

TWO HOMILIES ON ALMSGIVING:

CONCERNING ALMSGIVING

and

AS YOU DID IT TO ONE OF THESE, YOU DID IT TO ME

INTRODUCTION

These two homilies¹ are published together because they have as their common theme almsgiving or showing kindness both towards the poor and persons afflicted with bodily sufferings. The first sermon considers beggars, while the second describes in concrete detail persons banned from society due to leprosy. We may safely assume that Gregory of Nyssa delivered the first homily towards the beginning of the Lenten season due to its reference to fasting: "There is a fasting (*nesteia*) with an incorporeal or spiritual effect, the soul's rejection of evil, and is a means by which we temper our attraction for food. Hence, fast from evil, refrain from the desire for anything harmful, do not seek gain in unjust actions, slay avarice for money, and do not take wealth through force and rape" (J.94.6-12). In Gregory's view, fasting has no value unless it is accompanied by works of charity.

Jean Danielou estimates the first sermon as having been delivered during the Lenten season of 382. He points out its close continuity with another sermon, **On Correction**, delivered in January 382 where Gregory develops the same comparison between the pedagogy of school masters and the one used by the clergy of his day.² Danielou compares the key passages as follows:

The leader of this Church, including those of sincere piety and teachers of virtue, closely resemble educators and instructors with regard to the fundamentals of knowledge. They are also comparable to persons caring for infants and children who do not yet have the ability to clearly enunciate words. Parents still maintain responsibility for the upbringing of their children because they are not expected to begin school all at once. Instead, they are first taught to inscribe letters in wax, know their names, and then to trace them out. Soon they progress to syllables and the pronunciation of words. In similar fashion, the Church's leaders first instruct their hearers in fundamental knowledge and then proceed to more advanced lessons. **Concerning Almsgiving** (J.93.3-16)

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¹ The critical text of these two sermons was prepared by Adrian Van Heck, **Gregorii Nysseni Opera**, vol. ix (Leiden, 1967), pp.93-108 and pp.111-127. The edition by J. P. Migne may be found in **Patrologia Graecia** 46 (Paris, 1858), cols. 543-469 and cols. 472-489.

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². *La Chronologie des Sermons de Gregoire de Nysse*, (**Revue des Sciences Religieuses** 29, Strasbourg, 1955), p.360 and p.360.

The child does not apply himself to characters and letters which the master impresses in wax; he does not invent them with the absurd pretension of finding new letters. Instead, he first applies his hand to the writing after the teacher's example and does not form any names with these letters except those he has been taught. **On Correction**, 46. 309d-312a

Both passages clearly have the same theme and image, the necessity of supplying the Christian faithful with a progressive pedagogy 3. Danielou also points out that the two sermons allude to man's rational capacity, *logikos*, which is a favorite subject of Gregory as well as the other Greek Fathers 4.

Jean Danielou suggests that the style of the second sermon differs from the first and contains no material by which to date it with certainty. However, he posits the Lenten season of 384 as the time of its delivery since we possess no other homilies by Gregory for this period. Danielou admits that his conjecture is hypothetical 5, and Jean Bernardi criticizes him for offering this date. Although the description of the poor is not accompanied by harsh words regarding wealthy persons as in the case of the first homily, Danielou says, "On peut se demander si précisément il n'y a pas une indication que ce sermon faisait suite à un discours qu'il ne faisait que prologer et compléter" 6. Furthermore, Bernardi believes that both homilies were delivered in relatively close succession. He disagrees with Danielou's assessment that the word *logikos* is important for assigning a date to the first homily, that is, its proximity to **On Correction**. Although the concept of *logikos* is not found in the second sermon, it is nevertheless present in such a passage as, "Man, made in God's image, was set as ruler over the earth with animals (*alogon*) placed at his service" (J.116.9-11). This concept of being made in God's image (*eikon*) runs throughout all Gregory's writings. As Roger Leys has pointed out, *eikon* has a static sense whereas the other term Gregory

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³.. Gregory's great predecessor, Origen, worked out what has become a classical theory of the three stages of the spiritual life: purgative, illuminative and unitive. These three divisions were assigned to the three books of the Old Testament, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs. In his **Commentary on the Song of Songs**, Gregory says, "The purpose of the book of Proverbs is to teach, while that of Ecclesiastes is to preach. The philosophy of the Song of Songs transcends both by its loftier doctrine" (J.18). For a discussion on this threefold division, cf. Jean Danielou, **Platonisme et Théologie Mystique** (Paris, 1944), pp. 17-26.

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⁴.. For reference to the term *logikos*, cf. **A Patristic Greek Lexicon** by G.W.H. Lampe (Oxford, 1961), p.805.

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⁵Ibid, p.364.

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⁶La Predication des Peres Cappadociens (Paris, 1968), p.280.

frequently uses, *homoiosis* or likeness, represents the progressive realization of *eikon* 7 . With this distinction in mind, we may say that in the context of the two homilies on almsgiving, our acts of charity belong to our likeness (*homoiosis*). These deeds, in turn, serve to equally enhance our *eikon* and the one belonging to those persons who are less fortunate. Such royalty "over the earth" is thus not intended by God as domination but as service gladly performed 8, for it divinizes man (cf. J.103.10, *theousin auton*).

Jean Bernardi suggests further evidence which indicates that Gregory of Nyssa presented both his homilies in relative close succession. For their point of departure the sermons take the same passage of St. Matthew's Gospel. Although the second homily lacks clear reference to fasting, its use of the passage from Matthew must have been fresh in the ears of persons who have recently heard the first homily. Furthermore, the Christian faithful were used to hearing the same Gospel proclaimed each year towards the beginning of the Lenten season. Bernardi also says that the first sermon contains two categories of the poor,

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⁷ **L'Image de Dieu** by Roger Leys (Paris, 1951), p.116. Cf. Hubert Merki's remarks on this distinction in his **Homoiosis Theo** (Freiburg, 1952), pp.138-40.

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⁸ We again quote Leys with regards to this royalty: "L'esprit en l'homme fonde une autre prerogative en laquelle Gregoire place souvent aussi l'image de Dieu: la royauté qu'il exerce sur le reste de la création. Qu'une destinée royale ait été inscrite dans notre nature, nos prerogatives de l'âme et le maintien même de notre corps le démontrent. En tant qu'image de la nature souveraine l'homme est roi aussitôt que crée" (ibid, p.71).

For another reference to this royalty, refer to Gregory's Commentary on Ecclesiastes: "God has said, 'Let us make man according to our image and likeness.' Since we are made according to God's likeness and are appointed to rule over the entire earth, tell me, who is the person who sells and buys? Only God can do this; however, it does not pertain to him at all, 'for the gifts of God are irrevocable' (Rom 11.29).

