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The Hungry Are Dying

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2001

a man, always insatiable, refuses to share his wealth with his own kind. Content yourself with a modest table. Do not suffer shipwreck on the high seas of unbridled banquets, for this wreck is a grievous thing, not just being broken by submerged rocks, but rather being driven out into the shadowy abyss from which no one who falls in ever returns.

Use; do not misuse; so, too, Paul teaches you. Find your rest in temperate relaxation. Do not indulge in a frenzy of pleasures. Don't make yourself a destroyer of absolutely all living things, whether they be four-footed and large or four-footed and small, birds, fish, exotic or common, a good bargain or expensive. The sweat of the hunter ought not to fill your stomach like a bottomless well that many men digging cannot fill. Our gourmands do not, in fact, even spare the bottom of the sea, nor do they limit themselves to the fish that swim in the water, but they also bring up the crawling marine beasts from the ocean bed and drag them to shore. One pillages the oyster banks, one pursues the sea urchin, one captures the creeping cuttle fish, one plucks the octopus from the rock it grips, one eradicates the mollusks from their pedestal. All animal species, those that swim in the surface waters or live in the depths of the sea, [468] all are thus brought up into the atmosphere. The artful skills of the hedonist cleverly devise traps appropriate to each.

But what is the ultimate fate of gourmands? It is inevitable that sin, wherever it strikes, like a disease brings on its consequences. Hence those who prepare a delicate and sybaritic table are attracted necessarily to sumptuous dwellings and squander their goods on enormous houses and superfluous ornaments. They also like to rest on magnificent beds covered with flowery hangings, richly embroidered. They have massively expensive silver tables made for them; some are remarkable by the sheen of the metal; on others an artist engraves scenes and one is thus able, during the meal, to delight in beautiful legends. Think further of all the wine bowls, tripods, jars, ewers, platters, all sorts of cups; the clowns, mimes, kithara-players, chanters, poets, male and female musicians, dancers, and all of the equipment of debauchery, boys with effeminate coiffures, shameless girls, sisters to Herodias in their indecency; this is that Herodias who caused the death of John, that is to say, the death of godlike and philosophical intellect in everyone.

While this is going on in the house, a myriad of Lazaruses sit at the gate, some dragging themselves along painfully, some with their eyes gouged out, others with amputated feet, some quite literally creep, mutilated in all their members.²⁶ They cry and are not heard over the flutes' whistling, loud songs, and the cackling of bawling laughter. If they beg more loudly at the door, the porter of a barbarous master bounds out like a brute and drives them away with strokes of a stick, setting the dogs on them and lashing their ulcers with whipcord. Accordingly they retreat, the beloved of Christ, who embody the essential commandment without having gained one mouthful of bread or meat, but satiated with insults and blows. And in the den of Mammon, some vomit up their meal like an overflowing vessel; others sleep on the table, their wine cups beside them. Twofold is the sin that reigns in this house of shame: one is the excess of the drunkards, the other the hunger of the poor who have been driven away.

If God sees these scenes — and I am sure He does — what fatal catastrophe, do you think, does He hold in store for those who hate the poor? Answer me! Or do you not know that it is to this end that the holy gospel shouts out and testifies with scenes of horror and dread? And thus it describes the deep groaning of the man flung into the pit and held captive in the abyss of the wicked. Another [469] of the same type is condemned to a sudden death, such that he plans in the evening his next day's pleasure but does not live to see the first ray of dawn (Luke 16:19; 12:20). Let us not be mortal, fitful, and temporary, in our faith but immortal, boundless, and never-ending in our pleasure. For this is the attitude we cling to, those of us who wish to pander to sensual gratification in everything as though we were rich men without heirs, as though we might be lords of earthly things forever. At harvesttime we worry about sowing and at seed-time we look forward to the joy of the harvest; we plant a plane tree in hopes of sheltering ourselves beneath its shade; we bury the seed of the date palm in the wish of savoring its fruits. And often this comes about in our old age, when the late autumn of life has set in, when the winter of death is near, and there remain not a cycle of years but only three or four days.

