two kinds: on the one hand we can gaze intently with the bodily eyes at visible things, and on the other hand by its noetic faculty the soul can apply itself to the contemplation of incorporeal things. If we say that the precept refers to the activity of the eyes, immediately we would find it to be impossible. For how could one grasp the whole of oneself with one's eye? For neither can the eye be used to see itself, nor to reach the head, nor to see the back, nor the face, nor the arrangement of the internal organs deep within. Now it is impious to say that the precepts of the Spirit are impossible. It remains therefore to hear what is prescribed as applying to the activity of the mind. Be attentive to yourself, that is, observe yourself carefully from every side. Let the eye of your soul be sleepless to guard yourself. You walk in the midst of snares [Sir 9.131. Hidden traps have been set by the enemy in many places. Therefore observe everything, "that you may be saved like a gazelle from traps and like a bird from snares" [Prov 6.5]. For because of keenness of sight the gazelle is not taken by the traps, whence also it gives its name to its own sharp-sightedness [an untranslatable play on words]; and the bird by lightness of wing ascends higher than the plots of the hunters, when it is alert. Therefore, see that you do not show yourself as worse than the non-rational animals in guarding yourself, lest when caught in the snares you become prey to the devil, taken captive by him into his will [2 TiM 2.26].

3 Be attentive, then, to yourself, that is, neither to what is yours nor to what is around you, but be attentive only to yourself. For we ourselves are one thing, and what is ours is another, and the things around us are another. Thus we are the soul and the mind, through which we have come into being according to the image of the Creator, but the body is ours and the sense perceptions through it, while around us are possessions, skills, and the other equipment of life. What then does the Word say? Do not be attentive to the flesh, nor pursue its good in every manner, health and beauty and enjoyment of pleasures and long life, nor admire wealth and reputation and power. As for those

things that are of service to you in this temporary life, do not regard them as great. Through concern about these things do not neglect the life that comes first for you, but be attentive to yourself, that is, to your soul. Adorn it and take care of it, so that all the filth befalling it from wickedness may be removed through attention, and all the shame due to evil may be cleansed away, but adorn and brighten it with all the beauty that comes from virtue. Examine what sort of being you are. Know your own nature, that your body is mortal but your soul is immortal, and that our life is twofold in kind. One kind is proper to the flesh, quickly passing by, while the other is akin to the soul, not admitting of circumscription. Therefore be attentive to yourself, neither remaining in mortal things as if they were eternal, nor despising eternal things as if they were passing. Look down on the flesh, for it is passing away; take care of the soul, for it is something immortal. Understand yourself with all exactness, that you may know what gift to apportion to each for the flesh nourishment and coverings, and for the soul doctrines of piety~ education in courtesy, training in virtue, correction of passions. Do not fatten the body excessively and do not seek a lot of flesh. For since "the flesh lusts against the spirit and the spirit against the flesh" [Gal 5.17], and these are opposite to each other, see that you do not add to the flesh and grant great power to what is inferior. For as in the turning of scales, if you weigh down one side you truly make the opposite side lighter, so also with body and soul, the increase of one necessarily produces a decrease in the other. For when the body enjoys well-being and becomes heavy through much fleshiness, the mind is necessarily inactive and slack in its proper activity; but when the soul is in good condition and through care of its own goods is raised up toward its proper greatness, following this the state of the body withers.

4. The same precept is both useful to the sick and very appropriate to the healthy. In regard to the sick, physicians recommend to the ill to be attentive to themselves and to disregard none of the things heard to bring healing. Likewise also the Word, a physician for our souls, thoroughly cures the soul afflicted by sin through this small aid. Be attentive, then, to yourself, that you may also receive the aid of healing proportionate to your offense. If the sin is great and severe, you need many confessions, bitter tears, earnestness in vigils, continual fasting. If the transgression is light and tolerable, let the repentance be equal to it. Only be attentive to yourself, that you may recognize the strength and illness of your soul. For many through lack of attention get great and incurable illnesses, and they do not themselves know that they are ill. Great is the usefulness of this precept also for strength in deeds; thus the same thing both heals the sick and makes perfect the healthy.

