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# 10. His Selected Sayings Replete with Wisdom and Guidance

# **Sayings and Maxims of Imam Ali (p)**

# Introduction

Translating idioms and sayings from the Arabic language into English is fraught with difficulties and imperfections. The selected maxims presented here from out of 480 maxims extracted from the book *Peak of Eloquence* have been rephrased in order to convey the essence and intent of what was said. It is hoped that the reader will benefit from the wisdom contained therein.

1. He who is greedy is disgraced; he who discloses his hardships, faces humiliation; he who has no control over his tongue debases himself.1

### 2. Pearls:

- Poverty often hinders an individual from arguing his case.

  A poor man is a stranger in his own town.
- Patience is bravery.

Avarice is disgrace.

God-consciousness is the best weapon of defense.

Misfortune and helplessness are calamities.

3. The best companion is Submission to the Will of God; wisdom is the noblest heritage; knowledge is the best sign of distinction.

- 4. The mind of a wise man is the safest custody of secrets; cheerfulness is the key to friendship; patience will conceal many defects.
- 5. A self-admiring person earns the dislike of others; charity and almsgiving are the best remedies for ailments and calamities.
- 6. When this world favors a person, it ascribes to him the merits of others, and when it turns its face away from him, it snatches away from him his own merits. 2
- 7. Live amongst people in such a manner that if you die they weep over you, and if you are alive, they crave your company.
- 8. If you overpower your enemy, pardon him (by way of thankfulness to God) for enabling you to subdue him.
- 9. When (even small) blessings come to you, do not lose them through ungratefulness (to God).
- 10. He who gallops with loose reins collides with death.
- 11. Overlook the shortcomings of generous people, because if they fall, God will support them.
- 12. Failures are often due to timidity and fear; disappointments are due to bashfulness; hours of leisure pass away like summer clouds, therefore do not waste the opportunities for performing good deeds.
- 13. Giving relief to the distressed and helping the oppressed are means for atonement for great sins.
- 14. O son of Adam, when you see that your Lord, the Glorified, bestows His favors on you, while you (continue to) disobey Him, you should fear Him (i.e., that His Wrath may turn those blessings into misfortunes).
- 15. Expressions of your face may reveal your hidden thoughts.
- 16. The best way to serve God is not to make a show of it.
- 17. Beware! God has not exposed many of your sinful activities; it may appear to you as if He has forgiven you. (Likely, He is giving you time to repent.)
- 18. A virtuous person is better than the virtue, and a vicious person is worse than the vice.
- 19. Be generous but not extravagant; be frugal but not miserly.
- 20. The best wealth is to give up excessive desires.
- 21. The one who utters negative things about others will himself become target of scandal.

- 22. Optional prayers (Optional Salaat) cannot attain the pleasure of God when one ignores obligatory prayers (Salaat).1
- 23. A wise person thinks before he speaks, whereas a fool speaks before he thinks.
- 24. A fool's heart is at the mercy of his tongue, whereas a wise man's tongue is under the control of his heart (mind).
- 25. One of the companions of Imam fell ill. Imam Ali called upon him and gave him this advice: "Be thankful to God. He has made this illness a thing to atone for your sin, because a disease in itself does not bring rewards to anyone; it merely expiates one's sins. As far as reward is concerned, one has to earn it with his good thoughts and deeds. The Almighty Lord grants Paradise to his subjects on account of their God–consciousness and noble thoughts."
- 26. Blessed is the man who always keeps the life in the Hereafter in his thoughts, who remembers the Day of Judgment in all his deeds, and who is happy with the lot that God has destined for him.
- 27. Certainly the prize for you to aim for (in the Hereafter) is paradise, so do not sell yourself short (for pleasures of this world).
- 28. The sin that makes you sad and repentant is liked by God more than the good deed that makes you vain.
- 29. The value of a man depends upon his courage; his truthfulness depends upon his self-respect; and his chastity depends upon his sense of honor.
- 30. Success requires foresight and resolve; foresight requires thinking and planning.
- 31. The real forgiveness is to forgive while having the power to punish.
- 32. The help given after a request would be either out of a sense of self–respect or from fear of rebuke. (Therefore, it is better to help before the request comes.)
- 33. There is no greater wealth than wisdom and no greater poverty than ignorance. There is no greater heritage than good manners and no greater support than consultation.
- 34. Patience is of two kinds: patience over what hurts you and patience against your (unfulfilled) desires.
- 35. Wealth turns a foreign land into a homeland and poverty turns one's native place into a foreign land.
- 36. Contentment is the capital that does not diminish.
- 37. Wealth is the fountainhead of passions.
- 38. Whoever warns you (against sin) is like one who gives you good tidings.3