Let us be realistic, considering these things reasonably: our life is fleeting and flowing, and time cannot be stopped nor held back; it is like a river's current that sweeps everything in its path to final destruction. If only, short-lived and perishable as we are, we would not be called to render account. But such is exactly the peril that looms every hour: we will have to justify all to the incorruptible judge, even the words that we utter. This is why the blessed psalmist meditates on a similar thought and desires to know his own moment of death. He prays that God will tell him how many days he has left, in order to ready himself for his final hour, that he might not be caught unaware, like an unprepared traveler who must seek provisions while he is en route. "Lord," he cries, "Make me to know my end and the measure of my days that I may know in what way I am lacking. See, you have made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight" (Ps. 90:5–6).

Observe the conscientious prudence of this worthy soul, of royal rank though he was. For he perceives the king of kings and judge of judges as clearly as in a mirror, and he seeks to attain the perfect word of the commandments and to die as an intact and flawless citizen of the world to come. May it come to pass that we all attain it by the grace and philanthropy of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory forever. Amen.

C. Gregory of Nyssa

On the Love of the Poor: 2 "On the saying, 'Whoever Has Done It to One of These Has Done It to Me'"

[In illud: Quatenus uni ex his fecistis mihi fecistis]

[472] Again I hold before my eyes the dreadful vision of the return of the kingdom; upset by this account, my soul is not yet able to dispel this mental anguish, as a certain scene is manifest, the king of heaven sitting, formidable, on the throne of glory as the gospel describes it—a magnificent throne, if that is what it is, on which is placed the one who has no place. Thousands of angels form a circle around the king;

26. The first reference in these two sermons to the disease of "leprosy" and its biblical model.

and he is a king great and fearsome, who, from the apex of his indescribable glory, inclines himself toward humanity, who I saw there assembling on foot — all the races that have lived from the beginning of humankind to this formidable day of the *parousia* — and meting out to all the penalty of their deeds. To those on the right, who lived rightly, he bestowed rewards. The reprobates, massed together on the left, were seen to be assigned the chastisement of their crimes; and he separated the one group from the other. He spoke to each; to one he spoke sweet and good words: “Come, you, blessed of my father.” And to the others this dreadful curse: “Be gone, evil ones, to eternal fire” (Matt. 25:31).

This image impresses my soul with such fear that it seems to be coming to life, and no reality seems at all urgent, nor can my spirit take interest in any other topic of study or reflection except these words. And yet it is not a small [thing], nor worthy of merely a little attention: to know how He comes who is always present, who says, “For I am with you always.” (Matt. 28:20) If He is with us, why does He announce His return as if He has been absent? If, [473] “in God we have life, movement and being,”²⁷ according to the words of the apostle, it is impossible that the One who holds all in His hand can separate Himself in terms of place from that which He holds. How is He able to not be present to those whom He encompasses, or how is it possible to wait in the promise of His coming? What sort of throne is there for One who is bodiless? What is the limiting circumference of the throne of the One who is not limited to place?²⁸ In all these thoughts I am running ahead of myself, as they are greater than our present concern with the end of time. Lest we be tossed out among the class of those condemned, we will do our best to use language by which each might derive profit.

Certainly, my brothers, certainly this threat continues to terrify me. I do not deny my trouble and I greatly wish that you would no longer scorn my fears. “Blessed,” says the wise man, “is the man always on guard. The one who hardens his heart falls into trouble” (Prov. 28:14). Insofar as the evil hour of grievous trial has not yet come, let us act wisely.

And how to elude this threat? By choosing the way, alive and fresh, indicated in scripture. What is the way? “I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, naked, sick, a prisoner. That which you have done to one single person, it is to me to whom you have done it. Come, then, blessed of my father” (Matt. 25:40). What does this teach us? That God’s blessing follows from obeying his commandments. In transgressing them, one courts condemnation. Let us choose blessing and flee the curse. It is for us to seek out or not to seek out, one or the other. Let us throw ourselves with zeal into the path of God where we will live, blessed by the Lord who holds himself bound to the attentions that we render to the needy. The commandment is vital especially now, with so many in need of basic essentials for survival, and many constrained by need, and many whose bodies are utterly spent from suffering sickness. In caring for them, you will see for yourself the realization of the good news. I think

above all of the victims of a terrible illness. The greater the attentions, the more vast the blessings that await the faithful servants of the commandment.

