

The Precepts of Pythagoras

The precepts of Pythagoras are a collection of short instructions or commandments on various activities, intended to act as a guide to proper and judicious conduct for the members of the Pythagorean brotherhood. They are expressed in symbolic terms, and must be interpreted to be correctly understood. The number of these precepts varies from collection to collection. I have used the collection of the French writer M. Dacier, found in his book *The Life of Pythagoras, with his Symbols and Golden Verses, together with the Life of Hierocles and his Commentary upon the Verses* (London edition of 1707).

Dacier presented seventy-five precepts, which he chose to call symbols. I have not adopted this term since it is bound to confuse modern readers. Many of the precepts are open to more than one interpretation, and some are difficult to fathom. The explanations should be received as a guide to their understanding, not as a final statement of their meaning.

Concerning these concise instructions, Dacier wrote:

Symbols are short Sentences, and as it were Riddles, which under the Cover of plain and natural Expressions, represent to the Understanding the Analogical Truths we would teach it. These sorts of Symbols were, as I may say, the Infancy of Morals; for not having need, any more than Proverbs, either of Definition or Reasoning, and going directly to inculcate the Precept, they were very proper to instruct Mankind, especially at a time when Morals had not yet been methodically treated. Thus you see why they were so much in use, not only in Egypt, but in Judea, and In Arabia, as we see by the Proverbs of Solomon, which are full of them; by the Story of the Queen of Sheba, who went to prove the Wisdom of that Prince with these sorts of Riddles; and by the Story of Samson: And they were yet more proper for Pythagoras, who after the Example of the Egyptians, endeavour'd to teach his Doctrine without divulging it and without hiding it.

I.

Go not beyond the balance.

The balance or scale was the ancient symbol of justice. It represented a just measure of worth, and hence by extension both lawful and honorable dealings. The aphorism is a warning not to exceed the bounds of the just laws of the nation. It is not a prohibition against violating arbitrary edicts that are unfair but are enforced only by the threat of punishment; rather, it warns against disgracing the dictates of the goddess Justice, whose laws are always based on fairness and truth.

II.

Sit not down on the bushel.

Dacier observed that the bushel, or *choenix*, was the measure of grain given to each slave for his sustenance. A bushel basket is most easily used for a seat when it is inverted, and in this

condition cannot be filled. To sit on the bushel basket is to be slothful, and the consequence is deprivation. Honest work is the way to provide for the necessities of life.

A bushel basket can also form a seat when it is filled, if we rest upon its contents. Another possible interpretation is that we should not be content with the measure of a slave – that is, should not merely accept what is given us, but should strive to better our lot in life by working beyond the degree that is required for mere survival. A familiar saying that expresses somewhat the same idea is “Do not rest on your laurels.”

III.

Tear not the crown to pieces.

It was the custom in ancient times to wear wreaths of flowers about the head during banquets. Dacier suggests three possible interpretations: that we should not spoil celebrations by displays of worry or grief; that we should not transgress the laws of the state, which are its crowning glory; that we should not speak ill of princes, that is to say, of those in positions of power.

Of the three, I am inclined to believe that Pythagoras intended the first meaning. The crown of flowers worn at feasts represented a union of its members. Each flower symbolized one of the celebrants, and the chain of stems, the good cheer that bound them together. To rend this crown by nervously picking at its petals, as undoubted many a worried guest must have done while revelry went on all around him, is to break this sacred union of happiness with a display of discontent. No one is more resented by party-goers than a melancholy individual who inhibits their enjoyment. It is a display of bad manners that can have unfortunate social consequences.

IV.

Eat not the heart.

The popular expression “eat your heart out” has an ancient lineage. Homer used this expression of Bellerophon, saying that he was “eating his own heart” with despair. This precept cautions us not to give in to discontent over our condition in life. Prolonged brooding and melancholy are self-destructive and accomplish no useful end.

V.

Stir not up the fire with a sword.

Do not inflame to violence the anger of others by your words or deeds. It is to “add fuel to the fire” and to “pour oil upon the flames,” to use two more familiar expressions. Fire symbolizes anger, the sword symbolizes strife or conflict.

There are two interpretations as to how this stirring up to violence takes place. Either the Pythagorean precept cautions against opposing or contradicting an angry person, lest that anger be turned against you; or it cautions against encouraging anger by giving counsels of violent action. I believe that Pythagoras intended the second meaning. To incite to violence

those who are enraged is a despicable act of which Pythagoras would have strongly disapproved.

VI.

When you are arrived on the frontiers, desire not to return back.

Dacier interpreted this to mean that when we reach the appointed time of death, we should not timorously cling to life. However, “frontier” can be viewed more generally as any challenge that confronts us. If we accept this broader meaning of the term, then the message is that when we accept a difficult task or a hardship, we should not try to back out of it at the last minute. It is a caution against getting “cold feet” in the face of opposition.

VII.

Go not in the public way.

This is a counsel to avoid the easy avenue of popular opinion in favor of the narrow path of independent thought. It is particularly applicable in occult or spiritual studies. Those who accept popular opinion about difficult questions will never attain an informed understanding of the matter. They must seek their own unique way to the truth if it is to acquire meaning in their lives. It is the difference between truism and living truth, between the unexamined life and knowing oneself.

VIII.

Suffer no swallows about your house.

Swallows are proverbial for their incessant twittering. Silence is necessary for a philosophical way of life. This is a caution against engaging in idle conversation for its own sake, merely as a type of social interaction. It is specifically condemned around the home. It is one thing for an enlightened man or woman to indulge in casual talk while in society, where silence might be misinterpreted as rudeness, but it is another thing to bring this noise home, into what should be a haven of stillness and reflection.

IX.

Wear not the image of God upon your ring.

Hands commit all manner of actions, base and noble, coarse and refined. A divine image should always be treated with respect. This is not possible when it is worn on the person as an article of jewelry. To avoid profanation, it should not be worn. Pythagoras would probably not have approved of the wearing of the cross by Christians, for this reason. It too easily lapses from a reminder of the divine to a mere fashion accessory.

In ancient times, rings were often used as seals for legal documents. A more symbolic interpretation is that we should not invoke the name of God to justify our personal, selfish actions.

X.

Help men to burden, but not to unburden themselves.

It is no act of kindness to help others live easy, slothful, unexamined lives. The human spirit thrives on challenges that must be overcome by an application of effort and ingenuity. It sickens where all needs are met without work. In the absence of doubt there can be no learning. The true spiritual teacher is one who knocks out the underpinnings of conventional thought and leaves the student bewildered and confused, because then he is forced to think and act for himself. Questions are the wealth of the soul.

XI.

Shake not hands easily with any man.

A handshake is a bond of trust. It represents an accord or agreement. Do not pledge your support or compliance to anyone unless you are sure they merit your respect.

Another interpretation is that you should not make hollow displays of camaraderie toward those to whom you do not feel genuine affection and trust.