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# Sincerity, Honesty, and Goodwill in the Qur'an and Sunnah

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*In the name of God, the Gracious, the Merciful*

In Islam, we must always practice our faith with sincerity (*al-ikhlaṣ*), honesty (*al-ṣidq*), and goodwill (*al-naṣīḥah*). Each of these virtues includes a vertical dimension (in relation to God) and a horizontal dimension (in relation to other people); they tell us how to behave with God and how to behave with others. Virtues in Islam such as these act as guiding principles in all of our affairs, from our mundane daily interactions to the conduct of nations and everything in between. They are meant to be in the front of our minds at all times, to be considered in all of our decisions. In this article, I will explicate the meaning of these virtues according to the Qur'ān and Sunnah, with an aim to uncover their relevance for us in this life and in the Hereafter.

## **Sincerity – *al-ikhlaṣ***

The first deed a Muslim must do to make good his or her Islam is to purify his or her intention (*al-niyah*) in worship and religious deeds. We should act sincerely for the sake of God and dedicate our deeds to no other, neither by way of idolatry (*al-shirk*), hypocrisy (*al-nifāq*), nor ostentation (*al-riyā'*).

The Prophet ﷺ<sup>1</sup> said:

إِنَّمَا الْأَعْمَالُ بِالنِّيَّاتِ، وَإِنَّمَا لِكُلِّ امْرِئٍ مَا نَوَى، فَمَنْ كَانَتْ هِجْرَتُهُ إِلَى دُنْيَا يُصِيبُهَا، أَوْ إِلَى امْرَأَةٍ يَنْكُحُهَا، فَهِيَ حِرَّتُهُ  
إِلَى مَا هَاجَرَ إِلَيْهِ

<sup>1</sup> The symbol ﷺ represents *ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wa sallam* (peace and blessings of God be upon him).

Verily, deeds are only by intentions. Verily, every person will have only what they intended. Whoever emigrated to get something in the world or to marry a woman, then his emigration is for whatever he emigrated for.<sup>2</sup>

The early jurists and scholars such as Al-Shāfi'ī, Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, Abū Dāwūd, Al-Dāraquṭnī, and Al-Tirmidhī agreed that this hadīth encompasses one-third of Islam.<sup>3</sup> Al-Bukhārī chose to lead his collection of authentic traditions with it.<sup>4</sup> Al-Shāfi'ī also said that this hadīth encompasses seventy topics of jurisprudence (*al-fiqh*), by which he meant a great many topics, and Ibn Maḥdī encouraged authors to include it at the beginning of any work to advise their students to continually correct and renew their intentions.<sup>5</sup> Right intention, which is sincerity, is the foundation of everything else we do in Islam.

Every act of worship, charity, or any good deed will be judged by the intention behind it. God knows the true and secret inner-motives of all deeds that we do, and these motives will be made known on the Day of Resurrection.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

إِنَّمَا يُبْعَثُ النَّاسُ عَلَى نِيَّاتِهِمْ

Verily, the people will be raised for judgment only according to their intentions.<sup>6</sup>

We must actively cultivate the virtue of sincerity in our worship and deeds, as it is the first blessed step on the straight path towards eternal life in the Hereafter. Abū Sulayman, may God have mercy on him, said, “Blessed is he who takes a single step desiring nothing but God Almighty.”<sup>7</sup>

In truth, God has commanded us to make our worship sincere for his sake alone. Sincerity is the obligatory prerequisite for the acceptance of any righteous deed, not merely an encouraged virtue.

God said:

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ فَاعْبُدِ اللَّهَ مُخْلِصًا لَهُ الدِّينَ (٢) أَلَا لِلَّهِ الدِّينُ الْخَالِصُ وَالَّذِينَ اتَّخَذُوا مِنْ دُونِهِ أَوْلِيَاءَ مَا نَعْبُدُهُمْ إِلَّا لِيُقَرِّبُونَا إِلَى اللَّهِ زُلْفَىٰ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَحْكُمُ بَيْنَهُمْ فِي مَا هُمْ فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي مَنْ هُوَ كَاذِبٌ كَفَّارٌ (٣)

It is We who sent down the Scripture to you [Prophet] with the Truth, so

<sup>2</sup> al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, v.1 p.6 #1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, v.1 p.11.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ al-Nawawī ‘alá Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, v.13 p.53 #1907.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Mājah, M. *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, v.2 p.1414 #4229; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* v.1 p.468 #2379.

<sup>7</sup> Ibn Qudāmah, *Mukhtaṣar Minhāj al-Qāṣidīn*, v.1 p.365.

worship God with your total devotion: true devotion is due to God alone.<sup>8</sup>

And God said:

وَمَا تَفَرَّقَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَتْهُمْ الْبَيِّنَةُ (٤) وَمَا أُمِرُوا إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ حُنَفَاءَ وَيُقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُوا الزَّكَاةَ وَذَلِكَ دِينُ الْقِيَمَةِ (٥)

[Yet] those who were given the Scripture became divided only after they were sent [such] clear evidence, though all they are ordered to do is worship God alone, sincerely devoting their religion to Him as people of true faith, keep up the prayer, and pay the prescribed alms, for that is the true religion.<sup>9</sup>

All of the prophets, peace and blessings be upon them, were sincere to God when they delivered the divine revelations to their peoples. They are the exemplars of the highest standard of inward and outward righteousness that we must strive to emulate.

God said:

وَأَذَكَّرَ عَبْدَنَا إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ أُولَى الْأَيْدِي وَالْأَبْصَارِ (٤٥) إِنَّا أَخْلَصْنَاهُمْ بِخَالِصَةٍ ذُكِّرَى الدَّارِ (٤٦) وَإِنَّهُمْ عِنْدَنَا لَمِنَ الْمُصْطَفَيْنِ الْأَخْيَارِ (٤٧)

Remember Our servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all men of strength and vision. We caused them to be devoted to Us through their sincere remembrance of the Final Home: with Us they will be among the elect, the truly good.<sup>10</sup>

And God said:

قُلْ أَمَرَ رَبِّي بِالْقِسْطِ وَأَقِيمُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ عِنْدَ كُلِّ مَسْجِدٍ وَادْعُوهُ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ كَمَا بَدَأَكُمْ تَعُودُونَ

Say, "My Lord commands righteousness. Direct your worship straight to Him wherever you pray; call on Him; devote your religion entirely to Him. Just as He first created you, so you will come back [to life] again."<sup>11</sup>

And God said:

قُلْ إِنِّي أُمِرْتُ أَنْ أَعْبُدَ اللَّهَ مُخْلِصًا لَهُ الدِّينَ

Say, "I have been commanded to serve God, dedicating my worship entirely to Him."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Zumar 39:2-3; Abdel Haleem p.459.

<sup>9</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Bayyinah 98:4-5; Abdel Haleem p.599

<sup>10</sup> Qur'ān, Surat Şad 38:45-47; Abdel Haleem p.457.

<sup>11</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-A'rāf 7:29; Abdel Haleem p.154.

<sup>12</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Zumar 39:11; Abdel Haleem p.461.

And God said:

فَادْعُوا اللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ وَلَوْ كَرِهَ الْكَافِرُونَ

So call upon God and dedicate your religion to Him alone, however hateful this may be to the disbelievers.<sup>13</sup>

And God said:

هُوَ الْحَيُّ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ فَادْعُوهُ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

He is the Living One and there is no god but Him, so call on Him, and dedicate your religion entirely to Him. Praise be to God, the Lord of the Worlds.<sup>14</sup>

Hypocrisy, by contrast, is to perform acts of worship and good deeds for some ulterior or worldly motive. The vice of hypocrisy is one of the terrible sins of the heart that leads to Hellfire. The only way to repent from hypocrisy is to renew sincerity in the innermost depths of our hearts.

God said:

إِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ فِي الدَّرَكِ الْأَسْفَلِ مِنَ النَّارِ وَلَنْ تَجِدَ لَهُمْ نَصِيرًا (١٤٥) إِلَّا الَّذِينَ تَابُوا وَأَصْلَحُوا وَاعْتَصَمُوا بِاللَّهِ وَأَخْلَصُوا دِينَهُمْ لِلَّهِ فَأُولَئِكَ مَعَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَسَوْفَ يُؤْتِ اللَّهُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

The hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of Hell, and you will find no one to help them. Not so those who repent, mend their ways, hold fast to God, and devote their religion entirely to Him: these will be joined with the believers, and God will give the believers a mighty reward.<sup>15</sup>

Acts of worship and good deeds done in idolatry or hypocrisy, to show off for people, or to gain some worldly advantage, will be worthless on the Day of Resurrection. These fruitless deeds will be scattered like dust, leaving nothing behind but sins to be judged and punished.

God said:

وَقَدِمْنَا إِلَىٰ مَا عَمِلُوا مِنْ عَمَلٍ فَجَعَلْنَاهُ هَبَاءً مَنْثُورًا

And We shall turn to the deeds they have done and scatter them like dust.<sup>16</sup>

Deeds might be good outwardly, but they will amount to nothing without corresponding inward righteousness. 'Ā'ishah, may God be pleased with her, once said, "O Messenger of God, in the time of ignorance the son of Jud'ān would maintain family ties and feed

<sup>13</sup> Qur'ān, Surat Ghāfir 40:14; Abdel Haleem p.469.

<sup>14</sup> Qur'ān, Surat Ghāfir 40:65; Abdel Haleem p.475.

<sup>15</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Nisā' 4:145-146; Abdel Haleem p.102.