But what ought we to do? Do not tear apart the unity of the Spirit, that is to say, do not consider as strangers those beings who partake of our nature; do not imitate the men who condemn the Gospel. I am talking about the priest and the Levite who passed by [476] on the road without the least compassion for the unfortunate man whom the robbers had come and left for dead. For if this sort is charged with not even discerning the brutal calamity of a naked body, how are we innocent — us — if we imitate these guilty ones? And indeed, the man who had been attacked by brigands presented a spectacle similar to the sight of those caught in suffering in these days.

You see these people, whose frightful malady has changed them into beasts. In place of fingernails, the disease has caused them to bear pieces of wood on hands and feet. Strange impressions are left on our paths! Who recognizes there a human foot? These people who yesterday stood upright and looked at the sky are here, today, bending to the earth, walking on four feet, practically changed into animals; Listen to the rasping wheeze that comes from their chest. Thus it is that they breathe.

But we assert that this condition is worse than that of animals. At least beasts preserve, in general, the appearance they had at birth until they die. None of them experiences the effects of such an avatar, so profound a reversal. With men all happens as if they change in nature, losing the traits of their species to be transformed into monsters. Their hands serve them as feet. Their knees become heels; their ankles and toes, if they are not completely eaten away, they drag miserably like the launch boat that drags the ships. You see a man and in him you have no respect for a brother? No, you do not pity a being of your own race; his affliction only instills horror in you, his begging repels you, and you flee his approach like the assault of a wild beast. Think a little: the angels, who are pure spirit, do not hesitate to touch humankind, and your body of flesh and blood is no horror to them at all. But why evoke angels? The Lord of the angels, the king of celestial bliss, became man for you and put on this stinking and unclean flesh, with the soul thus enclosed, in order to effect a total cure of your ills by his touch. But to you, you who share the nature of this brokenness, you flee your own race. No, my brothers, let not this odious judgment flatter you! Remember who you are and on whom you contemplate: a human person like yourself, whose basic nature is no different from your own. Don’t count too heavily on the future. In condemning the sickness that preys upon the body of this man, you fail to consider whether you might be, in the process condemning yourself and all nature. For you yourself belong to the common nature of all. Treat all therefore as one common reality.

[477] Why aren’t you moved by any of the diseases you perceive happening to other people? You see the wandering men who are scattered along our roads like cattle foraging for a little nourishment, clothed in wretched rags, a wooden staff in their hands to arm and support them. Yet these are not their own fingers that they clasp, but a species of straps lying along their wrists. A torn scrip, a morsel of stale bread, that is their entire hearth, home, light, bed, barn, table, all the supplies of life. And do you not know who it is who lives in this condition? Man born in the image of God, entrusted with the governance of the earth and the rule over all creatures, here so alienated by sickness that one hesitates to recognize him. He has none of the

27. Acts 17:28.

28. The French adds the question, present in the Latin text but not in the Greek, “What is the expression of one who has no face?”

appearance of a man, nor those of a beast. Do you think about the man? But the human body disowns this hideous form. Do you try to see here an animal? But there is no species that takes the form of this monster. Alone, they dare to look at themselves among themselves, and they live in bands, united by their common sufferings. To outsiders they only awaken disgust. Among themselves necessity overrides the horror that they give themselves. Driven away from everywhere, they form a society apart and living, mixed together, closely [in a narrow space]. Can you distinguish their gloomy dances? Do you listen to their plaintive songs? How do they arrive to make a parade of their infirmities and give the crowds the spectacle of their crippled bodies? Macabre jugglers, exhibiting their diverse mutilations! Making sad melodies and gloomy chants, poets of a unique type of tragedy where, without any need of new subjects, they fill the stage with their own misfortunes. What expressions! What detailed descriptions! What events do we hear? They tell how they have been driven away by their own parents, without the least grief over their affliction, how they have been banished from the assemblies, festivals, the markets, treated like murderers and parricides, condemned like those to perpetual exile, but much worse yet. For criminals are always able to establish themselves abroad and live among the members of a collective group. Alone, the sick are driven out from all countries, like designated enemies of the human race. They are not considered worthy of a roof, a common table, or any furniture.