"Because God called human nature to freedom which had become addicted to sin, he should not subject it to servitude again. But if God did not subject freedom to slavery, who can deny his lordship?...If these things [the earth and what it contains] are inestimable, then tell me, how much greater value is the man who is over them? If you mention the entire world, you thus find nothing equivalent to man's honor...When the Lord of the earth bought man, he acquired nothing more precious" (J.336-7).

wanderers and sick persons while the second completes the list by mentioning lepers 9

In **Concerning Almsgiving and As You Did it to One of These...**¹⁰ we see Gregory at his best as a pastor and bishop concerned for the well-being of the flock entrusted to him. We have here neither allegorical flights of fancy nor deep theological and philosophical speculation so characteristic of his treatises and commentaries on Scripture. Instead, Gregory is very much concerned about how Christians of his day should relate to persons suffering from corporeal afflictions and homelessness. A brief historical background is in order to put these two sermons in perspective. Around the year 377 the Goths invaded Thrace under the emperor Valens which caused many persons to be displaced. Most likely Gregory is referring to such uprooted persons who were wandering about the countryside and left destitute because of the Goths' invasion. Thus uppermost in his mind as a pastor was how to care for these unfortunate persons. Gregory states that one of the best ways to manifest Christian charity (*agape*) is to fast: "There is a fasting with an incorporeal or spiritual effect (*asomatos nesteia kai aulos eykrateia*), the soul's rejection of evil, and is a means by which we temper our attraction for food" (J.94.6-8). Despite the benefit of bodily abstinence, the Bishop of Nyssa is quick to point out that those who fast can still follow their inclinations towards greed as in the case of Judas "who fasted with the eleven [Apostles] but did not refrain from greed; he lost salvation despite his fasting" (J.94.16-19). Gregory is clearly more concerned with moderation as opposed to abstinence, for "What advantage is there in corporeal fasting unless the mind is cleansed" (*an me kathareue ho nous*, J.95.14)? Such *katharsis* is central to his teaching for the "more advanced lessons" mentioned in the opening paragraph; fasting thus provides "the foundation of virtue" (*nesteia themelios aretes*, J.95.17-18). Those responsible for providing this foundation, are, in the sermon's opening words, "The leader of this Church, including those of sincere piety and teachers of virtue."

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⁹ The second homily also refers to destitute persons mentioned in the first homily: "You see men wandering about as swine in search of food with torn rags for clothing; they have staffs in hand, one for a weapon and another for a support which they do not grasp by the fingers but bind to their hands with a rod. Their pouches are ripped and the lump of bread they possess is thoroughly rotten" (J.116.1-8).

Adrian van Heck, the person responsible for the critical edition of both homilies, has seen a parallel between the second homily and several passages of Discourse XLII belonging to Gregory of Nazianzos (869A-876A and 896A). Thus van Heck estimates that Gregory of Nazianzos has imitated his friend, Gregory of Nyssa. With this in mind, the two sermons have occurred before January 1, 382. However, van Heck sees the possibility that Gregory of Nyssa echoes a lost letter of his brother Basil who also describes in detail the miserable lot of persons afflicted with leprosy.

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¹⁰ Scholars usually designate the first homily by the Latin title, **De Pauperibus Amandis I** and the second by **De Pauperibus Amandis II**.

Central to Gregory's doctrine on fasting is the passage from Isaiah, "Do you fast in order to quarrel and to fight and to smite the lowly with wicked fist? Loosen all the bond of wicked-ness, undo the thongs of the yoke, share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house" (58.6-7). Thus a necessary biblical parallel is drawn between fasting and a life devoted to comfort of the poor. This text now sets the tone for the rest of the homily which proceeds to describe in vivid detail the plight of the destitute. Gregory reminds us again that we are placed between two often conflicting affections, "your satiety and your brother's hunger" (J.97.16). Within this context he stresses that Christians should concentrate upon moderation of such things as the intake of food and use of wealth, as we have already mentioned, and should give from the excess already in their possession. In other words, Gregory does not advocate descending to the same level as destitute persons; instead, he realizes that God provides for an enlightened Christian who can therefore afford to be generous. The bishop of Nyssa places Jesus Christ as central to any almsgiving: "Our Savior assumed a human form. He loved mankind and bestowed upon us his own person to shame the indifferent and those who loathe the poor" (J.98.24-99.2).

The humility of Christ sets the stage for the final judgment where "the Son of Man is coming from heaven and walking on the air as though it were the earth while a countless myriad of angels attend him" (J.99.13-16). At Christ's second coming all mankind will be judged and rewarded according to each person's deeds¹¹. Gregory locates this passage from St. Matthew in the middle of his first homily which he later uses to introduce the second homily. Shortly afterwards the second sermon elaborates upon Christ's words (which form the title to this homily), "I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick and in prison." "Whatever you did for one of these, you did to me" (J.113.12-14). In other words, Gregory devotes himself to the practical application of the Christian life which is founded upon the mysterious, close identity of Christ with persons in need. He elaborates upon this theme by quoting the passage from St. Luke which describes the Good Samaritan who showed mercy to the man

¹¹ With regard to this passage, Rev. A.S. Dunstone remarks, "When the whole human race stands before the *bema* [judgment seat] of the Christ, he [Gregory of Nyssa] expects that goodwill implanted in their souls will remain with those who have partaken of Grace. The prisoner with many charges outstanding against him fears the judge...but receives Grace. The verb *charizomai* is used of this bestowal of judicial innocence at the beginning of the second **Oratio De Pauperibus Amandis**, where the scene is the Heavenly Court. We have already referred to the (thoroughly biblical) paradox in the **De Baptismo**, where he first warns those who have met with Grace that they will not live with the just unless...and then goes on to speak of Grace as a free gift." From an article entitled "Grace in Gregory of Nyssa" in **The Scottish Journal of Theology**, vol.15, no.3 (Edinburgh, Sept. 1962), p.243.

injured by robbers (J.114) 12. Note that the second homily speaks of Christ's identity with the human race, especially those who are less fortunate: "The Lord of angels, the most blessed King of heaven, became man for you and assumed this foul smelling, contemptible flesh endowed with a soul in order to cure your illness through his own touch" (J.115.15-19). This universal condensation where Christ unites himself with humanity provides a pattern on which we should show compassion, for Gregory counsels us "to make a sound judgment regarding this completely uncertain nature in which you participate, even though it is common to everyone" (J.115.25-28).