<sup>16</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Furqān 25:23; Abdel Haleem p.363.

the poor. Will it benefit him?” The Prophet ﷺ said:

لَا يَنْفَعُهُ، إِنَّهُ لَمْ يَقُلْ يَوْمًا: رَبِّ اغْفِرْ لِي خَطِيئَتِي يَوْمَ الدِّينِ

It will not benefit him. Verily, he never said even for one day: My Lord, forgive my sins on the Day of Judgment.<sup>17</sup>

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَقْبَلُ مِنَ الْعَمَلِ إِلَّا مَا كَانَ لَهُ خَالِصًا، وَأَبْغَىٰ بِهِ وَجْهَهُ

Verily, God does not accept any good deeds unless they are done sincerely and in pursuit of his countenance.<sup>18</sup>

Provoking idolatry, hypocrisy, and ostentation are the main lines of attack that Satan uses against human beings. In fact, every person will fall into these sins unless they consciously renew the sincerity of their intentions.

God said:

قَالَ رَبِّ بِمَا أَغْوَيْتَنِي لَأُزَيِّنَنَّ لَهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَأُغْوِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْمَعِينَ (٣٩) إِلَّا عِبَادَكَ مِنْهُمُ الْمُخْلَصِينَ

Iblis [Satan] then said to God, ‘Because You have put me in the wrong, I will lure mankind on earth and put them in the wrong, all except Your devoted servants.’<sup>19</sup>

In other words, no one is safe from Satan unless their intentions are sincere. Al-Ghazālī comments on this verse, “Hence, the servant is not freed from Satan except by sincerity.”<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, sincerity is the essential quality that guards our hearts and protects us from the delusions of malice or the treachery of evil spiritual forces.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

ثَلَاثٌ لَا يُعْلَىٰ عَلَيْهِنَّ قَلْبُ مُسْلِمٍ إِخْلَاصُ الْعَمَلِ لِلَّهِ وَمُنَاصَحَةُ أَيْمَةِ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَلُزُومُ جَمَاعَتِهِمْ فَإِنَّ الدَّعْوَةَ تُحْبِطُ مِنْ وَرَائِهِمْ

There are three traits by which the heart of a Muslim will not be deceived (or consumed by hatred): sincere deeds for God, offering goodwill to the leaders of the Muslims, and keeping to their community.<sup>21</sup>

The phrase “by which the heart of a Muslim will not be deceived” means that his or her

<sup>17</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, v.1 p.196 #214.

<sup>18</sup> al-Nasā’ī, *Sunan al-Nasā’ī*, v.6 p.25 #3140; declared good (*jayyid*) by Ibn Ḥajar in *Fath al-Bārī* v.6 p.28.

<sup>19</sup> Qur’ān, Surat al-Ḥijr 15:39-40; Abdel Haleem p.265.

<sup>20</sup> al-Ghazzālī. *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, v.4 p.378.

<sup>21</sup> al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, v.4 p.331 #2658; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* v.2 p.1145 #6766.

heart will not be penetrated by malice (*al-ḥiqd*) or treachery (*al-khiyānah*).<sup>22</sup> Thus, one is in danger of falling into such destructive vices and traps without the protection offered by the virtues of sincerity to God and goodwill to people. A sincere Muslim is not full of hatred and malice towards humanity; any expressions of ill will towards others is a warning sign of deficient faith.

Ultimately, the virtue of sincerity is the key to Paradise and salvation from the Hellfire. On one occasion, a man accused another Muslim of hypocrisy in the presence of the Prophet, and the Prophet ﷺ said, “Do you not agree that he says there is no God but God in pursuit thereby of the countenance of God?” The man said, “Of course.” The Prophet said:

فَأِنَّهُ لَا يُوَافَى عَبْدٌ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ بِهِ، إِلَّا حَرَّمَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ النَّارَ

Verily, a servant is not brought to the Day of Resurrection saying so but that God will forbid him from entering the Hellfire.<sup>23</sup>

Yet it is not simply the outward words of faith that make the difference between eternal salvation and damnation; the difference is the purity of heart within the person who says them, for even hypocrites use righteous words. As Ibn Mu’ādh, may God have mercy on him, said, “Sincerity distinguishes good deeds from sins just as milk is distinguished from filth and blood.”<sup>24</sup>

Sincerity may even save a person from making serious errors in faith and creed, so long as those errors are *honest mistakes*. For example, a man from the previous nations once had himself cremated because he feared God would resurrect him to punish him for his sins.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

أَسْرَفَ رَجُلٌ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ، فَلَمَّا حَضَرَهُ الْمَوْتُ أَوْصَى بِنَفْسِهِ فَقَالَ: إِذَا أَنَا مِتُّ فَأَحْرِقُونِي، ثُمَّ اسْحَقُونِي، ثُمَّ اذْرُونِي فِي الرِّيحِ فِي الْبَحْرِ، فَوَاللَّهِ لَأَنْ قَدَرَ عَلَيَّ رَبِّي لَيُعَذِّبَنِي عَذَابًا مَا عَذَّبَهُ بِهِ أَحَدًا، قَالَ فَفَعَلُوا ذَلِكَ بِهِ، فَقَالَ لِلْأَرْضِ: أَدِي مَا أَخَذْتِ، فَإِذَا هُوَ قَائِمٌ، فَقَالَ لَهُ: مَا حَمَلَكَ عَلَى مَا صَنَعْتَ؟ فَقَالَ: خَشَيْتُكَ، يَا رَبِّ - أَوْ قَالَ مَخَافَتِكَ - فَعَفَرَ لَهُ بِذَلِكَ

A man had indulged himself in sin, so when death approached he enjoined his sons, saying: When I die you should burn me, pulverize me, and scatter me to the winds over the sea. By God, if God is capable he will punish me in such a way as he has not punished anyone else. So they did that to him and when he stood before his Lord, God said to him: What compelled you to do what you did? The man said: Fear and awe of you, O Lord. Thus, God forgave him due to that.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> al-Qārī, *Mirqāt al-Mafātīḥ*, v.1 p.306 #228.

<sup>23</sup> al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, v.9 p.18 #6938.

<sup>24</sup> Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, v.1 p.658 verse 2:139.

<sup>25</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, v.4 p.2110 #2756.

Even though it is, in reality, an act of unbelief to imagine God is incapable of resurrecting the dead, the sincerity in the man's righteous fear was far more important. Ibn al-Qayyim comments on this hadīth, saying, "Despite this [error in creed], God forgave him and had mercy upon him due to his ignorance. He had acted according to the knowledge that reached him, and he did not renounce the power of God out of repeated stubbornness or denial."<sup>26</sup>

Sincerity must be the overriding virtue and God forgives the honest mistakes of his servants, as every deed is judged first by its intention. Even so, the believers must also do their best due diligence to act right in every situation. God judges the whole of the human being, their inward states as well as their outward actions.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَنْظُرُ إِلَىٰ أَجْسَادِكُمْ، وَلَا إِلَىٰ صُورِكُمْ، وَلَكِنْ يَنْظُرُ إِلَىٰ قُلُوبِكُمْ

Verily, God does not look at your appearance or wealth, but rather he looks at your hearts and actions.<sup>27</sup>

As a result, we must complement our sincerity with the good conduct that should necessarily follow it. Only by sincerity in worship and charitable deeds, fulfilling both the rights of God and the rights of people – especially the weakest and most vulnerable groups of people – will we be granted the support of God in our religion and our societies.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

إِنَّمَا يَنْصُرُ اللَّهُ هَذِهِ الْأُمَّةَ بِضَعِيفِهَا، بِدَعْوَتِهِمْ وَصَلَاتِهِمْ وَإِخْلَاصِهِمْ

Verily, God only supports this nation due to their weak, their supplications, their prayers, and their sincerity.<sup>28</sup>

If we are performing religious devotions by day and transgressing the rights of others by night, then our worship is not truly sincere. Sincere prayers must result in good deeds towards others, or at least a restraint on our evil impulses.

God said:

أَتَلُّ مَا أُوحِيَٰ إِلَيْكَ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَأَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ تَنْهَىٰ عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ وَلَذِكْرُ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ مَا تَصْنَعُونَ

Keep up the prayer: prayer restrains outrageous and unacceptable behavior.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *Madārij al-Sālikīn*, v.1 p.348.

<sup>27</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, v.4 p.1986 #2564.

<sup>28</sup> al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan al-Nasā'ī*, v.6 p.45 #3178; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi'* *al-Ṣaḥīḥ* v.1 p.470 #2388.