For each of us who are disciples of the Word is a servant in one particular activity appointed to us among those in accord with the Gospel. For in the great house of the church there are not only vessels of every kind, gold and silver and wood and earthenware [2 Tim 2.20], but also skills of all kinds. For the house of God, which is the church of the living God [1 Tim 3.15] has hunters, travelers, architects, builders, farmers, shepherds, athletes, soldiers. This brief word is appropriate to all of them, producing in each both exactitude of action and eagerness of will. You are a hunter sent by the Lord, who said, "Behold, I am sending many hunters, and they will hunt them atop every moun-

tain" [Jer 16.16]. Be carefully attentive to yourself, lest perhaps the prey flee from you, that being caught by the word of truth those made savage by evil may be led to the Savior. You are a traveler like the one who prayed, "Make straight my steps" [Ps 118-133]. Be attentive to yourself, lest you turn aside from the road, lest you turn away to the right or left [cf Deut 17.20]; go on the royal road. Let the architect firmly lay the foundation of faith, which is Christ Jesus. Let the builder watch what he builds on it, not wood, not hay, not straw, but gold, silver, precious stones [1 Cor 3.10]. Shepherd, be attentive lest any of your duties as a shepherd escape your notice. And what are these? Lead back the stray, bind up the broken, heal the sick. Farmer, dig around the unfruitful fig tree and place there what will help its fruitfulness. Soldier, share in sufferings for the Gospel, fight the good fight against the spirits of evil, against the passions of the flesh, take up all the full armor of the Spirit. Do not be entangled in the business of life, that you may please the one who has made you a soldier [2 Tim 2.4]. Athlete, be attentive to yourself, lest perhaps you transgress any of the athletic rules. For nobody is crowned if he does not strive lawfully [2 Tim 2.5]. Imitate Paul, and run, and wrestle, and box; and like a good boxer, keep the gaze of your soul undistracted. Shield your vital organs by putting your hands in front of them; let your eye look intently toward your opponent. In the race, stretch forward to what lies ahead. Run so that you may obtain. In wrestling, struggle against the invisible opponents. Such a one the Word wishes you to be throughout your life, not frightened, nor lying idle, but soberly and vigilantly watching over yourself.

5. I lack the time to describe in full the pursuits of those who work together in the Gospel of Christ, and the power of this commandment, how it is well suited to all. Be attentive to yourself; be sober, able to deliberate, protective of present things, cautious toward things to come. Do not through laziness give up what is already present, and do not take for granted the enjoyment of things that do not exist, or things that perhaps will not exist, as if they were in your hands. Does not this infirmity naturally exist in the young, who having frivolously expansive minds regard things hoped for as already present? For when they have time during the day, or in the quiet of night, they invent for themselves insubstantial fantasies and are carried along by them through the agility of the mind, imagining an illustrious life, a brilliant marriage, happiness in their children, a long old age, honor from all. Though the things they hope for can nowhere be actualized, they become unduly inflated toward the greatest of human attainments. Acquiring large and beautiful houses filled with all kinds of treasures, they encompass land, as much as the vanity of their thoughts can appropriate from the whole creation. Thereupon they enclose wealth in storehouses of vanity~ To these things they add cattle, a crowd of household slaves surpassing number, civic authority, sovereignty over nations, military commands, wars, triumphs, kingship itself. As all these things happen through the empty invention of the mind, through much folly they seem to enjoy the things they hope for as already present and lying at their feet. This weakness belongs to a lazy and indifferent soul, to see dream visions while the body is awake. Therefore the Word compresses this frivolous expansion of the mind and inflammation of the thoughts, and like a kind of bridle halting the unstable mind, it mandates this great and wise precept. To yourself be attentive, it says, not taking nonexistent things for granted, but manage present things advantageously with a view to what takes place.

Yet I believe that the Legislator also uses this exhortation to remove a habitual passion. Since it is easy for each of us to meddle in things belonging to others rather than examining things belonging to ourselves, that we may not suffer from this it says, stop busying yourself with these dangerous evils. Do not spend time through thoughts scrutinizing the weakness that belongs to another, but be attentive to yourself, that is, turn the eye of your soul to inquire about things that belong to you. For many, according to the word of the Lord, who observe well the twig in the eye of their brother, do not look at the beam in their own eye [Mt 7.3]. Therefore do not cease examining yourself closely, to see whether life proceeds for you according to the commandments; but do not look around at things outside yourself in case perhaps you can find some fault, like that stern and boastful Pharisee, who having set himself up as just also greatly despised the publican [cf. Lk 18.11]. Do not cease examining yourself as to whether you have sinned somehow in thought, whether somehow your tongue has slipped, running ahead of your mind, whether in the works of your hands you have done something inadvisable. And if you find in your own life many sins (and you will surely find some, being human), say the words of the publican, "O God, be gracious to me, the sinner" [Lk 18.13].