As if this is not bad enough, they are forbidden from the public fountains as well as the streams: they are likely to poison them, it is said. If a dog comes there to moisten his bloody tongue, it is not decreed that the water has been polluted. But if only a sick man approaches there, at once the stream is condemned because of him. Such are their stories and such their complaints. This is why, pressed by hunger, they come to throw themselves at the feet of the public and implore the first to appear. This atrocious spectacle has often filled me with alarm; often I have felt deeply upset by it, and now [480] it utterly confounds my thoughts. I see again this pitiable suffering, these scenes that force one to tears, these human beings dragging themselves along the road, half-dead, yet supremely human. Rather than men, theirs is a lamentable wreckage. Their malady has robbed them of the traits that would permit them to be identified. One is not able to recognize humans in them: they have lost the form. Alone among the living, they detest themselves and abhor the day they were born, since they have reason to curse these hours that have inaugurated such a horrendous existence. Human beings, I say, who are ashamed to answer to this common name, and who fear dishonoring the common nature by carrying the title. They pass their life ever groaning and never lack a good excuse for tears. All that they ever need to do to awaken their own plaintive cries is to look at themselves. For they do not know whether it is worse to lose their members or still to have them: should they be sad that nature sometimes spares them rather than mutilating them? Which is worse: to be able to see the evidence of their loss or to no longer have it in sight, the malady having rendered them blind? To have such misfortunes to relate, or to be dumb victims for whom the leprosy has eaten away their tongue? To feed miserably on a mouthful of bread or to have lost the form of the mouth altogether and no longer be able to eat like everyone else? To have the experience of the body rotting like carrion, or to be completely without nerve sensations? Where is their sight? Their smell?

Their touch? Where are the other sensations that the infection eats away, little by little? One sees these unfortunates everywhere, trudging along like a flock in search of better pasture. To bargain for food, they carry their distress and show their ulcers by way of a beggar's palm. Isolated in their malady, they have no one to guide their way; their need brings them together and they themselves bring relief to one another. Powerless alone, they help one another and lend the use of their members to make up for those without. One always sees them together. The misfortune itself has fine points, more to their benefit if it advertises itself in all its horror. Each person is his own source of pity, but the public is especially further disturbed if it sees all the infirmities at one time, augmenting the horror of the particular miseries; the misfortunes of one's neighbor thus increase the compassion felt for each individual. This one brandishes a mutilated hand, another exposes a bloated abdomen, a third uncovers a now useless face and another a leg eaten away with gangrene. Anxious to expose his distress, each bares the affected part.

What then? Is one not sinning against the natural law by reducing this person's suffering to theatrical phrases, treating the disease with a speech and remembering it with a ballad?²⁹ Is it not necessary rather to let our compassion and love for one another shine forth radiantly in action? There is a difference between words and action as great as the difference between a painting and the reality. The Lord affirms that we will be saved, not by our words but by our actions. Also, we ought not to short-change the commandment that enjoins us to help them [the poor]. But let no one say that some place far away from our life is perfectly sufficient and send them off to some frontier, supplying them with food. For a plan of this sort displays neither mercy nor sympathy but is designed, in the guise of goodwill, to banish these people utterly from our life. Are we not willing to shelter pigs and dogs under our roof? The hunters are often not separated, even at night, from their dogs. Look at the love that the peasant has for his calf. Even better, the traveler washes his donkey's hoofs with his own hands, brushes his back, carries out his dung, and cleans the stable. And will we disparage our own kin and race as baser than the animals? Let these things not be — no, my brothers! Resolve that this inhumanity will not triumph.

Remember who they are on whom we meditate: on human beings, in no way distinct from common nature. "There is for all only one entrance into life"³⁰: one way to live, to drink, to eat, only one physical make-up, a common biological law, only one physical death, only one return to the dust. All are similarly bound for decomposition; The body lives bound to the soul; like a transitory bubble, the spirit clothes itself in the body. The bubble bursts without leaving a trace of our exit. Our memory remains on steles, tombstones and epitaphs, but these also disappear eventually. Do not be exalted, as the apostle said, "but fear" (Rom. 11:20), lest the harsh lawgiver make you the first victim of the cruelty you practice. Do you flee, tell me, from the one who is sick? What repels you? That he has a weakness characterized by oozing of the rotten humors and blood infected by pus, followed by a flow of bile? For this is the medical explanation. Is it the sick person's fault if the frail fabric of his

29. παθαίνεσθαι, to sing a song or psalm of pathos.