Remembering God is greater: God knows everything you are doing.<sup>29</sup>

Likewise, a man once came to the Prophet ﷺ and he said, “A person prays in the night, but he steals in the morning.” The Prophet said:

إِنَّهُ سَيَنْهَاهُ مَا تَقُولُ

Verily, what you say [about the prayer] should stop him.<sup>30</sup>

Such transgressions against the rights of people – all while regular outward devotions to God are performed – reflect a lack of sincerity and a weakness of true faith. Muslims who fail to actualize sincerity in their deeds towards others will be, in reality, completely bankrupt on the Day of Resurrection. The Prophet ﷺ once said to his companions, “Do you know who is bankrupt?” They said, “The one without money or goods is bankrupt.” The Prophet said:

إِنَّ الْمُفْلِسَ مِنْ أُمَّتِي يَأْتِي يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ بِصَلَاةٍ، وَصِيَامٍ، وَزَكَاةٍ، وَيَأْتِي قَدْ شَتَمَ هَذَا، وَقَذَفَ هَذَا، وَأَكَلَ مَالَ هَذَا، وَسَفَكَ دَمَ هَذَا، وَضْرَبَ هَذَا، فَيُعْطَى هَذَا مِنْ حَسَنَاتِهِ، وَهَذَا مِنْ حَسَنَاتِهِ، فَإِنْ فَنِيَتْ حَسَنَاتُهُ قَبْلَ أَنْ يُفْضَى مَا عَلَيْهِ أُخِذَ مِنْ خَطَايَاهُمْ فَطُرِحَتْ عَلَيْهِ، ثُمَّ طُرِحَ فِي النَّارِ

Verily, the bankrupt of my nation are those who come on the Day of Resurrection with prayers, fasting, and charity, but also with insults, slander, consuming wealth, shedding blood, and beating others. The oppressed will each be given from his good deeds. If his good deeds run out before justice is fulfilled, then their sins will be cast upon him and he will be thrown into the Hellfire.<sup>31</sup>

Such people are truly bankrupt because their good deeds, even if they were done for the sake of God, were otherwise cancelled out by their sins against others. As the Prophet ﷺ said:

رُبَّ صَائِمٍ لَيْسَ لَهُ مِنْ صِيَامِهِ إِلَّا الْجُوعُ، وَرُبَّ قَائِمٍ لَيْسَ لَهُ مِنْ قِيَامِهِ إِلَّا السَّهَرُ

A person might fast and he gets nothing from his fast but hunger. A person might pray at night but he gets nothing from his prayer but sleeplessness.<sup>32</sup>

For this reason, the scholars said these two conditions are required for the acceptance of any good deed: sincerity and conformity to the prophetic way (*Sunnah*). Fudayl ibn 'Iyād, may God have mercy on him, said, “God purifies good deeds and makes them correct. Indeed, if deeds are sincere and incorrect, they will not be accepted. If deeds are correct and insincere, they will not be accepted. Rather, they are only accepted if they are both sincere and correct. Sincere means they are done for God alone and

<sup>29</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-'Ankabūt 29:45; Abdel Haleem p. 402.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, v.15 p.483 #9778; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Arnā'ūṭ et al in their commentary.

<sup>31</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, v.4 p.1997 #2581.

<sup>32</sup> Ibn Mājah, M. *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, v.1 p.539 #1690; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* v.1 p.656 #3488.



correct means they are done according to the Sunnah.” Then Fudayl recited the verse:

آتِلْ مَا أَوْحَىٰ إِلَيْكَ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَأَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ تَنْهَىٰ عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ وَلَذِكْرُ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ  
يَعْلَمُ مَا تَصْنَعُونَ

Anyone who fears to meet his Lord should do good deeds and give no one a share in the worship due to his Lord.<sup>33 34</sup>

The heart and the mind should work together, with sincerity to God guiding the use of reason. Al-Junayd, may God have mercy on him, said, “Verily, God has servants who use their minds. When they reason, they act. When they act, they are sincere. Sincerity calls them to all of the gates of righteousness.”<sup>35</sup> Reason is certainly important, but like other virtues it is empty without sincerity.

The importance of inward and outward righteousness is perhaps most apparent when the need arises to defend the community in military action (*al-jihād*). Any military actions that Muslims undertake must fulfill the conditions of just war laid down by the Prophet, his companions, and the scholars, including having the right intention and restricting the use of force only to what is necessary for defense.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

الْعَزُورُ غَرَوَانٌ: فَأَمَّا مَنْ ابْتَغَىٰ وَجْهَ اللَّهِ، وَأَطَاعَ الْإِمَامَ، وَأَنْفَقَ الْكَرِيمَةَ، وَيَاسَرَ الشَّرِيكَ، وَاجْتَنَبَ الْفُسَادَ، فَإِنَّ  
نَوْمَهُ وَنُبْهَهُ أَجْرٌ كُلُّهُ، وَأَمَّا مَنْ غَرَا فَخْرًا وَرِبَاءً وَسَمْعَةً، وَعَصَى الْإِمَامَ، وَأَفْسَدَ فِي الْأَرْضِ، فَإِنَّهُ لَمْ يَرْجَعْ  
بِالْكَفَافِ

Expeditions are of two kinds. As for one who seeks the countenance of God, obeys the leader, spends in charity from his precious possessions, shows leniency to his colleagues, and avoids corruption, then the entirety of his sleep and vigilance are rewarded. As for one who fights out of pride, showing off, and seeking a reputation, who disobeys the leader and commits corruption in the land, then he will return with nothing of importance.<sup>36</sup>

If Muslims fight out of zealotry, pride, anger, to gain spoils, or if they transgress the strict laws of war, then they will have no reward in the Hereafter for their efforts. A man once came to the Prophet ﷺ and said, “O Messenger of God, a man intends to fight for the sake of God and he is seeking worldly gains.” The Prophet said:

لَا أَجْرَ لَهُ

There is no reward for him.

<sup>33</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *I'lām Al-Muwaqqi'īn*, v.2 p.124.

<sup>34</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Kahf 18:110; Abdel Haleem p.305.

<sup>35</sup> al-Ghazzālī. *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, v.4 p.379.

<sup>36</sup> Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, v.3 p.13 #2515; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* v.2 p.768 #4174.

The people found that very difficult and they said, “Return to the Messenger of God, for perhaps he did not understand you.” The man returned and he said, “O Messenger of God, a man intends to fight for the sake of God and he is seeking worldly gains.” The Prophet said:

لَا أُجْرَ لَهُ

There is no reward for him.

The man returned a third time and the Prophet said:

لَا أُجْرَ لَهُ

There is no reward for him.<sup>37</sup>

In this regard, it is not permissible for Muslims to have their intentions divided in the conduct of deeds that should only be done for the sake of God. Having a split intention in worship or charitable deeds is, in fact, a form of sharing partners (*al-ishrāk*) with God.<sup>38</sup>

The Prophet ﷺ said:

قَالَ اللَّهُ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى: أَنَا أَغْنَى الشُّرَكَاءِ عَنِ الشُّرْكَاءِ، مَنْ عَمِلَ عَمَلًا أَشْرَكَ فِيهِ مَعِيَ غَيْرِي، تَرَكْنَاهُ وَشِرْكُهُ

God Almighty said: Verily, I have no need of any partners. Whoever performs a deed in which he associates another besides me, I will abandon him and his partner.<sup>39</sup>

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

إِذَا جَمَعَ اللَّهُ النَّاسَ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ لِيَوْمٍ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ، نَادَى مُنَادٍ: مَنْ كَانَ أَشْرَكَ فِي عَمَلٍ عَمِلَهُ اللَّهُ أَحَدًا فَلْيَطْلُبْ ثَوَابَهُ مِنْ عِنْدِ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ أَغْنَى الشُّرَكَاءِ عَنِ الشُّرْكَاءِ

When God gathers the people on the Day of Resurrection, a day of which there is no doubt, an announcement will be made: To those who shared with anyone in deeds done for God, then let him seek his reward from those besides God. Verily, God is free of any partners.<sup>40</sup>

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ أَخْلِصُوا أَعْمَالَكُمْ لِلَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ، فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَقْبَلُ إِلَّا مَا أُخْلِصَ لَهُ، وَلَا تَقُولُوا: هَذَا لِلَّهِ وَلِلرَّحِمِ، فَإِنَّهَا لِلرَّحِمِ وَلَيْسَ لِلَّهِ مِنْهَا شَيْءٌ، وَلَا تَقُولُوا: هَذَا لِلَّهِ وَلَوْجُوهِكُمْ، فَإِنَّهَا لَوْجُوهِكُمْ وَلَيْسَ لِلَّهِ مِنْهَا شَيْءٌ

O people! Make your deeds sincere for God Almighty. Verily, God does not

<sup>37</sup> Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Aḥmad*, v.13 p.277 #7900; declared fair due to external evidence (*ḥasan li ghayri*) by Al-Arnā'ūṭ et al in their commentary.

<sup>38</sup> al-Ghazzālī. *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, v.4 p.379.

<sup>39</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, v.4 p.2289 #2985.

<sup>40</sup> al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, v.5 p.165 #3154; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* v.1 p.145 #482.

accept any deed unless it is done sincerely for him. Do not say: This is for the sake of God and this is for the sake of my relatives. Verily, it was done for your relatives and none of it was for God. And do not say: This is for the sake of God and for your sake. Verily, it was done for their sake and none of it was for God.<sup>41</sup>

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

بَشِّرْ هَذِهِ الْأُمَّةَ بِالسَّنَاءِ، وَالنَّصْرِ، وَالتَّمَكِينِ، فَمَنْ عَمِلَ مِنْهُمْ عَمَلًا لِلدُّنْيَا، لَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ نَصِيبٌ

Give glad tidings to this nation of honor, victory, and stability. Yet, whoever does a deed of the Hereafter for the sake of the world, then he will have no portion of it in the Hereafter.<sup>42</sup>

And Abū al-Āliyah, may God have mercy on him, said, “The companions of Muhammad ﷺ said to me: Do not do a good deed for anyone besides God, for God will leave you in the charge of the one for whom you did it.”<sup>43</sup> This prohibited split intention is only when it involves doing an act of worship for something else besides God. It is permissible, for example, to conduct worldly business during the Ḥajj pilgrimage season, as this kind of split intention does not involve dedicating an act of worship or a good deed to anyone else.<sup>44</sup>

If a deed is done for the sake of a false god, that is the greater idolatry (*al-shirk al-akbar*) which removes a Muslim from the fold of Islam entirely. However, if a good deed is done to show off for people, what is known as ostentation, then this is the lesser idolatry (*al-shirk al-aṣghar*); a tremendous sin, to be sure, but one that does not expel Muslims from Islam altogether. In order for a believer to be purely sincere, he or she must avoid both the greater and lesser forms of idolatry. Sa’īd ibn Jubayr, may God have mercy on him, said, “Sincerity is to not associate partners with God in one’s religion and to not display ostentation in good deeds to anyone.”<sup>45</sup>

In a way, the lesser idolatry of ostentation is even more dangerous than the greater idolatry, due to the fact that it can be such a subtle defect in our intentions. The Prophet ﷺ once said to the companions:

إِنَّ أَوْفَى مَا أَخَافُ عَلَيْكُمُ الشِّرْكَ الْأَصْغَرُ

Verily, my greater fear for you is the lesser idolatry.