The first homily elaborates upon the identity of Christ with the poor by saying that almsgiving rouses everyone as a trumpet summons contestants in a wrestling school to the distribution of prizes (J.100). In Gregory's words, "This [almsgiving] is indeed the highest of all praises, for it is associated with God (*theou paredros*), loved by goodness, and manifests kinship with it. In this manner God himself shows that he is the source of all our virtue and kind deeds towards everyone" (J.100.18-22). Gregory then proceeds to speak of God's bounty both to man and beast after which he mentions human greed for "corporeal concerns" which tends to blur our imitation of "the Lord and Creator insofar as mortal beings can emulate his blessedness and immortality" (*he tou makariou kai athanatos mimesis*, J.102.15-16). Note that we are encouraged not only to imitate Christ but God as Creator who lavishly bestows material blessings upon humankind (J.102). Mercy and kindness (*eleos kai eupoiia*, J. 103.8) are the most important characteristics of this imitation which "brings to life our original, immortal image (*eikon*) which transcends conception" (l.10-11). Gregory then typically proceeds to add that this image consists in "that unending, incorruptible blessed life whose joys and pleasures we cannot now comprehend" (l. 15-17). We should keep in mind that the aim of this homily is simply to educate persons in the knowledge of this image which is attainable through such practical means as fasting and almsgiving. Gregory makes an appeal that we realize our membership in one and the same human race (l.23-24) which should preclude any temptation to self-aggrandizement, the consequences of which are enumerated on J. 105. At this point he mentions the beggar Lazarus taken from St. Luke's Gospel who now rests in Abraham's bosom while the rich man suffers the consequences in hell of his greed.

The notion of incorruptibility (*aphtharsia*) is a central teaching for Gregory of Nyssa. In Jean Danielou's words, "[*Aphtharsia*] est proprement la qualite de ce qui n'est pas sujet a la corruption de la vie biologique...Dans l'homme elle est une participation a la vie divine" 13. *Aphtharsia* has its root in the Greek philosopher

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¹² For another reference to this passage, refer to Gregory's **Commentary on the Song of Songs**: "He [Christ] became the companion of him who fell in among robbers; he healed his wounds with oil, wine and bands; he placed him upon his own ass; he gave him rest at the inn; he offered two denarii for staying there; and upon his return, promised to pay for any extra service" (J.427).

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¹³ **Platonisme et Theologie Mystique** (Paris, 1944), p.55.

Plotinos, yet Gregory has endowed this term with theological significance. One of the primary sources for scriptural inspiration here is St. Paul whom Gregory often employs as his mouthpiece: "What are we striving after? It is a wonderful, hopeful, anticipation of joy. Having taken off this flesh which abound with corruption, we put on immortality (1Cor 15.53) or that unending, incorruptible blessed life whose joys and pleasures we cannot now comprehend" (J.105.12-17). We find a similar reference to *aphtharsia* in Gregory's treatise, **Concerning Those Who Have Died:**

Thus whenever you examine your corruptibility, you fail to look at yourself (That [nature] is free from corruption when its mortality and tendency towards disintegration is regenerated and transformed into an immortal nature not subject to disintegration. Instead, external reality is in flux, falls away and dissolves). We are no longer obliged to fix our attention upon this nature because it is simply not worthy our while (J. 40).

The two homilies on almsgiving describe in graphic detail all those characteristics inimical to incorruptibility such as human greed and covetousness which have their root in "the passing, unstable nature of time which, like a teeming river, carries everything away to destruction [*phthora*]" (J.107.16-18). Such instability places the Christian in a dilemma of how to resolve the predicament of human misery resulting from ego-centered desires. On the other hand, we have the equal dilemma of Christ's presence and our incapacity to perceive him clearly: "'Behold, I am with you always' (Mt 28.20). If we believe that [Christ] is with us now, how will he come since he is proclaimed as not being present? If 'in him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17.28), as the Apostle [Paul] says, our efforts within the limitations of time can neither grasp nor embrace him who contains everything" (J.112.14-21) 14. However, it is not the divine transcendence which troubles Gregory; he offers us the scriptural example of Christ as "the road of life" (J.113.10-11) which is manifested in the hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, sick and imprisoned. In other words, the paradox between human misery and God's transcendence is resolved through "observance of the commandments" (l.16). Gregory of Nyssa thus gives the Christian a practical means to realize his or her divine origin which is manifested through acts of mercy since "we are members of the same race" (*homophuloi*, J.103.24).

Gregory concludes his first homily with reference to the transitory nature of human life on earth. His wishes that his hearers attain "the unblemished existence of that city (the heavenly Jerusalem, J.108.11)." Compare this conclusion with that of the second homily which equates our final homeland to a harbor or "the land of the Gospel which contains the great city whose architect and builder is our God" (J.126. 30-127.1). Note that the conclusion of the first homily with reference to the heavenly

¹⁴ With regard to this passage, Hans Urs Von Balthasar has remarked that a tension exists between Christ's presence here and now and his coming: "'Il y a derriere tout cela un seul mystere fondamental, celui de la source divine qui a chaque moment est autre et qu'one ne peut jamais voir tout entiere. C'est le mystere de la Presence qui n'a jamais fini de venir" (Presence et Pensee, Paris, 1943), pp.131-2.

homeland serves as an introduction to the second homily which begins with the scene of the last judgment from St. Matthew's Gospel. Failure to live in according with the norms of Christian life result in condemnation before the judgment seat (*bema*) of God.

Gregory recommends to his listeners that they contemplate death by quoting Wisdom 7.6 (J.120.15-16) and compares human existence to a bubble which temporarily houses our immortal spirit. Although corporeal existence is "mobile and unstable" (*rheuste kai astatos*, 1.29), we should not remain content with remote philosophical speculation about the human condition. The bishop of Nyssa is prompt to remind us of Christ's identity with the outcasts of society by quoting Mt. 25.41, the passage which forms the title to this second homily. Such mutual responsibility is perceived in terms of a "yoke of love" (J.122.10) which enables us to see through the transitory nature of corporeal afflictions: "But when the soul is freed from this corruptible, earthy entanglement, it will shine with its own beauty (*to idio kallei enoraizetai*, 1.29)¹⁵. At this point Gregory refers to the example of the beggar Lazarus whom the rich man besought for assistance. He is clear that this example of a man who suffered much in life and was neglected by an prosperous man be intended as a warning for us to show mercy towards the afflicted "that their abundance after life may supply your salvation" (J.123.22).

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[**M.453 & J.93**] The leader of this Church, including those of sincere piety and teachers of virtue, closely resembles educators and instructors with regard to the fundamentals of knowledge. They are also comparable to persons caring for infants and children who do not yet have the ability to clearly enunciate words. Parents still maintain responsibility for the upbringing of their children because they are not expected to begin school all at once. Instead, they are first taught to inscribe letters in wax, know their names and then trace them out. Soon they progress to syllables and the pronunciation of words. In similar fashion, the Church's leaders first instruct their hearers in fundamental knowledge and proceed to more advanced lessons.

Two days ago we reproached that pleasure as it pertains to the throat and stomach. Today, however, you are not paying attention to my observations on the benefit of abstention from meat and wine which induces laughter and debauchery and the craving after food and [**J.94**] strong drink. I have already said enough about such matters, and you have heeded my counsel through your actions. Because you have taken my first instructions to heart, let us now proceed to more advanced lessons.

