

First Theological Oration (Oration 27), Gregory Nazianzus (329 - 389)

A Preliminary Discourse Against the Eunomians.

I. I am to speak against persons who pride themselves on their eloquence; so, to begin with a text of Scripture, Behold, I am against you, O thou proud one, Jeremiah 50:31 not only in your system of teaching, but also in your hearing, and in your tone of mind. For there are certain persons who have not only their ears 2 Timothy 4:3 and their tongues, but even, as I now perceive, their hands too, itching for our words; who delight in profane babblings, and oppositions of science falsely so called, and strifes about words, which tend to no profit; for so Paul, the Preacher and Establisher of the Word cut short, Romans 9:28 the disciple and teacher of the Fishermen, calls all that is excessive or superfluous in discourse. But as to those to whom we refer, would that they, whose tongue is so voluble and clever in applying itself to noble and approved language, would likewise pay some attention to actions. For then perhaps in a little while they would become less sophistical, and less absurd and strange acrobats of words, if I may use a ridiculous expression about a ridiculous subject.

II. But since they neglect every path of righteousness, and look only to this one point, namely, which of the propositions submitted to them they shall bind or loose, (like those persons who in the theatres perform wrestling matches in public, but not that kind of wrestling in which the victory is won according to the rules of the sport, but a kind to deceive the eyes of those who are ignorant in such matters, and to catch applause), and every marketplace must buzz with their talking; and every dinner party be worried to death with silly talk and boredom; and every festival be made unfeative and full of dejection, and every occasion of mourning be consoled by a greater calamity — their questions— and all the women's apartments accustomed to simplicity be thrown into confusion and be robbed of its flower of modesty by the torrent of their words...since, I say this is so, the evil is intolerable and not to be borne, and our Great Mystery is in danger of being made a thing of little moment. Well then, let these spies bear with us, moved as we are with fatherly compassion, and as holy Jeremiah says, torn in our hearts; Jeremiah 4:19 let them bear with us so far as not to give a savage reception to our discourse upon this subject; and let them, if indeed they can, restrain their tongues for a short while and lend us their ears. However that may be, you shall at any rate suffer no loss. For either we shall have spoken in the ears of them that will hear, Sirach 25:9 and our words will bear some fruit, namely an advantage to you (since the Sower sows the Word upon every kind of mind; and the good and fertile bears fruit), or else you will depart despising this discourse of ours as you have despised others, and having drawn from it further material for gainsaying and railing at us, upon which to feast yourselves yet more.

And you must not be astonished if I speak a language which is strange to you and contrary to your custom, who profess to know everything and to teach

everything in a too impetuous and generous manner...not to pain you by saying ignorant and rash.

III. Not to every one, my friends, does it belong to philosophize about God; not to every one; the Subject is not so cheap and low; and I will add, not before every audience, nor at all times, nor on all points; but on certain occasions, and before certain persons, and within certain limits.

Not to all men, because it is permitted only to those who have been examined, and are passed masters in meditation, and who have been previously purified in soul and body, or at the very least are being purified. For the impure to touch the pure is, we may safely say, not safe, just as it is unsafe to fix weak eyes upon the sun's rays. And what is the permitted occasion? It is when we are free from all external defilement or disturbance, and when that which rules within us is not confused with vexatious or erring images; like persons mixing up good writing with bad, or filth with the sweet odours of ointments. For it is necessary to be truly at leisure to know God; and when we can get a convenient season, to discern the straight road of the things divine. And who are the permitted persons? They to whom the subject is of real concern, and not they who make it a matter of pleasant gossip, like any other thing, after the races, or the theatre, or a concert, or a dinner, or still lower employments. To such men as these, idle jests and pretty contradictions about these subjects are a part of their amusement.

IV. Next, on what subjects and to what extent may we philosophize? On matters within our reach, and to such an extent as the mental power and grasp of our audience may extend. No further, lest, as excessively loud sounds injure the hearing, or excess of food the body, or, if you will, as excessive burdens beyond the strength injure those who bear them, or excessive rains the earth; so these too, being pressed down and overweighted by the stiffness, if I may use the expression, of the arguments should suffer loss even in respect of the strength they originally possessed.