<sup>41</sup> al-Dāraquṭnī, *Sunan al-Dāraquṭnī*, v.1 p.77 #133; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Silsilat al-Ṣaḥīḥah* v.6 p.624 #2764.

<sup>42</sup> Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Aḥmad*, v.35 p.147 #21223; declared strong (*qawī*) by Al-Arnā’ūṭ et al in their commentary.

<sup>43</sup> Ibn al-Sarī, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, v.2 p.435.

<sup>44</sup> Qur’ān, Surat al-Baqarah 2:198.

<sup>45</sup> Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*, v.1 p.658 verse 2:139.

They said, “What is the lesser idolatry, O Messenger of God?” The Prophet said:

الرَّبَّاءُ، يَقُولُ اللهُ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ لَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ: إِذَا جُرِيَ النَّاسُ بِأَعْمَالِهِمْ: أَذْهَبُوا إِلَى الَّذِينَ كُنْتُمْ تُرَاءُونَ فِي الدُّنْيَا فَاَنْظُرُوا هَلْ تَجِدُونَ عِنْدَهُمْ جَزَاءً

It is ostentation. God Almighty will say to them on the Day of Resurrection, when people are being recompensed for their deeds: Go to those for whom you made a show in the world and look, do you find any reward with them?<sup>46</sup>

In another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said to his companion:

يَا أَبَا بَكْرٍ لَلشَّرِّكَ فِيكُمْ

O Abū Bakr, there is idolatry among you more hidden than the crawling of an ant.

Abū Bakr said, “Is there idolatry other than to make another god alongside God?” The Prophet said:

وَالَّذِي نَفْسِي بِيَدِهِ لَلشَّرِّكَ أَحْفَى مِنْ دَبِيبِ النَّمْلِ، أَلَا أَدُلُّكَ عَلَى شَيْءٍ إِذَا قُلْتَهُ ذَهَبَ عَنكَ قَلِيلُهُ وَكَثِيرُهُ؟ قَالَ: قُلِ اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي أَعُوذُ بِكَ أَنْ أُشْرِكَ بِكَ وَأَنَا أَعْلَمُ وَأَسْتَعُوذُ لِمَا لَا أَعْلَمُ

By the one in whose hand is my soul, there is idolatry more hidden than the crawling of an ant. Shall I not tell you something to say to rid you of it, both minor and major? Say: O God, I seek refuge in you that I associate partners with you while I know, and I seek your forgiveness for what I do not know.<sup>47</sup>

This is a humbling supplication that we should repeat often, as in it we acknowledge the potential for subtle defects in our intentions.

To be clear, the trial of ostentation is even more dangerous than the great tribulations near the end of time. The Prophet ﷺ once came to the companions while they were discussing the False Messiah (*al-Masīḥ al-Dajjāl*). The Prophet said:

أَلَا أُخْبِرُكُمْ بِمَا هُوَ أَخَوْفُ عَلَيْكُمْ عِنْدِي مِنَ الْمَسِيحِ الدَّجَالِ

Shall I not tell you about my greater fear for you than the False Messiah?

They said, “Of course!” The Prophet said:

الشَّرِّكَ الْخَفِيُّ، أَنْ يَقُومَ الرَّجُلُ يُصَلِّي، فَيَزِيئُ صَلَاتَهُ، لِمَا يَرَى مِنْ نَظَرِ رَجُلٍ

It is hidden idolatry, that a man stands for prayer and beautifies his prayer when he sees another man looking at him.<sup>48</sup>

We ought to strive to help those around us who are enduring the suffering of trials, no

<sup>46</sup> Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Aḥmad*, v.39 p.39 #23630; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* v.1 p.323 #1555.

<sup>47</sup> al-Bukhārī, *al-Adab al-Mufrad*, v.1 p.377 #716; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in his commentary.

<sup>48</sup> Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, v.2 p.1406 #4204; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* v.1 p.509 #2607.

doubt. But as far as our own souls are concerned, our more immediate worry should be the trials within our own hearts. Every day we must work to perform our daily prayers with reverence (*al-khushū'*) and to avoid praying and behaving with the manners of a hypocrite.

God said:

فَوَيْلٌ لِلْمُصَلِّينَ (٤) الَّذِينَ هُمْ عَنْ صَلَاتِهِمْ سَاهُونَ (٥) الَّذِينَ هُمْ يُرَاءُونَ (٦) وَيَمْنَعُونَ الْمَاعُونَ

So woe to those who pray but are heedless of their prayer; those who are all show and forbid common kindnesses.<sup>49</sup>

And God said:

إِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ يُخَادِعُونَ اللَّهَ وَهُوَ خَادِعُهُمْ وَإِذَا قَامُوا إِلَى الصَّلَاةِ قَامُوا كُسَالَى يُرَاءُونَ النَّاسَ وَلَا يَذْكُرُونَ اللَّهَ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

The hypocrites try to deceive God, but it is He who causes them to be deceived. When they stand up to pray, they do so sluggishly, showing off in front of people, and remember God only a little.<sup>50</sup>

When we pray and fast, our concern should not be whether others view us as pious or not. Beautifying the prayer or displaying the discomfort of fasting for the sake of people is simply another act of lesser idolatry.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

مَنْ صَلَّى يُرَائِي فَقَدْ أَشْرَكَ، وَمَنْ صَامَ يُرَائِي فَقَدْ أَشْرَكَ

Whoever prays to be seen has associated partners with God. Whoever fasts to be seen has associated partners with God.<sup>51</sup>

Avoiding ostentation applies not only to acts of worship, but also to any act of religious devotion such as seeking Islamic knowledge.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

مَنْ تَعَلَّمَ عِلْمًا مِمَّا يُبْتَغَى بِهِ وَجْهُ اللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ لَا يَتَعَلَّمُهُ إِلَّا لِيُصِيبَ بِهِ عَرَضًا مِنَ الدُّنْيَا، لَمْ يَجِدْ عَرَفَ الْجَنَّةَ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ

Whoever seeks knowledge that should be sought for the sake of God Almighty, but only to gain some worldly benefit, then he will never smell the fragrance of Paradise on the Day of Resurrection.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Mā'ūn 107:4-7; Abdel Haleem p.603.

<sup>50</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Nisā' 4:142; Abdel Haleem p.142.

<sup>51</sup> al-Bazzār, *al-Baḥr al-Zakḥkhār*, v.8 p.407 #3482; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Ibn Kathīr in *Jāmi' al-Masānīd wal-Sunan* v.4 p.211-212 #5151.

<sup>52</sup> Abū Dāwūd. *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, v.3 p.323 #3664; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaghīr* v.2 p.1060 #6159.

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

مَنْ طَلَبَ الْعِلْمَ لِجَارِي بِهِ الْعُلَمَاءِ أَوْ لِيُمَارِيَ بِهِ السُّفَهَاءَ أَوْ يَصْرِفَ بِهِ وُجُوهَ النَّاسِ إِلَيْهِ أَدْخَلَهُ اللَّهُ النَّارَ

Whoever seeks knowledge in order to impress the scholars, or to argue with the foolish, or to attract the attention of people, then God will admit him into Hellfire.<sup>53</sup>

Indeed, one of the pitfalls of the students of sacred knowledge is to become embroiled in controversies and debates to the point that they forget why they are studying Islam in the first place. It is very easy for a student to become distracted by the pomp and show of scholarship and academia.

In the end, it takes a constant and relentless internal struggle against our caprice and base desires to achieve true sincerity and purity of heart, what scholars such as Ibn Rajab refer to as the greater jihad (*al-jihād al-akbar*) or jihad of the heart (*jihād al-qalb*).<sup>54</sup> Ma'rūf al-Karkhi, may God have mercy on him, would strike himself and say, "O my soul! Be sincere and purify yourself!"<sup>55</sup>

This is a spiritual struggle and a jihad that we cannot afford to lose, lest we lose our opportunity for salvation. Many hypocrites who were considered by people to be righteous Muslims in the world – either as brave warriors, scholars, or pious worshippers – will be exposed on the Day of Resurrection for the fraudulent motives of their diseased hearts.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