30. Wisdom of Solomon 7:6.

sickly nature exposes itself in these unfortunate ways? Don't you see the healthy person suffering with a boil, a pimple, or other irritations of this sort, of similar purulent inflammations that overheat and redden the skin? What then? Does the rest of the body energetically destroy itself? Just the opposite: all the healthy parts act together to resorb the place of infection. This kind of suffering is not nauseating. Our healthy skin does not interfere with the [484] healing of the abscess. So why send these unfortunates away from us? This is why: no one fears the pronouncement, "Go, far from me, into the eternal fire. Of those whom you have given no aid, it is me you have failed to help." If we believed this, we would change our attitude toward the unfortunates; we would go back to them, without any trace of repugnance over caring for their illness. But if we have faith in the promise of God, it is our duty to obey these commandments: only our willingness can assure us of God's promised good will. Stranger, naked, hungry, sick, prisoner; this person carries all the misfortunes the gospel describes. He lives naked, without roof, and the addition of illness reduces him to the most tragic penury. He possesses nothing and has no power to get out of his suffering and provide for his life. He is a prisoner, chained by the illness. You have here the means by which to fulfill the whole law, rendering to the Lord all the things he demands if you show philanthropy to this person. Why then seek your own destruction? For God makes a home for those faithful to his law but deserts the hard-hearted. "Carry my yoke"; (Matt. 11:29) it is called yoke, obedience to the law.

Let us respond now to this summons: become Christ's beast of burden, strap on charity, and do not shake off this soft and gentle yoke that does not chafe the neck but rather caresses it. "Let us sow blessings in order to also reap blessings" (2 Cor. 9:6). This seed will yield a plentiful harvest. The crop of the Lord's law is abundant. The fruits of blessing are high indeed. Do you know how far they pile up? To the apex of heaven. All the good deeds that you have done will reap celestial fruit. Don't despair as a result of this saying, nor say that it is despicable to have a friendship with these people. The hand is mutilated but it is not insensitive to assistance. The foot is gangrenous but always able to run to God; the eye is missing, but it discerns invisible goodness nonetheless, to the enlightenment of the soul. Don't despise their misshapen body; yet a little while and you will contemplate a vision more astonishing than a complete miracle. Our frail nature is not prone to long-term endurance. As soon as there is no more weaving to be done on the corruptible and terrestrial body, the soul, delivered, will manifest its interior beauty. To that rich man of luxury, the life-giving hand of the poor man was not loathsome, but [485] he expressed a desire that the formerly purulent fingers of the poor man might procure for him a drop of water, wanting to lick the wet thumb of the poor man with his tongue. He would not have had to wish this if he had known enough to perceive the soul beyond the ugliness of the body. Once in the afterlife, what vain regrets take hold of the rich man? How he ought to proclaim the poor blessed for his bad lot here below? How he ought to accuse his own people, those vowed to wealth to the detriment of the soul? If he had the chance to live his life over, which character do you think he would play? That of a grand overlord or that of the oppressed? To all appearances, it is not uncertain that he would prefer the lot of the unfortunate. For he wishes that a beacon be sent [to warn] the brothers about this fate, so that they would give up this delusion of vain riches and temptation to a love of comfort and not slide down the slope

of pleasure, rolling uncontrollably into the infernal shadows. What do you think? Are we never going to learn the lesson of these accounts? Do we refuse the fair deal that our companion, the godly apostle, offers us: Your overabundance provides for their deficit so that the abundance of the needy in what pertains to this life might provide for your salvation? (2 Cor. 8:14) If we wish to find our profit here, we should practice this with foresight. If we desire to take this blessing up, let us give relief right now. If we want to be received by them in the eternal places, let us receive them now. If we wish to heal the wounds by which our sins have afflicted us, heal today the ulcers that break down their flesh. "Blessed are the merciful, for they will obtain mercy" (Matt. 5:7).