V. Now, I am not saying that it is not needful to remember God at all times;...I must not be misunderstood, or I shall be having these nimble and quick people down upon me again. For we ought to think of God even more often than we draw our breath; and if the expression is permissible, we ought to do nothing else. Yea, I am one of those who entirely approve that Word which bids us meditate day and night, and tell at eventide and morning and noon day, and praise the Lord at every time; or, to use Moses' words, whether a man lie down, or rise up, or walk by the way, or whatever else he be doing Deuteronomy 6:7 — and by this recollection we are to be moulded to purity. So that it is not the continual remembrance of God that I would hinder, but only the talking about God; nor even that as in itself wrong, but only when unseasonable; nor all teaching, but only want of moderation. As of even honey repletion and satiety, though it be of honey, produce vomiting; Proverbs 25:16 and, as Solomon says

and I think, there is a time for every thing, Ecclesiastes 3:1 and that which is good ceases to be good if it be not done in a good way; just as a flower is quite out of season in winter, and just as a man's dress does not become a woman, nor a woman's a man; and as geometry is out of place in mourning, or tears at a carousal; shall we in this instance alone disregard the proper time, in a matter in which most of all due season should be respected? Surely not, my friends and brethren (for I will still call you Brethren, though you do not behave like brothers). Let us not think so nor yet, like hot tempered and hard mouthed horses, throwing off our rider Reason, and casting away Reverence, that keeps us within due limits, run far away from the turning point, but let us philosophize within our proper bounds, and not be carried away into Egypt, nor be swept down into Assyria Daniel 3:12, nor sing the Lord's song in a strange land, by which I mean before any kind of audience, strangers or kindred, hostile or friendly, kindly or the reverse, who watch what we do with over great care, and would like the spark of what is wrong in us to become a flame, and secretly kindle and fan it and raise it to heaven with their breath and make it higher than the Babylonian flame which burnt up every thing around it. For since their strength lies not in their own dogmas, they hunt for it in our weak points. And therefore they apply themselves to our— shall I say misfortunes or failings?— like flies to wounds. But let us at least be no longer ignorant of ourselves, or pay too little attention to the due order in these matters. And if it be impossible to put an end to the existing hostility, let us at least agree upon this, that we will utter Mysteries under our breath, and holy things in a holy manner, and we will not cast to ears profane that which may not be uttered, nor give evidence that we possess less gravity than those who worship demons, and serve shameful fables and deeds; for they would sooner give their blood to the uninitiated than certain words. But let us recognize that as in dress and diet and laughter and demeanour there is a certain decorum, so there is also in speech and silence; since among so many titles and powers of God, we pay the highest honour to The Word. Let even our disputings then be kept within bounds.

VI. Why should a man who is a hostile listener to such words be allowed to hear about the Generation of God, or his creation, or how God was made out of things which had no existence, or of section and analysis and division? Why do we make our accusers judges? Why do we put swords into the hands of our enemies? How, do you think, or with what temper, will the arguments about such subjects be received by one who approves of adulteries, and corruption of children, and who worships the passions and cannot conceive of anything higher than the body...who till very lately set up gods for himself, and gods too who were noted for the vilest deeds? Will it not first be from a material standpoint, shamefully and ignorantly, and in the sense to which he has been accustomed? Will he not make your Theology a defence for his own gods and passions? For if we ourselves wantonly misuse these words, it will be a long time before we shall persuade them to accept our philosophy. And if they are in their own persons inventors of evil things, how should they refrain from grasping at such things when offered to them? Such results come to us from mutual contest. Such

results follow to those who fight for the Word beyond what the Word approves; they are behaving like mad people, who set their own house on fire, or tear their own children, or disavow their own parents, taking them for strangers.

VII. But when we have put away from the conversation those who are strangers to it, and sent the great legion Luke 8:31 on its way to the abyss into the herd of swine, the next thing is to look to ourselves, and polish our theological self to beauty like a statue. The first point to be considered is— What is this great rivalry of speech and endless talking? What is this new disease of insatiability? Why have we tied our hands and armed our tongues? We do not praise either hospitality, or brotherly love, or conjugal affection, or virginity; nor do we admire liberality to the poor, or the chanting of Psalms, or nightlong vigils, or tears. We do not keep under the body by fasting, or go forth to God by prayer; nor do we subject the worse to the better— I mean the dust to the spirit— as they would do who form a just judgment of our composite nature; we do not make our life a preparation for death; nor do we make ourselves masters of our passions, mindful of our heavenly nobility; nor tame our anger when it swells and rages, nor our pride that brings to a fall, nor unreasonable grief, nor unchastened pleasure, nor meretricious laughter, nor undisciplined eyes, nor insatiable ears, nor excessive talk, nor absurd thoughts, nor anything of the occasions which the Evil One gets against us from sources within ourselves; bringing upon us the death that comes through the windows, Jeremiah 9:21 as Holy Scripture says; that is, through the senses. Nay we do the very opposite, and have given liberty to the passions of others, as kings give releases from service in honour of a victory, only on condition that they incline to our side, and make their assault upon God more boldly, or more impiously. And we give them an evil reward for a thing which is not good, license of tongue for their impiety.