إِنَّ أَوَّلَ النَّاسِ يُفْضَىٰ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ عَلَيْهِ رَجُلٌ اسْتَشْهَدَ، فَأْتِيَ بِهِ فَعَرَفَهُ نِعْمَهُ فَعَرَفَهَا، قَالَ: فَمَا عَمِلْتَ فِيهَا؟ قَالَ: قَاتَلْتُ فِيكَ حَتَّى اسْتَشْهَدْتُ، قَالَ: كَذَبْتَ، وَلَكِنَّكَ قَاتَلْتَ لِأَنْ يُقَالَ: جَرِيءٌ، فَقَدْ قِيلَ، ثُمَّ أُمِرَ بِهِ فَسُحِبَ عَلَىٰ وَجْهِهِ حَتَّى أُلْقِيَ فِي النَّارِ، وَرَجُلٌ تَعَلَّمَ الْعِلْمَ، وَعَلَّمَهُ وَقَرَأَ الْقُرْآنَ، فَأْتِيَ بِهِ فَعَرَفَهُ نِعْمَهُ فَعَرَفَهَا، قَالَ: فَمَا عَمِلْتَ فِيهَا؟ قَالَ: تَعَلَّمْتُ الْعِلْمَ، وَعَلَّمْتُهُ وَقَرَأْتُ فِيكَ الْقُرْآنَ، قَالَ: كَذَبْتَ، وَلَكِنَّكَ تَعَلَّمْتَ الْعِلْمَ لِيُقَالَ: عَالِمٌ، وَقَرَأْتَ الْقُرْآنَ لِيُقَالَ: هُوَ قَارِئٌ، فَقَدْ قِيلَ، ثُمَّ أُمِرَ بِهِ فَسُحِبَ عَلَىٰ وَجْهِهِ حَتَّى أُلْقِيَ فِي النَّارِ، وَرَجُلٌ وَسَّعَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ، وَأَعْطَاهُ مِنْ أَصْنَافِ الْمَالِ كُلِّهِ، فَأْتِيَ بِهِ فَعَرَفَهُ نِعْمَهُ فَعَرَفَهَا، قَالَ: فَمَا عَمِلْتَ فِيهَا؟ قَالَ: مَا تَرَكْتُ مِنْ سَبِيلٍ تُحِبُّ أَنْ يُنْفَقَ فِيهَا إِلَّا أَنْفَقْتُ فِيهَا لَكَ، قَالَ: كَذَبْتَ، وَلَكِنَّكَ فَعَلْتَ لِيُقَالَ: هُوَ جَوَادٌ، فَقَدْ قِيلَ، ثُمَّ أُمِرَ بِهِ فَسُحِبَ عَلَىٰ وَجْهِهِ، ثُمَّ أُلْقِيَ فِي النَّارِ

Verily, the first people to be judged on the Day of Resurrection will be a man who was martyred. He will be brought, the blessings of God will be made known and he will acknowledge them. God will say: What did you do about them? The man will say: I fought in your cause until I was martyred. God will say: You have lied, for you fought only that it would be said you were brave, and thus it was said. Then, God will order him to be

<sup>53</sup> al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, v.4 p.329 #2654; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* v.2 p.1091 #6383.

<sup>54</sup> Ibn Rajab, *Jāmi' al-'Ulūm wal-Hikam*, v.1 p.489 #19.

<sup>55</sup> Ibn Qudāmah, *Mukhtaṣar Minhāj al-Qāṣidīn*, v.1 p.365.

dragged upon his face until he is cast into Hellfire. Another man studied religious knowledge, taught others, and recited the Qur'ān. He will be brought, the blessings of God will be made known and he will acknowledge them. God will say: What did you do about them? The man will say: I learned religious knowledge, taught others, and I recited the Qur'ān for your sake. God will say: You have lied, for you studied only that it would be said you are a scholar and you recited the Qur'ān only that it would be said you are a reciter, and thus it was said. Then, God will order him to be dragged upon his face until he is cast into Hellfire. Another man was given an abundance of blessings from God and every kind of wealth. He will be brought, the blessings of God will be made known and he will acknowledge them. God will say: What did you do about them? The man will say: I did not leave any good cause beloved to you but that I spent on it for your sake. God will say: You have lied, for you spent only that it would be said you are generous, and thus it was said. Then, God will order him to be dragged upon his face until he is cast into Hellfire.<sup>56</sup>

As sincerity towards God is the starting point in the fulfillment of all religious duties – inward and outward, for God and for fellow creatures – it cannot be forced upon anyone in any way. Sincerity must come organically from within the heart of a person, either by self-discovery or persuasion. Compulsion in religion has no place in Islam at all.

God said:

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ قَدْ تَبَيَّنَ الرُّشْدُ مِنَ الْغَيِّ فَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِالطَّاغُوتِ وَيُؤْمِنْ بِاللَّهِ فَقَدِ اسْتَمْسَكَ بِالْعُرْوَةِ الْوُثْقَىٰ لَا  
أَنْفِصَامَ لَهَا وَاللَّهُ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ

There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error, so whoever rejects false gods and believes in God has grasped the firmest handhold, one that will never break. God is all hearing and all knowing.<sup>57</sup>

And God said:

وَقُلِ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفُرْ

Say, 'Now the truth has come from your Lord: let those who wish to believe in it do so, and let those who wish to reject it do so.'<sup>58</sup>

And God said:

فَذَكَرْ إِنَّمَا أَنْتَ مُذَكَّرٌ (٢١) لَسْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ بِمُصَيِّرٍ

<sup>56</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, v.3 p.1513 #1905.

<sup>57</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Baqarah 2:256; Abdel Haleem p.43.

<sup>58</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Kahf 18:29; Abdel Haleem p.298.



So [Prophet] warn them: your only task is to give warning, you are not there to control them.<sup>59</sup>

Sa'īd ibn Zayd commented on this verse, saying, "You are not an authority over them to coerce them into faith."<sup>60</sup> In other words, the Prophet ﷺ was not given a mandate to force people to embrace Islam. In several verses, God reminds the believers time and again that the only duty of the prophets was to deliver the message.

God said:

مَنْ يُطِيعِ الرَّسُولَ فَقَدْ أَطَاعَ اللَّهَ وَمَنْ تَوَلَّىٰ فَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ عَلَيْهِمْ حَفِيظًا

Whoever obeys the Messenger obeys God. If some pay no heed, We have not sent you to be their keeper.<sup>61</sup>

And God said:

وَإِنْ تُكَذِّبُوا فَقَدْ كَذَّبَ أُمَمٌ مِّن قَبْلِكُمْ وَمَا عَلَى الرَّسُولِ إِلَّا الْبَلَاغُ الْمُبِينُ

If you say this is a lie, [be warned that] other communities before you said the same. The messenger's only duty is to give clear warning.<sup>62</sup>

And God said:

فَهَلْ عَلَى الرَّسُولِ إِلَّا الْبَلَاغُ الْمُبِينُ

Are the messengers obliged to do anything other than deliver [their message] clearly?<sup>63</sup>

And God said:

قُلْ أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ فَإِن تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّمَا عَلَيْهِ مَا حُمِّلَ وَعَلَيْكُمْ مَّا حُمِّلْتُمْ وَإِن تُطِيعُوهُ تَهْتَدُوا وَمَا عَلَى الرَّسُولِ إِلَّا الْبَلَاغُ الْمُبِينُ

Say, "Obey God; obey the Messenger. If you turn away, [know that] he is responsible for the duty placed upon him, and you are responsible for the duty placed upon you. If you obey him, you will be rightly guided, but the Messenger's duty is only to deliver the message clearly."<sup>64</sup>

And God said:

وَأَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَطِيعُوا الرَّسُولَ وَأَحْذَرُوا فَإِن تَوَلَّيْتُمْ فَأَعْلَمُوا أَنَّمَا عَلَى رَسُولِنَا الْبَلَاغُ الْمُبِينُ

Obey God, obey the Messenger, and always be on your guard: if you pay

<sup>59</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Ghāshiyah 88:21-22; Abdel Haleem p.593.

<sup>60</sup> al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*, v.24 p.341.

<sup>61</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Nisā' 4:80; Abdel Haleem p.92.

<sup>62</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Ankabūt 29:18; Abdel Haleem p.399.

<sup>63</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Naḥl 16:35; Abdel Haleem p.272.

<sup>64</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Nūr 24:54; Abdel Haleem p.358.



no heed, bear in mind that the sole duty of Our Messenger is to deliver the message clearly.<sup>65</sup>

And God said:

قَالُوا رَبُّنَا يَعْلَمُ إِنَّا إِلَيْكُمْ لَمُرْسَلُونَ (١٦) وَمَا عَلَيْنَا إِلَّا الْبَلَاغُ الْمُبِينُ

They said, “Our Lord knows that we have been sent to you. Our duty is only to deliver the message to you.”<sup>66</sup>

If God wanted to compel everyone to follow one religion, he could have created people without free will or he could have mandated his prophets to force people into compliance. God did neither of those things because his will is to test the sincerity of people’s faith in this world.

God said:

وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَأَمَنَّ مَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ كُلَّهُمْ جَمِيعًا أَفَأَنْتَ تُكْرِهُ النَّاسَ حَتَّىٰ يَكُونُوا مُؤْمِنِينَ

Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed. So can you [Prophet] compel people to believe?<sup>67</sup>

And God said:

لِكُلِّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شِرْعَةً وَمِنْهَاجًا وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَكِن لِّيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِي مَا آتَيْنَاكُمْ فَاسْتَبِقُوا  
الْخَيْرَاتِ إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ

We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about.<sup>68</sup>

Religious difference is natural and inevitable; God allows it as it is his will to test the sincerity of people. Rather than provoking conflict from such differences, God tells us to “race to do good,” as if to compete in charitable works. Even when the Prophet ﷺ had to fight others to defend his community and their right to practice Islam, he never forced anyone to enter Islam – not once, not ever. The prophetic method of spreading Islam is by persuasion, not by persecution.

Ibn al-Qayyim writes:

[The Prophet] never forced the religion upon anyone, but rather he only fought those who waged war against him and fought him first. As for those

<sup>65</sup> Qur’ān, Surat al-Mā’idah 5:92; Abdel Haleem p.124.

<sup>66</sup> Qur’ān, Surat Yā Sīn 36:16-17; Abdel Haleem p.442.

<sup>67</sup> Qur’ān, Surat Yūnus 10:99; Abdel Haleem p.221.