- 39. The tongue is a beast; if let loose, it devours.
- 40. Return greetings with greater warmth. Repay a favor with what is more. The initiator of a favor deserves greater merit.
- 41. To deny the needy is of greater shame than to give something small in charity.
- 42. If you cannot achieve your desire, then be contented with what you have.
- 43. An ignorant person will either overdo or be negligent in performing a task.
- 44. The wiser a person, the less he talks.
- 45. To be a leader, one should be knowledgeable, and practice it before preaching.
- 46. Every breath of yours is one more step towards death.
- 47. Acquire wisdom from whomever you can (even from an adversary).
- 48. Knowledge and wisdom are the privilege of the faithful, so obtain them, even from one who is lacking in faith.
- 49. The worth of an individual is in his achievements.
- 50. Strive to acquire these five qualities:
- i) Have hope in God alone.
- ii) Fear nothing more than sin.
- iii) Do not be ashamed to admit what you do not know.
- iv) Do not be ashamed (or be afraid) to learn a new thing.
- v) Acquire patience, because its relationship to faith is like that of "the head to the body."
- 51. One who presupposes to know everything will stay ignorant.
- 52. I value the cautious opinion of an older individual more than the valor of a youth.
- 53. I wonder at the person who loses hope of salvation while the door of repentance is still open.
- 54. There are two sources of deliverance from God's punishment. God addressed the Prophet Muhammad(s) and said,

"God is not to chastise them (sinners) while you (Prophet) are among them, nor is God to

# chastise them, while they still seek forgiveness" (Qur'an Chapter 8, Verse 33).

- 55. Whoever keeps his affairs with God in proper order (being obedient to God), God will also put his affairs of the world in order. Whoever arranges affairs for his salvation (By virtuous acts), God will arrange his worldly affairs. Whoever warns himself (purifies his heart), God will be his protector.
- 56. Advice: "Do not lose hope in God's Mercy. At the same time do not take for granted immunity from His punishment."
- 57. Refresh your tired mind by indulging in sayings and words of wisdom.
- 58. The knowledge that remains merely on the tongue is superficial knowledge. The intrinsic (real) value of knowledge is realized when it is acted upon.
- 59. Do not pray to the Lord saying, "Lord! Protect me from (undergoing) temptations and trials," for there is none who is not tempted and tried. Beseech Him to guard you against such temptation that would lead you to sins. God says in His Book:

# "Know that your wealth and children are temptations." (Qur'an 8:28)

- 60. When asked what is good, he replied: "Good is not in having much wealth and progeny, but good is in possessing much knowledge, forbearance, and much worship of God; and to thank God for your good deed and to repent for your evil deed."
- 61. To sleep in a state of firm belief is better than to pray in a state of doubtfulness.
- 62. In regard to the following passage of the Qur'an:

# "Verily, to God we belong and to Him do we return" (Qur'an 2:156).

Imam Ali explained, "Our declaring, 'we belong to God,' indicates that we accept Him as our Master and Owner, and when we say 'our return is to Him,' it is an admission that we are mortal."

- 63. Someone praised Imam Ali. He replied, "God knows me best, and I know myself better than you do." Then he prayed, "O Lord! Make me better than what they think of me and excuse my weaknesses that they are not aware of."
- 64. Fulfilment of (others') needs becomes a lasting virtue in the following ways: "Regard it small so that it attains greatness, conceal it so that it may manifest itself, and give it in a timely manner so that it brings pleasantness."
- 65. Whoever likes to indulge in vain pleasures will dislike austerity, whereas salvation requires austerity.
- 66. Imam Ali (p) said this about people who wake up at night to offer prayers to God: "Those are the

fortunate ones, for they take the Qur'an and the prayers as their guide and protector. Like Jesus Christ, they forsake the world and its vain pleasures. Prophet David had said that this was the hour when prayers are accepted."

- 67. Many educated people have ruined their Hereafter because of their ignorance of religion. Their (secular) knowledge was not of use to them.
- 68. No one can establish the rule of God (on earth) except an individual who, in enforcing justice, is neither deficient nor is weak. He is neither greedy nor a wrongdoer.
- 69. He who loves the family of the Prophet must be willing to lead an austere life.