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¹⁵ Refer to a similar passage from the **Commentary on the Song of Songs**: "We become like the food we have eaten. Let us take the example of a hollow vessel of crystal; anything put in it is clearly visible. Similarly, by placing the lilies' splendor [the virtues] in our souls, they become radiant and show from outside the forms within...The person formed with these by a good life makes himself radiant by showing in his life each form of virtue" (J.441-42).

There is a fasting with an incorporeal or spiritu-al effect, the soul's rejection of evil, and is a means by which we temper our attraction for food. Hence, fast from evil, [M.456] refrain from the desire for anything harmful, do not seek gain in unjust actions, slay avarice for money (cf. Mt 6.24) and do not take wealth through force and rape. What profit is there by not eating meat when you hurt your brother? The same applies to acting unjustly towards the poor. What kind of piety do you manifest by drinking water yet at the same time you plot harm and drink the blood of iniquity? Judas fasted with the eleven [apos-tles] but did not refrain from greed; he lost salva-tion despite his fast-ing. Even the devil who does not eat (for a spiri-tual being lacks a body) had lost his dignity through transgression. Similar-ly, none of the demons takes food nor drinks to excess nor is condemned by strong drink (for their [incorporeal] nature implies no need for nourish-ment); rather, they speed through the air night and day as zealous servants who contrive against us. [J.95] But if we human beings unite ourselves to God and the good after we have rejected their as-saults, they fade away through jealousy and envy.

Christians should be instruct-ed by a love of wisdom, and the soul should flee any harm which springs from evil. By showing moderation with respect to wine and drink, we avoid occasions of sin. I publicly attest that nothing which de-lights us such as water, oil and any other nourishment without- blood can resemble [the soul] because they have an outside appear-ance and inside composi-tion. Fasting is ordained for the soul's purity. If a person defiles himself by choice and other similar actions, why do we waste our time by drinking thoroughly polluted water (cf. Lev 8. 21)? What advantage is there in corpo-real fasting unless the mind is cleansed? A swift chariot with four horses is useless without reins. What profit is a swift vessel unless the helmsman is sober? Fasting is the foundation of virt-ue. Just as a house's foundation and a ship's keel is ineffec-tive and no good unless they are both very strong and skillfully constructed, abstinence is deficient if it lacks appropri-ate ethical values. Let the fear of God teach the tongue to speak at the proper time and not utter vanity. In this way we will know the time, mea-sure, necessary word and [J.96] proper response as well as the occasion to speak modestly and not rant against persons using polite language. We can control that small bodily member, the tongue, by inserting a bridle into the mouth; then it will no longer speak in a disorder-ly, incoherent fashion. Let the mouth utter praise, not calum-ny; let it sing, not blas-pheme and shout praise, not chatter. Let the rash hand be bound strongly to the memory of God (cf. Mk 14.65, Jn 18.22). For these reasons let us fast because our Lamb [Christ] was abused, struck on the face and treated disrespectfully [M.457] by being nailed [on the cross]. As Christ's disci-ples, let us not exhibit the same mistaken zeal as the Jews, but if we do, Isaiah's words apply to us: "Do you fast in order to quarrel and to fight and to smite the lowly with wicked fist" (Is 58.4)? Lean from that prophet the sincere, pure works of fast-ing: "Loosen all the bonds of wicked-ness, undo the thongs of the yoke, share your bread with the hungry, and bring the home-less poor into your house" (Is 58.6-7).

Now is the opportune time to be ungrudging towards the naked and unclothed since a multitude of captives is at our door. There is no lack of strangers and

wanderers, and the seeking hand is always extended. For all these people their home includes the open sky, inns, plazas, streets and deserted market places. They dwell in caves like night ravens and owls (cf. Ps 102.6), and their clothing is torn rags. The farmer takes notice of them and shows mercy. [J.97] If any food falls their way, they jump upon it. Springs provide water for animals, and holes in the ground acts as their storehouse from which they do not allow anything to escape but keep close guard over them. Knees held together form a table and the ground is their bed. A river or pool freely bestowed by God forms a bath which does not require construction. A wanderer out in the fields did not live like this from the beginning but only as a result of calamities and necessity.

A person who fasts is supplied with life's necessities provides sufficient reason why we should be generous towards our unfortunate brethren. Give to the poor anything your greedily consume. Let the just fear of God provide for your compensation. Exercise a healthy self-control by showing discretion between two conflicting affections, your satiety and your brother's hunger. Doctors perform their work in a similar fashion. They drain some patients of fluids and give them to others in order to preserve the health of both by addition and discharge. Pay attention to sound advice. Let reason open wide your gates. Allow advice coming from those in want to affect the wealthy. Do not enrich the impoverished by argumentation. When they hear the eternal Word of God, let it give them a home. Provide the needy from your own abundance.

There are many other poor and destitute persons besides those we have just mentioned. Let each of us take pains to our assist neighbor. Do not allow another person take your treasure, and embrace misfortune as if were gold. Take into your arms the calamity [of the poor] like your own health and provide for the safety of wife, children, servants and your entire [J.98] household. [M.460] The needy and sick person is doubly poor. Helpless persons of good health move about from door to door; they carefully approach affluent persons and beseech everyone at cross roads. However, those afflicted by illness are restrained in confining shelters and are put in corners as Daniel was cast into the pit (Dan 14.32). Here they look forward to your tenderness and concern for the poor as awaiting Ambakoum 16. The prophet's mercy provides us with a friend because he unhesitatingly brings swift relief to those in prison. Because his gift is not a punishment we have no reason to fear, for the fruit of mercy yields much fruit. Sow and thus fill your house with an immense multitude of benefits.

But you say, "I am poor." Even so, give what you have. God does not seek that which is beyond your strength. Give your bread; to one, give a drink of wine and to another, a garment. In this way the charity of many dissolves the misfortune of one

¹⁶ The Septuagint attributes the name of Ambakoum to the Prophet Habacuc. He is mentioned in the apocryphal book, Bel and the Dragon, inserted at the close of chapter twelve in the Book of Daniel. However, this identification is chronologically incorrect. The angel of the Lord bids Habacuc to take food to Daniel in the lions' den, vs. 34.

person. Moses did not receive money for the tent of worship from one individual but from everyone (Ex 35.5). Some brought much gold and others brought silver whereas the poor brought skins or goat hair. Do you not see that the offering of the widow sur-passes the one from rich man? She gave everything in her possession (Mk 12.42).

Do not despise the offerings of poor as unworthy. Take them into account and realize how valuable they are. Our Savior assumed a human form. He loved mankind and [J.99] bestowed upon us his own person to shame the indifferent and those who loathe the poor. In this way he resembles persons who show imperial images against the violent in order to shame them by a show of power. The good which we expect is stored up; the doorkeepers of the kingdom [of heaven] open the gates of divine goodness and close them to wicked evildoers. They are both severe accusers and trustworthy advocates offering pleas and accusations not by words but from the evidence of judgment, for [Christ] scrutinizes the hearts of men and cries out his message with the utmost clarity (Acts 1.24; 15.8).