<sup>68</sup> Qur’ān, Surat al-Mā’idah 5:48; Abdel Haleem p.117.

who made peace with him or conducted a truce, then he never fought them and he never compelled them to enter his religion, as his Lord the Almighty had commanded him: There is no compulsion in religion, for right guidance is distinct from error (2:256).<sup>69</sup>

In sum, God wants people's hearts; he does not want servants forced into hypocritical and empty worship. As Al-Sūsī, may God have mercy on him, said, "God only desires sincerity in the deeds of his creatures."<sup>70</sup>

### **Honesty – al-Ṣidq**

Related to sincerity is the virtue of honesty and truthfulness. Like sincerity, honesty has implications both in relation to God and in relation to our behavior towards others.

God said:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَكُونُوا مَعَ الصَّادِقِينَ

You who believe, be mindful of God: stand with those who are true.<sup>71</sup>

All of the prophets, peace and blessings be upon them, were truthful and honest people whom God praised for their honesty.

God said:

وَأَذْكُرْ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ إِنَّهُ كَانَ صِدِّيقًا نَبِيًّا

Mention too, in the Qur'ān, the story of Abraham. He was a man of truth, a prophet.<sup>72</sup>

And God said:

وَأَذْكُرْ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِسْمَاعِيلَ إِنَّهُ كَانَ صَادِقَ الْوَعْدِ وَكَانَ رَسُولًا نَبِيًّا

Mention too, in the Qur'ān, the story of Ishmael. He was true to his promise, a messenger and a prophet.<sup>73</sup>

And God said:

وَأَذْكُرْ فِي الْكِتَابِ إِدْرِيْسَ إِنَّهُ كَانَ صِدِّيقًا نَبِيًّا

Mention too, in the Qur'ān, the story of Idris. He was a man of truth, a prophet.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *Hidāyat al-Ḥayārā*, v.1 p.237.

<sup>70</sup> al-Ghazzālī. *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, v.4 p.379.

<sup>71</sup> Qur'ān, Surat al-Tawbah 9:119; Abdel Haleem p.207.

<sup>72</sup> Qur'ān, Surat Maryam 19:41; Abdel Haleem p.309.

<sup>73</sup> Qur'ān, Surat Maryam 19:54; Abdel Haleem p.310.

<sup>74</sup> Qur'ān, Surat Maryam 19:56; Abdel Haleem p.310.

Honesty is, first and foremost, with respect to God, and it is synonymous with sincerity as we have mentioned. Whoever achieves pure honesty with God will be admitted to Paradise.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

مَا مِنْ أَحَدٍ يَشْهَدُ أَنْ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَأَنَّ مُحَمَّدًا رَسُولُ اللَّهِ، صِدْقًا مِنْ قَلْبِهِ، إِلَّا حَرَّمَهُ اللَّهُ عَلَى النَّارِ

No one testifies that there is no God but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God – honestly from the heart (*ṣidq min qalbih*) – but that God will forbid him from entering Hellfire.<sup>75</sup>

Like sincerity, however, honesty with God must correlate with honesty towards others. ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, may God be pleased with him, said, “The best deeds are to fulfill the obligations of God, to be mindful of the prohibitions of God, and to have an honest intention before God Almighty.”<sup>76</sup> In this saying, Umar mentions obligations and prohibitions, which includes duties towards other people, alongside an honest intention with God. Both sets of duties – to God and to people – are not mutually exclusive; they must be done sincerely altogether. As Abū Bakr al-Warrāq said, “Preserve honesty in what is between you and God Almighty, and kindness in what is between you and the creation.”<sup>77</sup>

Telling the truth or telling lies are habits that are learned and, if necessary, must be unlearned. We should practice telling the truth so often that it becomes our second-nature, that we always tell the truth without any effort, for this is the mark of a pure heart that will be admitted into Paradise.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

عَلَيْكُمْ بِالصِّدْقِ، فَإِنَّ الصِّدْقَ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْبِرِّ، وَإِنَّ الْبِرَّ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْجَنَّةِ، وَمَا يَزَالُ الرَّجُلُ يَصْدُقُ وَيَتَحَرَّى الصِّدْقَ حَتَّى يُكْتَبَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ صِدْقًا، وَإِيَّاكُمْ وَالْكَذِبَ، فَإِنَّ الْكَذِبَ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْفُجُورِ، وَإِنَّ الْفُجُورَ يَهْدِي إِلَى النَّارِ، وَمَا يَزَالُ الرَّجُلُ يَكْذِبُ وَيَتَحَرَّى الْكَذِبَ حَتَّى يُكْتَبَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ كَذَابًا

You must be truthful. Verily, truthfulness leads to righteousness and righteousness leads to Paradise. A man continues to be truthful and encourages honesty until he is recorded with God as truthful. And beware of falsehood. Verily, falsehood leads to wickedness and wickedness leads to the Hellfire. A man continues tell lies and encourages falsehood until he is recorded with God as a liar.<sup>78</sup>

Dishonesty in words, by contrast, was one of the sins that the Prophet detested most. ‘Ā’ishah, may God be pleased with her, said, “There was no behavior more hateful to

<sup>75</sup> al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, v.1 p.37. #128.

<sup>76</sup> Ibn Rajab, *Jāmi’ al-‘Ulūm wal-Ḥikam*, v.2 p.336 #38.

<sup>77</sup> al-Ghazzālī. *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, v.4 p.387.

<sup>78</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, v.4 p.2103 #2607.

the Messenger of God ﷺ than dishonesty. A man would tell a lie when speaking in the presence of the Prophet and he would not be satisfied until he knew that he had repented.”<sup>79</sup> The Prophet made sure everyone who lied in public had repented, as the sin of false witness is indeed tremendous.

Thus, we ought to strive towards comprehensive honesty in all aspects of our lives – inwardly and outwardly. According to Al-Ghazālī, the virtue of honesty includes truthfulness in one’s words, deeds, and intentions.<sup>80</sup> The crux of the matter is that our outward actions must coincide with our inward state; the good words we say and the good deeds we do should be authentic expressions of the goodness in our hearts and in our character.

Muṭarrif, may God have mercy on him, said, “Verily, when the inward state of the servant matches his public behavior, God says: This is my true servant.”<sup>81</sup> And Abū Ya’qūb al-Nahrajūrī, may God have mercy on him, said, “Honesty is to be consistent with the truth in private and public. The reality of honesty is to speak the truth in matters of grave importance.”<sup>82</sup>

The heart and tongue are intimately connected; honest words come forth from a pure heart. It was once said to the Prophet “Which of the people is best?” The Prophet ﷺ said:

كُلُّ مَخْمُومِ الْقَلْبِ، صَدُوقِ اللِّسَانِ

Everyone who is pure of heart and truthful in speech.

They said, “Truthful in speech we know, but what is a pure heart?” The Prophet said:

هُوَ النَّقِيُّ النَّقِيُّ، لَا إِثْمَ فِيهِ، وَلَا بَغْيَ، وَلَا غِلَّ، وَلَا حَسَدَ

It is a heart that fears God and is clean. There is no sin in it and neither aggression, malice, nor envy.<sup>83</sup>

In a variant of this tradition, the companions said, “And who shows a sign [of a pure heart]?” The Prophet said:

مُؤْمِنٌ فِي خُلُقٍ حَسَنٍ

A believer with good character.<sup>84</sup>

As with sincerity, an honest heart is one that is not deluded and misled by hatred and

<sup>79</sup> al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, v.3 p.416 #1973; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Tirmidhī in his commentary.

<sup>80</sup> al-Ghazzālī. *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, v.4 p.387-388.

<sup>81</sup> Ibn al-Sarī, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, v.1 p.300 #530.

<sup>82</sup> al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A’lām al-Nubalā’*, v.11 p.465.

<sup>83</sup> Ibn Mājah, M. *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, v.2 p.1409 #4216; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Targhīb* v.3 p.99 #2889.

<sup>84</sup> al-Bayhaqī, *Shu’ab al-Īmān*, v.6 p.449 #4462.

malice; it is the container of righteous character from which good deeds and goodwill emerge. To purify the heart, then, is to develop a habit of telling the truth and being honest with all those around us, to our family, our friends, our colleagues, and our neighbors.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

لَا يَسْتَقِيمُ إِيمَانُ عَبْدٍ حَتَّى يَسْتَقِيمَ قَلْبُهُ، وَلَا يَسْتَقِيمُ قَلْبُهُ حَتَّى يَسْتَقِيمَ لِسَانُهُ، وَلَا يَدْخُلُ الْجَنَّةَ رَجُلٌ لَا يَأْمَنُ جَارُهُ بَوَائِقَهُ

The faith of a servant is not upright until his heart is upright, and his heart is not upright until his tongue is upright. A man will not enter Paradise if his neighbor is not secure from his evil.<sup>85</sup>

When we are honest with God and with others, we will find that all of our affairs will come together and any problems we have will work themselves out. ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb wrote to Abū Mūsa, may God be pleased with them both, saying, “Whoever purifies his intention, then God will take care of his affairs between people. And whoever embellishes for people what God knows is not in his heart, then God Almighty will disgrace him.”<sup>86</sup> On the contrary, dishonesty in heart and mind produces the uneasiness of cognitive dissonance, which can lead rather quickly to public exposure and humiliation.

How can we assess our level of honesty? Al-Tha‘labī narrates a wise proverb, “A man does not reach the peak of righteousness (*al-taqwā*) until it is such that, were he to place what is in his heart on a plate and go around the market with it, he would not be ashamed of anything on it.”<sup>87</sup> If you carry nothing in your heart that would shame you if made public, then you have achieved the summit of spiritual excellence. Most of us – not least this author! – are nowhere near such a pure state.