Be attentive to yourself. This word is for you also when you are brilliantly successful, and all of your life is flowing like a stream. It is useful in protecting you as a kind of good adviser bringing a reminder of things human. And of course also when hard pressed by circumstances, on occasion you can sing it in your heart, so that you are not lifted up by conceit to excessive pretension, nor do you give in to ignoble thoughts, falling into despair. Are you proud of wealth? And do you have grand thoughts about your ancestors? And do you exult in your homeland and bodily beauty and the honors given you by all? Be attentive to yourself, mindful that you are mortal, that "you are earth, and to earth you will return" [Gen 3.19]. Look around, examining those of like eminence before you. Where are those who possessed civil authority? Where are the unconquerable orators? Where are the leaders of public assemblies, the brilliant horse breeders, the generals, the governors, the despots? Are they not all dust? Are they not all legend? Are not the memorials of their lives a few bones? Stoop and look into the tombs to see if you can distinguish which is the slave and which is the master, which is the poor one and which is the rich. Distinguish, if such power is yours, the captive from the king, the strong from the weak, the attractive from the misshapen. So having remembered your nature you will not then be conceited. And you will remember yourself if you are attentive to yourself

6. Again, are you someone low born and obscure, a poor person born of the poor, without home or country, sick, in need every day, trembling at those in power, cowering before all because of your lowly life? "For one who is poor," Scripture says, "is not subjected to threats" [Prov 13.8]. Therefore do not despair of yourself because nothing enviable belongs to you in your present circumstances, do not renounce the hope of all good; but lift up your soul toward the good things made present to you already by God, and toward the things laid up in store through his promise for later. First, then, you are a human being, the only one of the animals formed by God [cf. Gen 2.7]. Is this not

enough to be reasonable grounds for the most exalted joy, that you have been entirely formed by the very hands of God who has made all things? That since you have come into being according to the image of the Creator you can ascend quickly toward equality of honor with the angels through good conduct? You have been given an intellectual soul, through which you comprehend God, you perceive by thought the nature of beings, you pluck the sweetest fruit of wisdom. All the land animals, domesticated and wild, and all those living in water, and all those that fly through the air, belong to you as slaves and are subject to you. Further, have you not invented arts, and built cities, and devised all the things pertaining to necessity and luxury? Are not the oceans passable for you through reason? Do not earth and sea serve your life? Do not air and sky and dancing stars disclose to you their pattern? Why then are you downcast because your horse does not have a silver-mounted bridle? Yet you have the sun carrying its torch for you in a swift race through the whole day. You do not have the luster of silver and gold, but you have the moon with its limitless light shining around you. You have not mounted a chariot inlaid with gold, but you have feet as a vehicle proper and adapted by nature to yourself. Therefore, why do you call happy one who has a fat purse but needs the feet of others to move around? You do not lie on a bed of ivory [cf. Am 6.41, but you have the earth which is more valuable than great amounts of ivory, and your rest upon it is sweet, sleep comes quickly and is free from anxiety. You do not lie beneath a gilded roof, but you have the sky glittering all around with the inexpressible beauty of the stars. Now these are human things, but those of which we will now speak are still greater. These things are for your sake: God present among human beings, the distribution of the Holy Spirit, the destruction of death, the hope of resurrection, divine ordinances perfecting your life, the journey toward God through the commandments; the kingdom of heaven is ready and crowns of righteousness are prepared for one who has not fled from labors on behalf of virtue.