The divine preaching which you have often heard prescribes a fearful judgment. It enables me to see the Son of Man coming from heaven and walking on the air as though it were the earth while a countless myriad of angels attend him (Mt 25.31+). Once the throne of glory has been set up and the King has seated himself, every tribe and nation under the sun is led to the air and divided into two [M.461] groups after which the entire multitude is brought before the judgment seat. I have heard that those at [Christ's] right are called lambs and those on his left, goats, because our human manner of speaking enables us to draw this comparison. There the judge speaks, [J.100] and the King answers those who have been generous. He rewards persons who have conducted themselves well during their lives in the kingdom [of heaven] while the wicked and evil enter eternal fire.

Scripture has carefully explained all these matters to us by using the example of a court in order that we might learn generosity by good deeds. A fitting life is the mother of the poor, teacher of the rich, a pattern for the young, refuge for the aged, treasure for the needy, gate for the destitute and care to persons of every age who suffer misfortune. Just as the trumpet blast of vanity stirs persons to ambition and announces the distribution of prizes to those in wrestling school, so does almsgiving summon everyone. It shows generosity towards the afflicted and averts plagues while at the same time it dispenses relief. This is the highest of all praises, for it is associated with God, loved by goodness and manifests kinship with it. In this manner God himself shows that he is the source of all our virtue and kind deeds towards everyone. God created the earth, the beauty of the heavens, the well ordered change of hours, the sun's heat and the cold [J.101] (He does not need these things) and works continuously for man's well being as an invisible provider, a timely sower and a wonderful irrigator. According to Isaiah, [God] gives seed for the sower, sends water from the clouds to the earth, and pours it abundantly into furrows (Is 55.10). When crops increase and vegetation appears, he parts the clouds of heaven which have hung over us and the sun extends its warm, intense rays to bring the lovely shoots to maturity. [God] bountifully provides food for man by nourishing the vine and giving

drink in due season to all types of animals. He also provides woolen skins for protection and covering our feet. You can see that God is the Creator of these benefits by giving nourishment and drink to the hungry and by clothing the naked as we have already said.

[M.464] If you wish understand how [God] cures the person afflicted by evil, then pay heed to our following words. Who has taught the bee to labor with wax and make honey? Who has distilled oil from the pine, terebinth and mastic trees? Who has made dry, aromatic fruit imported from India? Who has created oil [J.102] by strenuous bodily labor? Who has discerned roots and herbs and knows their qualities? Who has creatively invented remedies for healing? Who has opened springs of warm water from the earth and has made cold and warm water gush out for us to dissipate dryness or burning? At this point we may borrow the timely words of Baruch: "He [God] found the whole way of knowledge and has given it to Jacob his servant and to Israel his beloved" (Bar 3.6). Therefore, skills both related and not pertaining to fire, as well as those concerning water and a myriad of other techniques, are intended to serve us in many ways. God is thus the source of generosity and rich provider for our necessities.

Scripture teaches us to zealously imitate the Lord and Creator insofar as mortal beings can emulate his blessedness and immortality. However, we show contempt towards everything by appropriating them for our own enjoyment; we choose them for our own end and selfishly store them up. We have no concern for the misfortunate nor care for the poor. What a miserable attitude! A man sees someone else without food and lacks incentive for giving him nourishment. Such a person does not provide for others nor is he concerned about his security; he allows this tender plant to pitifully dry up from lack of water. Instead, he is well off and does not give it the needy. Just as the season of one spring [J.103] waters a great many fields, the wealth of one household suffices to sustain the poor. A sparing, grudging mind thus resembles a single stone which checks the flow of the course of water.

Corporeal concerns should not trouble us, for we should live for God. Food offers pleasure by entering through one small part of the body, the throat. It enters the stomach, decays and evacuates the body (Mt 15.17). On the other hand, mercy and kindness are beloved qualities belonging to God. They inhabit a person, divinize him and stamp him with imitation of the good in order bring to life [M.465] our original, immortal image which transcends conception. What are we striving after? It is a wonderful, hopeful, anticipation of joy. Having taken off this flesh which abounds with corruption, we put on immortality (1Cor 15.53) or that unending, incorruptible blessed life whose joys and pleasures we cannot now comprehend.

You who are bestowed with reason and a mind to interpret divine things, do not be enticed by what is transitory-. Measure your life by making wise choices. We do not possess everything but should allow a portion for the poor whom God loves. God, the Father of us all, possesses all things and we are members of the same race. It is more admirable that brothers equally share the best of their inheritance. In another case, if one brother or the other usurps wealth, the rest [J.104] indeed profit. Should

anyone wish to be the lord of all and exclude brothers from the third or fifth part, he is a cruel tyrant, an irreconcilable barbarian, or an insatiable beast which takes delight by devouring its food alone; rather, he is even more ruthless than any beast. This insatiable person allows no one else to participate in his wealth and resembles a wolf which joins with other wolves or is like a group of dogs which together rip apart a body. Food in moderation should be sufficient. Do not fall into the that insatiable sea of greed. A sailor in a grievous situation does not demolish [his ship] upon submerged rocks but escapes this terrible danger from which he can never escape if he falls into it.

In accord with what Paul has taught you (1Cor 7.31), use [what this life offers] and do not abuse it. Apply yourself to suitable enjoyment. Do not take pleasure in indecency and avoid the same destruction as animals, small four-footed beasts, birds and fish, whether they are easy or hard to find, contemptible or valuable. You cannot fill one stomach by going on a hunt just as great manual effort cannot block a deep well. Our search for pleasure does not allow the sea's depth to remain undisturbed. Not only do we only go after fish, we draw out other living things from the depths and bring them onto land and the air. Thus their small skeletal structure is revealed [**J.105**], and we catch the sea-urchin, creeping cuttlefish, the multi-footed creatures clinging to rocks, the small snails from the depths below and every type [**M.468**] of living thing which swims upon the sea's billows. In our greed we employ every means to draw out these creatures and bring them to light.

What are the consequences of this search for self-gratification? Evil necessarily follows when, like a disease, it enters to draw away whatever remains. Persons who spread out a table filled with sensuous delights are impelled to construct magnificent houses and spare no expense on their immensity and beauty. They are fond of places to recline, brightly colored clothing, are anxious for household furnishings, adorn their tables with all sorts of silver ornaments, some of which are delicately polished and others are intricately carved to present a feast for the throat and eye by stories of how they were made. Some examples are bowls, tri-pods, water containers, beakers, food platters, various drinking cups as well as actors, harpists, singers, elegant speakers, male and female singers, dancing girls, every sort of licentious performances, effeminate young boys with long hair and shameless girls. Their immodesty makes them sisters of Herodias (Mt 14.6, Lk 3.19) who kill John [the Baptist] or the divinity within each of us and the mind which loves wisdom.