The vice of hypocrisy, like idolatry, is divided into two levels: greater and lesser hypocrisy. The greater hypocrisy (*al-nifāq al-akbar*) is one who pretends to have faith while concealing unbelief in his heart. Such an act is merely a form of unbelief. On the other hand, the lesser hypocrisy (*al-nifāq al-aṣghar*) is to have any amount of dishonesty in our deeds.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

أَرْبَعٌ مَنْ كُنَّ فِيهِ كَانَ مُنَافِقًا خَالِصًا، وَمَنْ كَانَتْ فِيهِ خَلَّةٌ مِنْهُنَّ كَانَتْ فِيهِ خَلَّةٌ مِنْ نِفَاقٍ حَتَّى يَدْعَهَا: إِذَا حَدَّثَ كَذَبًا، وَإِذَا عَاهَدَ غَدَرَ، وَإِذَا وَعَدَ أَخْلَفَ، وَإِذَا خَاصَمَ فَجَرَ " غَيْرَ أَنَّ فِي حَدِيثِ سُفْيَانَ: «وَأِنْ كَانَتْ فِيهِ خَصْلَةٌ مِنْهُنَّ كَانَتْ فِيهِ خَصْلَةٌ مِنَ النِّفَاقِ

<sup>85</sup> Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Aḥmad*, v.20 p.343 #13048; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Targhīb* v.2 p.680 #2554.

<sup>86</sup> Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā’*, v.1 p.50.

<sup>87</sup> al-Tha‘labī, *al-Kaṣf wal-Bayān ‘an Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, v.1 p.144.

There are four signs that make someone a pure hypocrite and whoever has them has a characteristic of hypocrisy until he abandons it: when he speaks he lies, when he makes a covenant he is treacherous, when he makes a promise he breaks it, and when he argues he is wicked.<sup>88</sup>

It is possible for us to have elements of faith and hypocrisy in our hearts at the same time, as hypocrisy exists along a spectrum, as a matter of degree, rather than a discrete category. Again, it takes a constant struggle to maintain the virtue of honesty in everything that we do. As Sufyān al-Thawrī, may God have mercy on him, said:

عَلَيْكَ بِالصِّدْقِ فِي الْمَوَاطِنِ كُلِّهَا , وَإِيَّاكَ وَالْكَذِبَ وَالْخِيَانَةَ وَمُجَالَسَةَ أَصْحَابِهَا , فَإِنَّهَا وَزْرٌ كُلُّهُ , وَإِيَّاكَ يَا  
أَخِي وَالرِّيَاءَ فِي الْقَوْلِ وَالْعَمَلِ , فَإِنَّهُ شِرْكٌ بِعَيْنِهِ , وَإِيَّاكَ وَالْعُجْبَ , فَإِنَّ الْعَمَلَ الصَّالِحَ لَا يَرْفَعُ وَفِيهِ عُجْبٌ

You must be honest in all things. Beware of lying and treachery and sitting with those who commit them, for it will all be a burden of sin. Beware, my brother, of ostentation in words and deeds, as it is a form of idolatry.

Beware of vanity, for good deeds within which is vanity will not be exalted.<sup>89</sup>

Perhaps the most important social aspect of honesty is to be faithful to all of our contracts (*al-'uqūd*), promises (*al-wu'ūd*), covenants (*al-'uhūd*), and trusts (*al-amānah*).

God said:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَوْفُوا بِالْعُقُودِ

You who believe, fulfil your obligations.<sup>90</sup>

The word “obligations” in this verse refers to all types of covenants, those between God and those between people.<sup>91</sup>

As believers, we ought to be trustworthy enough to fulfill our word when we give it. The sign of a true believer is to emulate the honesty of Prophet Muhammad, who himself was known by his people even before Islam as “the Trustworthy” (*al-Amīn*).

The Prophet ﷺ said:

الْمُسْلِمُ مَنْ سَلِمَ النَّاسُ مِنْ لِسَانِهِ وَيَدِهِ، وَالْمُؤْمِنُ مَنْ أَمِنَهُ النَّاسُ عَلَى دِمَائِهِمْ وَأَمْوَالِهِمْ

The Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand the people are safe,<sup>92</sup> and the believer is the one people trust with their lives and wealth.

Similarly, an inability or unwillingness to follow up on our trusts is sign of weak faith or,

<sup>88</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, v.1 p.78 #58.

<sup>89</sup> Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā’*, v.7 p.82.

<sup>90</sup> Qur’ān, Surat al-Mā’idah 5:1; Abdel Haleem p.107.

<sup>91</sup> al-Suyūṭī and Maḥallī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, v.1 p.134 verse 5:1.

<sup>92</sup> al-Nasā’ī, *Sunan al-Nasā’ī*, v.8 p.104 #4995; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ Sunan al-Nasā’ī* v.3 p.342 #5010.

worse, no true faith at all. The faith of a Muslim believer is only as good as his or her word and promise.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

لَا إِيمَانَ لِمَنْ لَا أَمَانَةَ لَهُ، وَلَا دِينَ لِمَنْ لَا عَهْدَ لَهُ

There is no faith for one who cannot be trusted. There is no religion for one who cannot uphold a covenant.<sup>93</sup>

Citizenship is a modern form of public trust. As Muslims, we should be productive citizens of whatever country in which we live. The Prophet ﷺ instructed his companion Fudayk, saying:

يَا فُدَيْكُ أَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ وَاهْجِرِ السُّوءَ وَاسْكُنْ مِنْ أَرْضِ قَوْمِكَ حَيْثُ شِئْتَ

O Fudayk, establish prayer, avoid sins, and live in the land with your people wherever you wish.<sup>94</sup>

As long as we can practice our religion and avoid sins, we may live anywhere in the world. Yet wherever we are, we must leave its land and its people better than how we found it. We should contribute to the collective betterment of humanity, to both Muslims and non-Muslims, as honest and trustworthy neighbors.

The honesty of citizens is, in reality, what protects society from the tyranny of oppressive governments. Honesty in this context is a form of bravery, to speak the truth in the face of danger. When those in power commit great wrongs, we are called to speak out against it with honesty, courage, and compassion.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

لَا يَمْنَعَنَّ رَجُلًا مِنْكُمْ مَخَافَةُ النَّاسِ أَنْ يَتَكَلَّمَ بِالْحَقِّ إِذَا رَأَهُ أَوْ عَلِمَهُ

Let not fear of the people prevent one of you from saying the truth if he knows it.<sup>95</sup>

Honesty in such a case is also jihad in the way of God. Indeed, it is among the best and greatest deeds of jihād. A man asked Prophet, “What is the best jihād?” The Prophet ﷺ said:

كَلِمَةُ حَقٍّ عِنْدَ سُلْطَانٍ جَائِرٍ

A word of truth in front of a tyrannical ruler.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, v.19 p.376 #12383; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Arnā'ūṭ et al in their commentary.

<sup>94</sup> Ibn Ḥibbān, *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān*, v.11 p.202 #4861; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Ibn 'Abd al-Barr in *al-Istidhkār* v.7 p.277.

<sup>95</sup> Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, v.17 p.490 #11402; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Arnā'ūṭ et al in their commentary.

<sup>96</sup> Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, v.31 p.126 #18830; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Arnā'ūṭ et al in their

As Muslims, we should expect others to be honest and forthright with us when something we do is wrong. ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-Azīz, may God have mercy on him, would say, “May God have mercy on a man who shows me my faults.”<sup>97</sup> The truth is often a bitter, but necessary, medicine. No citizen should be prevented from appropriately expressing their honest feelings about our collective social problems. Their honesty just might be, in fact, our remedy.

### **Goodwill – al-Naṣīḥah**

Sincerity and honesty are related to another essential virtue in Islam: goodwill. We should have good intentions towards everyone and everything, to God and to all of his creatures. The Prophet ﷺ said:

الدِّينُ النَّصِيحَةُ

Religion is goodwill.

It was said, “To whom?” The Prophet said:

بِاللَّهِ وَلِكِتَابِهِ وَلِرَسُولِهِ وَلِأَيِّمَةِ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَعَامَّتِهِمْ

To God, his book, his messenger, the leaders of the Muslims and their common people.<sup>98</sup>

Put differently, the essence of Islam itself is goodwill in all things.

Abū Dāwūd considered this hadīth to be one of four around which jurisprudence (*al-fiqh*) revolved. Several other scholars considered it of great importance, some referring to it as one-fourth of Islam.<sup>99</sup> The word “goodwill” has a very wide meaning, but it can be concisely defined as a good intention towards another. Ibn Daqīq writes, “Goodwill is a comprehensive word meaning completely good intent for one counseled to obtain prosperity... There is no word in Arabic more comprehensive for goodness in this life and in the Hereafter than it.”<sup>100</sup>

Cultivating goodwill in our hearts towards all creatures is among the best acts of worship.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

قَالَ: قَالَ اللهُ: أَحَبُّ مَا تَعَبَّدَنِي بِهِ عَبْدِي إِلَيَّ النَّصْحُ لِي

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commentary.

<sup>97</sup> al-Kalābādhī, *Baḥr al-Fawā'id*, p.129.

<sup>98</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, v.1 p.74 #55.

<sup>99</sup> Ibn Rajab, *Jāmi' al-'Ulūm wal-Hikam*, v.1 p.215-216 #7.

<sup>100</sup> Ibn Daqīq, *Sharḥ al-Arba'īn al-Nawawīyah*, v.1 p.50 #7.