VIII. And yet, O talkative Dialectician, I will ask you one small question, Job 38:3 and answer thou me, as He says to Job, Who through whirlwind and cloud gives Divine admonitions. Job 38:1 Are there many mansions in God's House, as you have heard, or only one? Of course you will admit that there are many, and not only one. Now, are they all to be filled, or only some, and others not; so that some will be left empty, and will have been prepared to no purpose? Of course all will be filled, for nothing can be in vain which has been done by God. And can you tell me what you will consider this Mansion to be? Is it the rest and glory which is in store There for the Blessed, or something else?— No, not anything else. Since then we are agreed upon this point, let us further examine another also. Is there any thing that procures these Mansions, as I think there is; or is there nothing?— Certainly there is— What is it? Is it not that there are various modes of conduct, and various purposes, one leading one way, another another way, according to the proportion of faith, and these we call Ways? Must we, then, travel all, or some of these Ways...the same individual along them all, if that be possible; or, if not, along as many as may be; or else along some of them? And even if this may not be, it would still be a great thing, at least as it appears to me, to travel excellently along even one.— You are right in your conception.— What

then when you hear there is but One way, and that a narrow one, Matthew 7:14 does the word seem to you to show? That there is but one on account of its excellence. For it is but one, even though it be split into many parts. And narrow because of its difficulties, and because it is trodden by few in comparison with the multitude of the adversaries, and of those who travel along the road of wickedness. So I think too. Well, then, my good friend, since this is so, why do you, as though condemning our doctrine for a certain poverty, rush headlong down that one which leads through what you call arguments and speculations, but I frivolities and quackeries? Let Paul reprove you with those bitter reproaches, in which, after his list of the Gifts of Grace, he says, Are all Apostles? Are all Prophets? etc. 1 Corinthians 12:29

IX. But, be it so. Lofty you are, even beyond the lofty, even above the clouds, if you will, a spectator of things invisible, a hearer of things unspeakable; one who hast ascended after Elias, and who after Moses hast been deemed worthy of the Vision of God, and after Paul hast been taken up into heaven; why do you mould the rest of your fellows in one day into Saints, and ordain them Theologians, and as it were breathe into them instruction, and make them many councils of ignorant oracles? Why do you entangle those who are weaker in your spider's web, if it were something great and wise? Why do you stir up wasps' nests against the Faith? Why do you suddenly spring a flood of dialectics upon us, as the fables of old did the Giants? Why have you collected all that is frivolous and unmanly among men, like a rabble, into one torrent, and having made them more effeminate by flattery, fashioned a new workshop, cleverly making a harvest for yourself out of their want of understanding? Do you deny that this is so, and are the other matters of no account to you? Must your tongue rule at any cost, and can you not restrain the birthpang of your speech? You may find many other honourable subjects for discussion. To these turn this disease of thine with some advantage. Attack the silence of Pythagoras, and the Orphic beans, and the novel brag about The Master said. Attack the ideas of Plato, and the transmigrations and courses of our souls, and the reminiscences, and the unlovely loves of the soul for lovely bodies. Attack the atheism of Epicurus, and his atoms, and his unphilosophic pleasure; or Aristotle's petty Providence, and his artificial system, and his discourses about the mortality of the soul, and the humanitarianism of his doctrine. Attack the superciliousness of the Stoa, or the greed and vulgarity of the Cynic. Attack the Void and Full (what nonsense), and all the details about the gods and the sacrifices and the idols and demons, whether beneficent or malignant, and all the tricks that people play with divination, evoking of gods, or of souls, and the power of the stars. And if these things seem to you unworthy of discussion as petty and already often confuted, and you will keep to your line, and seek the satisfaction of your ambition in it; then here too I will provide you with broad paths. Philosophize about the world or worlds; about matter; about soul; about natures endowed with reason, good or bad; about resurrection, about judgment, about reward, or the Sufferings of Christ. For in these subjects to hit the mark is not useless, and to miss it is not dangerous. But with God we shall have converse, in this life only in a small

degree; but a little later, it may be, more perfectly, in the Same, our Lord Jesus Christ, to Whom be glory for ever. Amen.