[**J.106**] While such activity is transpiring within the house, innumerable Lazaruses are seated outside at the gates. Some are grievously afflicted with sores (Lk 16.19) and others are blind. Still other persons are beset with lame feet while a few drag themselves around because they have no limbs. They cry out but are ignored. The sound of music drowns them out together with songs from vocalists and much excited laughter. Should they cause commotion at the door, the porter leaps up, vehemently throws these dogs out while inflicting them with blows and wounds. Then the friends of Christ who are satisfied with the best of the commandments depart; instead of being filled with bread and meat, they receive assaults and blows. But inside the house wealthy persons go about their business while others resembling

over-load-ed ships dis-gorge food; still other persons sleep at the table with their drinking cups nearby. A two-fold sin of shame resides here: one person is completely drunk and at the same time some hungry wretch is cast out.

If God takes close notice of these things, how can you consider the despicable lot of the poor? You wonder why this can be so and ask that it cannot happen because the sacred Gospel testifies against all these dreadful examples. The bellow-ing and groans in the depths in-crease and [God] takes note of these evil deeds coming from such an abyss of [J.107] wickedness. Another [M.469] example condemns a person to sudden death because he desired to have his morning meal in the evening and does not see the rays of dawn (Lk 12.20). As a mortal subject to death, do not reject faith and take no pleasure in enjoy-ment because we resem-ble those who wish to flatter the flesh in every possible way. Such persons are lords without successors and sover-eigns holding sway upon the earth, that is to say, we should be very careful at harvest and look forward to the joy of har-vest at the time for planting. We plant a plane tree and antici-pate the shadow of its lofty branch-es and antici-pate the sweet-ness of fruit from darkly bed olive trees. Often when these plants mature at autumn and death approaches at winter, they do not last for a number of years but for only three or four days.

Let us therefore consider our transitory life and the passing, unstable nature of time which, like a teeming river, carries everything away to destruction. Would that this brief, perishable life be without guilt! Because we are subject to peril at each hour, we must be responsible to the incorruptible Judge not through words, as we have already said. The blessed psalmist now gives voice to this sentiment in his desire to have foreknowledge of life's end. He beseeches God to know the number of days left [J.108] to him that he might be ready at death and not be distressed as an unprepared traveler in the midst of his journey and troubles round about. "Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days in order that I may know what I lack. Behold, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my life is as nothing in your sight" (Ps 39.4-5). Consider the constitution of the good soul and its royal dignity. Closely reflect upon the King of Kings and Judge of Judges (1Tm 6.15) and seek to live and behave well in accord with the commandments. In this way we may all attain the unblemished existence of that city through the grace and love of our Lord Jesus, to whom be glory forever. Amen (cf. Rom 16.27).

AS YOU DID IT TO ONE OF THESE, YOU DID IT TO ME

[M.472 & J.111] I now turn my attention to contemplate the coming of the fearful King described in the Gospel (Mt 25.31-+). The soul cowers and is transfixed by these dreadful words when it considers the fearful description of the heavenly King seated upon the throne of glory. The throne is magnificent with a countless myriad of angels standing about it because it holds him who cannot be contained (Rev 7.11). This great and terrible king bends down from his inexpressible glory to human nature. Here we see all generations: those who have existed from the beginning right up to when everyone is gathered for that fearful manifestation where they are judged according to the worthiness of [J.112] their lives. Those who have lived well are at his right and rejoice, whereas those at his left are deprived of their inheritance and are rejected. I have heard a sweet, gentle voice saying to one group, "Come, blessed," and a dreadful rejection to the others which says, "Depart, evildoers" (Mt 25.34,41).

I read here that the soul is full of apprehension at the prospect in store for this latter group because they do not seem aware of their deeds and fail to perceive their predicament. The soul has no time to explore or contemplate anything else; however, these matters are not insignificant nor unworthy of our examination, that is, to know him who exists eternally. "Behold, I am with you always" (Mt 28.20). If we believe that [Christ] is with us now, how will he come since he is proclaimed as not being present? If [M.473] "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17.28), as the Apostle [Paul] says, our efforts within the limitations of time can neither grasp nor embrace him who contains everything. This applies to the present as well as to the future. I see that any being near or surrounding the throne surpasses whatever belongs to the present age. Thus we decline to speak of this order [J.113], regardless of what it contains, and turn our attention to the common good.

Brethren, I am very much troubled and do not deny the foreboding of my soul. I desire that you do not dread rejection, for blessed is the man who fears [the Lord] as Wisdom says (Prov 28.14). But according to a wise word of scripture (cf. Lev 26.15, Dt 28.15, Mal 2.2), anyone who despises his deeds is in turn despised by him. There-fore, we should not give way to a brooding state of mind.

Why should we reject fear? Because scripture tells us to advance on the road of life which truly invigo-rates and vivifies us (Heb 10.20). What is this road? [Christ] said, "I was hungry, thirsty, a stranger, naked, sick and in prison" (Mt 25.35). "Whatever you did for one of these, you did to me" (vs. 40). Thus he says, "Come, blessed of my Father" (vs. 34). These words teach us that blessedness consists in observance of the commandments and their rejection effects condemna-tion. Let us love the blessing and avoid condemnation. We should make haste and not subject our-selves to such a dire sentence by choosing [the curse]. Let us now accept the Lord of bless-ings and show concern for the needy. This is especially urgent because his injunction pertains to so many persons who lack basic necessities with regard to their bodies and who are consumed by painful illnesses. Let us pay close atten-tion to the good news on their behalf because I am speaking about persons who suffer from severe sickness. Since their [**J.114**] affliction is so great, we should obtain a blessing for them by observing [God's] commandment.

The task set before us consists in not opposing the Spiri-t's injunction. We must not be counted among those who are es-tranged nor must we imitate persons whom the Gospel rejects; I mean the priest and Levite who passed by [**M.476**] that unfor-tunate man without showing him mercy. The Gospel tells us that robbers left him half dead (Lk 10.30+). Should we imitate the irrespon-sibili-ty of those persons who are charged in their neglect of bodily afflic-tions? Furthermore, what does this sight imply which pertain-s to the man who fell prey to thieves and who was beset by suffer-ing? Here you see a man remodeled through weakness and reduced to a four-footed form; instead of hands he has hooves and talons by which he makes scratches on human footpaths. How can we know from his prints that a human being has made them? A man in upright posture who looks to heaven; although his nature has endowed him with hands, he has inclined to the earth and has become four-footed like an irratio-nal beast. He is thick with hair, makes hoarse noises with violent breathing from within as though he were sub-merged by water; we may even say that this man is more wretch-ed than an irrational beast. He retains all the [**J.115**] characteris-tics from birth until now and not one of them have changed into an alien form. His nature has been altered into a form which does not at all resemble what we are accus-tomed to see. For example, feet take the place of hands; he goes about on his knees which are like mallets either tapering off altogeth-er or are appendages for randomly crawling about.