7. If you are attentive to yourself, you will discover these things about yourself and still more, and you will enjoy the things present and will not be downcast about what you lack. This precept will be a great help if you are mindful of it on all occasions. For instance, has anger gained mastery over your thoughts, and have you been carried away by temper toward inappropriate words and savage, beast-like actions? If you were attentive to yourself, you would curb your temper like some disobedient and refractory colt, striking it with a blow of reason as if by a lash. You would also control your tongue, and you would not lay hands on the one provoking you. Again, evil desires madden the soul, casting you into incontinent and licentious impulses. If you were attentive to yourself and remembered that for you this present enjoyment will result in a bitter end, and this tickling, which through pleasure has now come about in your body, will bring forth the venomous worm punishing us forever in hell, and the burning of the flesh will become mother of eternal fire, immediately the pleasures will be gone and banished. A certain wondrous inner calm and quiet in the soul will also come into being, as when the noise of undisciplined servant girls becomes silent through the entrance of a discreet lady. Therefore be attentive to yourself, and know that the rational part of the soul is also intelligent, but the passionate part is also irrational. And the one exists by nature to rule, while the other exists to obey reason and be persuaded by it. So do not ever allow your

mind, reduced to utter slavery, to become a slave of the passions; moreover, do not yield to the passions struggling against reason and let them transfer to themselves the rule of the soul.

The exact comprehension of yourself also provides entirely sufficient guidance toward the concept of God. For if you are attentive to yourself, you will not need to trace your understanding of the Fashioner from the structure of the universe, but in yourself, as if in a kind of small ordered world, you will see the great wisdom of the Creator. Understand that God is incorporeal from the incorporeal soul existing in you, not circumscribed by place; since neither as a matter of principle does your mind spend its life in a place, but through its conjunction with the body it comes to be in a place. You believe God to be invisible in understanding your own soul, since it also is ungraspable with bodily eyes, for it is colorless, it is without shape, and it has not been encompassed by any bodily characteristic, but it is recognized only from its energies. So nor should you investigate God by understanding through the eyes, but supporting faith by reason, have spiritual understanding about him. Marvel at the Creator's work, how the power of your soul has been bound together with the body, so that penetrating to its extremities it leads the many separate limbs and organs to one convergence and sharing of life. Examine what power from the soul is given to the flesh, what sympathy is given back to the soul by the flesh; how the body receives life from the soul, and the soul receives pain from the body. Examine where you have stored away the things you have learned; why the addition of things that have come later does not overshadow the knowledge of things retained, but without confusion you keep your memories distinct, inscribed on the directive faculty of the soul as if on a bronze slab, guarded closely. Examine how as the soul slips gradually toward the passions of the flesh its own beauty is destroyed; and how again cleansed from the shame of evil, through virtue it ascends quickly toward the likeness of the Creator.

8. If you like, after your contemplation of the soul be attentive also to the structure of the body and marvel at how appropriate a dwelling for the rational soul the sovereign Fashioner has created. He has made the human being alone of the animals upright, that from your very form you may see that your life is akin to that on high; for all the quadrupeds are bent down toward their stomachs, while the human being is prepared to look up toward heaven, so as not to be devoted to the stomach or to the passions below the stomach but to direct his whole desire toward the journey on high. Then God placed the head at the top, locating in it the most valuable of the senses. There sight, and hearing, and taste, and smell have been established, all near each other. And although confined in a small space, none of them impedes the activity of its neighbor. The eyes have laid hold of the highest lookout point so that nothing blocks their view of the body's parts, but placed under the small projection of the eyebrows, they reach out from the prominence above in a direct line. Again, the hearing is not directed straight, but by a spiral-shaped pathway it takes hold of the noises in the air. This indeed exhibits the highest wisdom, enabling sound to pass though unhindered, or rather be led in, bending around the twists, while nothing from outside that accidentally falls in can be a hindrance to the auditory perception. Examine closely the nature of the tongue, how it is tender and nimble and is sufficient by its varied movement for every need of speech. Teeth, also or-

gans of speech, provide strong resistance to the tongue and at the same time also take care of food, some cutting it and others grinding it. And so when you have traversed all things with suitable reflection on each, and have observed carefully how air is drawn in through breath, how warmth is kept around the heart, and the organs of digestion, and the channels of blood, from all these you will perceive the unsearchable wisdom of the Creator [Rom 11.33]. So you will also say to him with the prophet, "Your knowledge from myself has become wonderful" [Ps 138.6]. Therefore be attentive to yourself, that you may be attentive to God, to whom be glory and dominion unto the ages. Amen.

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