But perhaps you will disagree with me that the commandments can be well trusted, and [you say that] these days it is important to avoid the risk of contagion. You imagine that therefore you escape involuntary ills by fleeing sicknesses. These words are made-up excuses by which you conceal your scorn for divine wishes. And they are not true. There is nothing to fear when one is following the commandment. Don't treat evil with evil. How often we see people who have devoted their lives to the sick from their youth to their old age, without their health being in the least affected. Nothing happens to them. Certain illnesses, such as the plagues, do have an external cause and can be traced to pestilence in the air or water, with suspected transmission from the afflicted to those who approach them—(Personally I do not believe it can possibly be passed on from the afflicted to those who are healthy, but that common factors contribute and bring on the illness similarly in everyone)³¹—that the sickness is to blame as it goes out from those who have been affected and into the rest. But it is only in the interior [488] that the illness develops, invading the blood by putrid humors that infect it, and the infection does not leave the sick person. This hypothesis is confirmed by the following proof: Is there anyone indeed among the strong whose health deteriorates by association with the sick, even if they are in extremely close contact while providing medical care? No; this does not happen. Indeed, the opposite is more likely, I say: that illness cannot even be transmitted from the sick to those who are healthy. In thus preparing for the kingdom of heaven, there is no [danger of] harm to the body of the one who serves. So why do you still hold back from applying the commandment of love?

But, you say, it is hard to master the loathing that most people naturally feel in the face of the sick. Truly, I am of your opinion: it is hard. But am I saying that if it is a worthy project, there will be no effort? God's law commanded much sweat and toil for the hope of heaven and He teaches humankind—by the harder tasks and harshness of constraining circumstances on all sides—that the way to life is difficult. For it is said, "Narrow and restricted is the way that leads to life" (Matt. 7:14). What then? Will we give up hope of blessing because it is incompatible with comfort? Let us ask the young people whether wisdom by effort does not seem to them more difficult than shameless abandonment to pleasures. Are we, with so much at stake, going to choose the pleasant, smooth path and beat a retreat in the face of the steep path of virtue? This decision offends the legislator who has forbidden us during our

31. The parentheses here are in the Greek text.

life to take the smooth road, easy and spacious. "Enter," he says, "by the restricted, narrow door." Let us put our efforts into the exercise of the precepts that our lives so ignore: curing the natural aversion of the healthy by the persevering exercise of care for the sick. For hard exercise has a surprising effect even on the most difficult people, in that it creates a long-term sense of enjoyment. Let no one say this is laborious duty, for it is useful to those who perform it. In time we will change and laborious effort will become sweet. If I must make it even more clear, sympathy toward the unfortunate is, in this life, profitable for the healthy. For it is beautiful³² for the soul to provide mercy to others who have fallen on misfortune. For all humanity is governed by a single nature, and no one possesses any guarantee of continual happiness. We ought never to forget the gospel [489] precept that we treat others as we wish others to treat us. Insofar as you sail on tranquil waters, hold the hand of the unfortunate who have suffered shipwreck. You all sail on the same sea, prone to waves and tempests; and reefs, underwater breakwaters and other dangers of the ocean evoke the same apprehension in all sailors. Insofar as you are floating, healthy and safe, on the calm sea of life, do not arrogantly pass by those who have shipwrecked their vessel on the reefs. What assurance do you have of always following your way on tranquil waters? You have not yet arrived at the safe port; you have not yet been dragged from the waves, you have not yet reached the shore; throughout your life you remain on the water. Your attitudes toward the unlucky person will determine the conduct of your fellow sailors toward you, yourself. Let us all go forward to attain the port of our rest and desire that the Holy Spirit grant us a serene haven at the end of our journey! Execute God's orders; let us conduct ourselves by the precept of love; guided in this way, let us go up and navigate [the way] to the promised land where the great city stands, whose architect and builder is our God, to whom be glory and power from age to age. Amen.

32. This thought is reminiscent of the opening paragraphs of Gregory of Nazianzus's Or. 14, where he lists the virtues that are *kalos*.

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