Are you not ashamed that a fellow human being is marked by these attributes? You do not show mercy to a man like yourself but despise his lot and hate his supplica-tion as one to be avoided when he approaches like some savage animal. We should make a precise comparison here because al-though you are man, you resem-ble an angel in your incorporeal, spiritual nature which is united with flesh and blood.

Why do I mention angels? The Lord of angels, the most blessed King of heaven, became man for you and assumed this foul smelling, contemptible flesh endowed with a soul in order to cure your illness through his own touch. You, whose nature resembles that sick man, flee the race of man. Do not, my brothers, allow wicked counsel to please you. Know those persons whom you consult because as a man among men, you should appropriate nothing of his common nature. Do not make predictions about the future. Condemn the passions of this alien body and make a sound judgment regarding this completely uncertain nature in which you participate, even though it is common to everyone. Therefore, let our remarks remain true in every case.

[M.477] Why do you not allow yourself be moved to show mercy? [J.116] You see men wandering about as swine in search of food with torn rags for clothing; they have staffs in hand, one for a weapon and another for a support which they do not grasp by the fingers but bind to their hands with a rod. Their pouches are ripped and the lump of bread they possess is thoroughly rotten. Their hearth, home, mattress, bed, possessions, table and all their other belongings are inadequate. Should you not take their plight into consideration? Man, made in God's image, was set as ruler over the earth with animals placed at his service (Gen 1.26). His prosperity changes to misfortune so that the appearances we see are uncertain, for neither what distinguishes him as a living being is pure nor is it characteristic of one. If you offer a conjecture about man, you would reject his character as unsightly. If you compare him to an irrational beast, you will not find any correspondence. Such animals are solely concerned with themselves and flock together by reason of their similarity. Those who have become loathsome to others do not perceive themselves in this way out of necessity. Having been expelled, they tend to keep their own company. Do you see their sad dances, their lamentable and pitiful condition and how have they caused such a dismal predicament? They make a show of their plight as jugglers displaying their various afflictions to onlookers. They compose melancholy songs, narrate gloomy stories, make lyrics [J.117] of disastrous situations and create novel, objectionable tragedies which do not pertain to the misfortune of others but to themselves. What pomp and stories they fabricate! What do we hear them saying? Why do not they reject their own unjust deeds? Why are they rejected from cities, gatherings, feasts and celebrations? Such people resemble murderers, those who commit patri-cide or persons condemned to perpetual exile; rather, they are much more unfortunate. If murderers are permitted to live with men, they cannot because they are perceived as a common foe without a single dwelling, common table or clothing.

What a dreadful fate! Neither flowing streams nor rivers can wash away the defilement of their illness. If dogs greedy for blood lick up water, beasts do not consider this revolting. If a sick person approaches water, men immediately want no share of it. They speak of such incidents in detail and deplore them while the wretched throw themselves at the feet of other persons out of necessity because they have become suppliants to everyone they encounter. Often this depressing sight has saddened me; I despair at their condition and their memory [M.480] troubles me. I have seen their pitiful dilemma, a sight which moves me to tears. They resemble dead

men by the wayside; they are no longer men but are [J.118] left in this wretched condition because they have lost recognizable characteristics. They hate themselves, curse the day of their birth and despise that day on which their lives began. They are ashamed of calling themselves human and thus do not insult [human] nature; they always live in misery and send up a continuous lament. When looking at themselves, they always have an occasion for sorrow; they are at a loss, rather, they think that they no longer have bodies because sickness, the only thing left to them, wastes them away. Such unfortunate persons consider these afflictions and do not have the strength to see because their vision is impaired. They seek to describe their condition and cannot because disease hinders their ability to speak. They wish to eat food and cannot because their mouths have ulcers. Unfortunately, they lack sensation like the dead because their senses have been destroyed. How do such persons see, smell or touch? What about the other senses which gradually lose their power or become completely corrupt? In all these conditions they wander like animals and exchange their [human] nature in search for verdant pasture. They endure hazards to obtain food by barter and show [J.119] their distress to everyone through supplication. Affliction leads them, and they sustain each other in difficulty. Each person supports the other by using their limbs for those more unfortunate. This does not apply for just one individual, but all wisely employ hardship as anyone can see when they are gathered together. Each one shows mercy and demonstrates sympathy. Their distress in an occasion for assistance which they reveal by mutual service. One person has mutilated hands, another has a swollen stomach while yet another's face is mutilated; still another person has a withered limb. Anyone with such a deprivation exhibits severe disability.

What can we gather from all these examples? Is the law of nature sinful? Can we recite a tragedy about human afflictions, extol them [M.481] and speak passionately of their memory? Should we show sympathy and concern? Words are united to deeds with regard to what is true, and the Lord does not say that salvation consists in words but in deeds which effect salvation (Mt 7.21). We are responsible for following his command. Let no one say that it is sufficient to send food to people not involved in our lives. This does not reveal mercy but an outward show [J.120] in order to remove such persons from our presence. Do not their lives put us to shame and make us like dogs? A hunter does not avoid the lairs of young animals, and the farmer knows how to care for calves; many such examples may be offered. Even the traveler washes the feet of his ass, takes care of its wounds and cleanses its stable of dung. Will we refuse to neglect human beings and their beasts? No, my brothers, no. Let not us not have this attitude towards our fellow men.

We ought to be mindful of who we are and the advice we give because men are not lords of their own [human] nature. "There is for all mankind one entrance into life" (Wisd 7.6), and we all must eat and drink. Similarly, the human body is constituted in one way and has a common end for "there is a common departure." Everyone must die and suffer dissolution. Nothing composed can regain its original condition because for a brief time the body appears as a bubble to house our spirit after which no trace exists of this transitory expansion. No memory of it remains forever in columns, stones and inscriptions. Keep this in mind, for the Apostle [Paul] says, "Do not become proud but stand in awe" (Rom 11.20). It is uncertain whether