God Almighty said: The most beloved act with which my servant worships me is goodwill for my sake.<sup>101</sup>

And Ibn al-Mubārak, may God have mercy on him, was asked, “Which deed is best?” He said, “Goodwill for the sake of God.”<sup>102</sup>

Goodwill in these traditions, as in others, is with respect to God and people in general. Goodwill with respect to God is to have sincerity (*al-ikhlas*) in all of one’s affairs, as previously discussed.<sup>103</sup> That is, to worship God free from any idolatry, ostentation, compulsion, or other ulterior motives. Goodwill with respect to people is to offer sound and helpful advice, but its essence, according to Ibn Daqīq, is “to love for them what one loves for himself of goodness and to dislike for them what one dislikes for himself of offenses.”<sup>104</sup> This is none other than *the golden rule*, to treat others the way we want to be treated.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

لَا يُؤْمِنُ أَحَدُكُمْ حَتَّىٰ يُحِبَّ لِأَخِيهِ - أَوْ قَالَ: لِجَارِهِ - مَا يُحِبُّ لِنَفْسِهِ

None of you has faith until he loves for his brother or his neighbor what he loves for himself.<sup>105</sup>

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

فَمَنْ أَحَبَّ أَنْ يُزْحَرَ عَنِ النَّارِ، وَيَدْخَلَ الْجَنَّةَ، فَلْتَأْتِهِ مَنِيئُهُ وَهُوَ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ، وَلَيَأْتِ إِلَى النَّاسِ الَّذِي يُحِبُّ أَنْ يُؤْتَىٰ إِلَيْهِ

Whoever would love to be saved from Hellfire and admitted into Paradise, then let him meet his end with faith in God and the Last Day, and let him treat people the way he would love to be treated.<sup>106</sup>

As in other religions, the golden rule, i.e., treat others the way you want to be treated, is an all-embracing principle of good conduct in Islam. Al-Nawawī comments on this hadīth, saying, “This is among the comprehensive sayings of the Prophet ﷺ, his marvelous wisdom, and an important rule. It deserves to be given close attention: that the human being must not treat people except in a way he would love to be treated by them.”<sup>107</sup>

Adherence to the golden rule is not simply something to be encouraged in Islam. As these traditions suggest, this principle is integral to faith in Islam and salvation in the

<sup>101</sup> Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, v.36 p.529 #22191; declared fair (*hasan*) by Al-Suyūṭī in *al-Tanwīr Sharḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaghīr*, v.8 p.10 #6021.

<sup>102</sup> Ibn Abī Dunyā, *Kitāb al-Amr bil-Ma’rūf*, v.1 p.107 #71.

<sup>103</sup> al-Ṣan’ānī, *al-Tanwīr Sharḥ al-Jāmi’ Al-Ṣaghīr*, v.8 p.10 #6021.

<sup>104</sup> Ibn Daqīq, *Sharḥ al-Arba’in al-Nawawīyah*, v.1 p.52 #7.

<sup>105</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, v.1 p.67 #45.

<sup>106</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, v.3 p.1472 #1844.

<sup>107</sup> al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ al-Nawawī ‘alá Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, v.12 p.233.

Hereafter. Consequently, it was included in the pledge that the companions gave to the Prophet himself. Jarīr ibn ‘Abd Allāh said, “I pledged allegiance to the Messenger of God ﷺ to establish prayer, to give charity, and to have goodwill towards every Muslim.”<sup>108</sup>

Al-Ghazālī explains that the companions considered the golden rule to be embedded in their pledge to God, the Prophet, and Islam:

They understood it is part of goodwill (*al-nuṣḥ*) that one should not be pleased for his brother to have except what pleases himself. They did not believe it was [merely] virtuous and an increase in [spiritual] ranks. Rather, they believed it was a condition of Islam within their pledge to him.<sup>109</sup>

Al-Subkī notes that the principle of good conduct in traditions like these is inclusive of non-Muslims, even if the text refers only to Muslims. Traditions that contain the words “Muslim” or “brother” are often meant to convey a situation Muslims would normally find themselves in – interacting with other Muslims – and are not meant to be restricted only to Muslims because “the generality of it is established by other evidence.”<sup>110</sup> In other words, we should apply the golden rule with everyone, both Muslims and non-Muslims, friends and enemies. In this respect, Al-Nawawī referred to humanity as a “universal brotherhood” (*‘umūm al-ikhwah*) deserving of altruistic “religious love” (*al-maḥabbah al-dinīyyah*).<sup>111</sup>

The universality of goodwill in Islam is demonstrated in the stories of the prophets, peace and blessings be upon them. They approached their peoples in a spirit of brotherhood and goodwill, even though at the time they were idolaters and unbelievers.

The Prophet Noah ﷺ said:

أُبَلِّغُكُمْ رِسَالَاتِ رَبِّي وَأَنْصَحُ لَكُمْ وَأَعْلَمُ مِنَ اللَّهِ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

I am delivering my Lord's messages to you and giving you sincere advice.  
I know things from God that you do not.<sup>112</sup>

And the Prophet Hūd ﷺ said:

أُبَلِّغُكُمْ رِسَالَاتِ رَبِّي وَأَنَا لَكُمْ نَاصِحٌ أَمِينٌ

I am delivering my Lord's messages to you. I am your sincere and honest adviser.<sup>113</sup>

And the Prophet Ṣāliḥ ﷺ said:

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<sup>108</sup> al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, v.1 p.21 #57.

<sup>109</sup> al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, v.2 p.76.

<sup>110</sup> al-Nawawī and al-Subkī, *al-Majmū’*, v.12 p.117.

<sup>111</sup> al-Nawawī, *Kitāb al-Arba’īn al-Nawawīyah wa Sharḥuh*, p.38.

<sup>112</sup> Qur’ān, Surat al-A’rāf 7:62; Abdel Haleem p.159.

<sup>113</sup> Qur’ān, Surat al-A’rāf 7:68; Abdel Haleem p.68.

فَتَوَلَّىٰ عَنْهُمْ وَقَالَ يَا قَوْمِ لَقَدْ أَبْلَغْتُكُمْ رِسَالَاتِ رَبِّي وَنَصَحْتُ لَكُمْ وَلَكِن لَّا تُحِبُّونَ النَّاصِحِينَ

My people, I delivered my Lord's messages to you and gave you sincere advice, but you did not like those who gave sincere advice.<sup>114</sup>

On the basis of goodwill, and the golden rule it implies, scholars derive the equality (*al-musāwāh*) of believers and, to be more precise, the virtue of giving preference (*al-tafḍīl*) to others.<sup>115</sup> Since the principle of goodwill extends to all of humanity, there is precedent in Islam for agreement with non-Muslims on a common understanding of human rights and political reconciliation. There is still much work to be done to achieve and restore justice, human rights, and political reconciliation among the nations of the world. Nevertheless, we should approach people in general with a spirit of goodwill similar to the prophets.

Bad will or malevolence (*al-ghish*) is yet another characteristic of hypocrisy that we must avoid. Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, may God be pleased with him, said, “Verily, the believers are people with goodwill between themselves, even if they reside far away from each other. The hypocrites are people with malevolence between themselves.”<sup>116</sup>

People with such malevolence often approach others with “two faces” (*wajhayn*), saying one thing while concealing another in their heart. They may even intentionally give bad advice, like a swindler or a con man. This vice is a type of dishonesty only exhibited by the worst of humanity.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

إِنَّ شَرَّ النَّاسِ ذُو الْوَجْهَيْنِ، الَّذِي يَأْتِي هَؤُلَاءِ بِوَجْهِهِ، وَهَؤُلَاءِ بِوَجْهِهِ

Verily, among the worst of people is one with two faces, he who comes with one face to these and another to those.<sup>117</sup>

And Bilāl ibn Sa’d, may God have mercy on him, said, “Do not be one with two faces and two tongues, making a show for people to praise you while your heart is wicked.”<sup>118</sup>

The greatest Muslims never behaved with such a malevolent spirit. Neither did they achieve anything from ostentatious displays of piety. Rather, they were great because of their sincerity, honesty, and goodwill. As Fudayl ibn ‘Iyāḍ, may God have mercy on him, said, “Those who achieved [greatness] never did so, in our view, with an abundance of fasts, nor prayers. Indeed, they only achieved it, in our view, with the spirit of generosity, purity of heart, and sincerity to the community.”<sup>119</sup>

<sup>114</sup> Qur’ān, Surat al-A’rāf 7:79; Abdel Haleem p.161.

<sup>115</sup> Ibn Ḥajar, *Fatḥh al-Bārī*, v.1 p.58.

<sup>116</sup> Ibn ‘Asākir, *Tārīkh Dimashq*, v.23 p.465.

<sup>117</sup> al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, v.9 p.71 #7179.

<sup>118</sup> Ibn Abī Dunyā, *al-Ikhlāṣ*, v.1 p.55 #28.

<sup>119</sup> Abū Nu’aym, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā’*, v.8 p.103.

## Conclusion

Sincerity, honesty, and goodwill are essential virtues in Islamic teachings. They must guide our behavior at every level: with God, with people, and within our own selves. Our most important goal is to facilitate and encourage sincerity to God, by persuasion and good example; faith displayed out of compulsion or in a state of hypocrisy has no value. Honest citizens contribute to the health of our societies by performing their duties and courageously speaking the truth on social problems; honesty is always valuable, even if it is mistaken. Goodwill embodies the ethics of reciprocity and equal treatment, setting a precedent for political reconciliation among the nations of the world; on this basis, we can pursue an understanding of human rights and dignity across religions and cultures. But most importantly, these virtues are obligations that we must fulfill – inwardly and outwardly – if we are to be granted salvation and admittance into Paradise.

*Success comes from God, and God knows best.*



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