you understand the harshness of this statement. Do you say that I should flee illness? Should a man be incriminated whose humor is corrupt and rotten because his blood has been mixed with black bile? We should pay attention to physicians who teach about illness. What wrong is there because man's substance is mobile, unstable [J.121] and subject to illness? Do you not see that in addition to persons in good health, there are other sound persons who often suffer affliction, boils or who are inflamed by these illnesses which develop into festering, redness and infirmities? What should we do? Do we not combat illness which afflicts a bodily member? On the other hand, we turn our attention to cure a diseased member by using the health of the entire body. Thus illness is not abominable, for a cure restores health to the [M.484] distressed member. Why do we shrink from these things? We should not fear the threat of him who says "Depart from me into eternal fire. Inasmuch as you did it not to one of these, you did it not to me" (Mt 25.41,-45). If we heed these words, people would not feel resentment towards those who are afflicted; they would take care to reject defilement from themselves and consider our zeal for those who are unfortunate. If we believe that the promise [of Christ] is true, one must observe the commandments without which a person cannot have hope. The stranger, those who are naked, without food, infirm and imprisoned are the ones the Gospel intends for you. The wanderer and naked, and ill person without necessities stand in need by reason of their hardships. A homeless person or one with no work lacks life's necessities; they are imprisoned by illness. You have the fullness of [J.122] the commandments with regard to these persons (Rom 13.10), so lend the Lord everything you have by showing mercy (Prov 19.17). Why are you then so obstinate concerning your own life? He who does not wish to have the God of all as a friend possesses nothing except stubbornness towards himself. Just as a person appropriates the commandment, another separates himself from it by not showing generosity. "Take my yoke upon yourself" (Mt 11.29). Here the text speaks of observing the commandments in terms of a yoke.

Let us pay attention to him who summons us and be united to Christ by putting on the yoke of love. Let us not reject it, for this yoke is sweet and light and does not weigh us down. As the Apostle says, "Let us sow bountifully in order that we might reap bountifully" (2Cor 9.6). Many ears of corn spring up from what we scatter. Abundant is the field of the Lord's commandments, and high is the yield of his blessing. Do you wish to understand to what height is its growth? It reaches to the highest heaven. Anything you do in this regard bears fruit in the treasure houses of heaven (Mt 6.20). Do not be dismayed by these words nor think that friendship with them is to be treated lightly. The hand may be mutilated but is not ineffective to reach for help. Food may be useless but does not hinder us from running to God. The eye may run with fluids but sees invisible benefits through the soul, do not despise the body's unseemly form. Wait awhile and you will see what surpasses every wonder because anything material is in a state of flux and does not continue while that [invisible good] remains forever. But when the soul is freed from this corruptible, earthly entanglement, it will shine with its own beauty. The proof for this is [J.123] as follows: the wealthy, well fed man [M.485] does not despise the poor man's hand after this life. However, the poor man's finger which suffered corruption is now worthy of a drop of water since the wealthy man longed to have a drop of water put on

his tongue (Lk 16.19). You would not desire this if from the disagreeable body you look at the soul's character above. Can the wealthy man recant by a change of life? How much can a poor, unfortunate man be blessed within this life? What lot is measured out for the soul of the wicked, wealthy man? If his life is restored, what would he receive? Would he be numbered among the fortunate or the misfortunate? His lot would certainly be among the latter group. He begs that worthy messengers be sent from the dead to his brothers in order that they may not be harmed by such arrogance which takes delight in things of the flesh, thereby falling into the chasm of hell on the smooth [path] of pleasure. Why do we not take these examples to heart? Why do not we pursue that rewarding task proscribed by the divine Apostle? "Your abundance should supply their want, so that their abundance after this life may supply your salvation" (2Cor 8.14). If we wish to receive kindness, let us be first to offer it; if we wish to be recipients later on, let us now attend to those in unfortunate circumstances; if we wish to acquire an everlasting dwelling from them, let us now admit them; if we wish to cure our sins, let us care for their afflictions. "Blessed are the merciful, for mercy will be shown to them" (Mt 5.7).

[J.124] But someone will ask if [God's] commandment is beneficial for the future. Now is the time to share in the sufferings of the poor and not bear the same fate as inconsiderate persons who flee their approach. Any words, utterances, affections and indifference concerning God's commandments are simply lies and shadows. They are not true because the performance of [God's] commandments does not entail fear; evil cannot cure evil. What benefit can we see in cures pertaining to both youth and old age when people do not strive to foster good habits which pertain to the body? Perhaps none at all. But certain afflictions such as plagues and similar external tribulations occur when polluted air or water strikes and defiles persons who pass them on to others (I do not believe that illness is transmitted to healthy persons, rather, everyone shares its common attack) because the cause of disease extends itself to other people. Thus misfortunes arise [M.488] from within our bodies; blood is defiled by an accumulation of corrupt humors which generate illness. This fact teaches us a valuable lesson: Do healthy habits deteriorate to illness if a person earnestly pursues healing? Of course not. Most likely affliction is not transmitted from ill persons to those in good health. If [J.125] this [God's] commandment is a valuable means for preparing the kingdom of heaven and if the body's cure has any value, what impedes us from practicing the command of love?

Do you claim that many persons abhor adversity and toil? This is true, and I admit that it is difficult. What action exists without involving adversity can you offer when it is performed according to virtue? The divine law prescribes much effort and labor with regard to our hope for heaven and shows a difficult, rough road to life which hems us in on all sides. "Strait and narrow is the gate which leads to life" (Mt 7.14). What must we then do? Should we reject that blessed hope because it is not easy? Let us ask youths if continence is easy or the free rein of desires is effortless; then we will cling that which is sweet and easy. But will we shrink from the hardship of virtue? It does not seem that these necessary efforts hinder the way of life which is broad, prone [to evil] and spacious. [Christ] says, "Enter through the strait and narrow gate." One of the [virtues] orders our life by fidelity to it, yet our habits impel

us to reject [God's] commandment. We will cure the natural rejection felt by healthy persons provided that we assiduously apply ourselves. Habits are indeed powerful and usually pursue [J.126] pleasure, not difficulties. Thus no one should say that the commandment is hard but helpful. Since the gain is great, the labor is insignificant compared to the gain, for anything laborious action in time becomes sweet through practice.

If there is anything further to be added, we should show sympathy towards misfortunate persons deprived of good health. It is a fine idea to be first in extending mercy those beset by afflictions. Since all mankind shares one human nature and since no one can remain constant in doing good, we should always be mindful of the Gospel's [M.489] precept to carry out whatever is demanded of us. Although we may be well equipped for a voyage, we should extend a hand to shipwrecked persons. We all share the sea, waves and surging billows along with the deep, rocks, promontories, and anything else which fills our life's voyage with fear. While you remain healthy and ply the sea of life in safety, do not pass by without showing mercy to those who have suffered shipwreck before you. Who is near you to always provide a successful voyage? You have not yet attained the harbor of rest, have exited the billowing waves, nor have you attained firm ground. You still travel through life on the sea. You experience similar experiences with persons in distress and assist those on a similar voyage. But we escort everyone through the Holy Spirit on the voyage of life into the harbor of rest. Let the performance of the commandments and love be our rudder. With those who are guided aright, let us attain the land of the [J.127] Gospel which contains the great city whose architect and builder is our God (Heb 11.20), to whom be glory and power forever (Rom 16.27). Amen.