70. Pearls of wisdom:
No wealth is more profitable than wisdom.
No loneliness is worse than one caused by one's vanity.
No eminence is more exalted than God-consciousness.
No trait is more useful than politeness.
No guidance is superior to the Divine guidance.
No deal is more profitable than good deeds.
No profit is greater than Divine reward.
■ No abstinence is better than to be free from doubts (about religion).
No virtue is better than refraining from prohibited deeds.
No worship is more sacred than fulfillment of obligations (in religion).
No belief is loftier than modesty and endurance.

1 No power is like one with forbearance.

No support is stronger than consultation. 71. A good deed accompanied with God awareness is sure to be accepted. 72. Two kinds of people will go astray on my account: those who, in their opinions, exaggerate my position, and those who berate my position because of jealousy or malice. 73. A lost opportunity results in grief. 74. This world is like a serpent; it is soft to the touch, but full of poison. Naive people are attracted by it, but wise ones keep away from it. 75. There is a deed whose pleasure passes away (quickly), leaving behind pain and punishment, and there is a deed that, though unpleasant, earns divine reward. 76. Someone laughed loudly at a funeral. On hearing that, Imam Ali (p) remarked, "Is it that death is ordained only for others? Or are we exempt from it?" 77. Blessed is the person: Who humbles himself before God. Whose source of income is honest. Whose intentions are honorable.

# 78. Imam Ali (p) passed by a cemetery. He stopped and gave an address in this manner:

"O resident of these abodes (Graves) where you are so lonely! O people of dust. O people of desolateness! You have gone ahead of us, but we are following you and shall meet you. The houses you left behind have been occupied by others. Your wives (widows) have married others. Your properties have been distributed among your heirs! This is the news from here. What is the news about things around you?"

## 79. Pearls

Whose character is noble.

Who does not oppress.

Who gives his wealth for the pleasure of God.

Who restrains his tongue from vain talk.

• Who does not make innovations in religion.

- I wonder at a miser who chooses to lives like a destitute, but in the next world will have to give account like a rich person.

  I wonder at the arrogant and vain person. Yesterday he was only a lowly sperm, and tomorrow he will be a corpse.

  I wonder at the person who observes the universe created by God, yet doubts the existence of God.

  I wonder at the person who sees people die, yet forgets his own end (death).

  I wonder at the person who understands the marvel of the beginning of life, yet refuses to accept that he will be brought back to life again.

  I wonder at the man who takes great pains to decorate his temporary habitat (of this world), yet ignores his permanent abode (the Hereafter).

  Whoever has no share for God (charity) in his wealth, there is no place for him in God's Kingdom.
- 83. This world is not a permanent abode; it is like a highway, and you are a traveler.
- 84. A friend cannot be a (true) friend unless he is tested on three occasions: a) in time of one's need, b) behind one's back, and c) after one's death.

82. If the people of the grave were to speak, they would inform you that the best provision for the next

- 85. Daily (ritual) prayers are the best medium through which one may seek nearness to God.
- 86. Before praying to God for increase of sustenance, give something in charity.
- 87. A person who is sure of good returns shows generosity.
- 88. Help (from God) comes in proportion to needs.

world is God-consciousness.

- 89. He who practices moderation will not face poverty.
- 90. Loving one another is one-half of wisdom.
- 91. (God's) gift of endurance is in proportion to the difficulty.
- 92. Many individuals get nothing (spiritual) out of observing fasts, except hunger and thirst; many get nothing out of their night prayers but (physical) exertion and loss of sleep. The sleep and eating of an Intelligent (Godly) person is much better (more acceptable).

- 93. Fortify your faith with charity. Protect your wealth with the aid of *Zakaat* (obligatory Islamic charity). Ward off calamities by offering prayers.
- 94. An individual's worth is known through his speech.
- 95. One who does not know his own worth is condemned to failure.
- 96. Patience will ultimately lead to success.
- 97. One who agrees with the action of a group is regarded (by God) as having committed that action.
- 98. A man who participates in a sinful deed will be regarded as having committed two sins, one for committing the sin and the other sin for agreeing to it.
- 99. You have been shown (the good), if only you care to see; you have been given guidance, if only you care to heed; you have been counseled, if (only) you care to listen.
- 100. One who visits places of ill repute has no right to complain against a person who speaks ill of him.
- 101. One who acquires authority succumbs to favoritism.
- 102. One who guards his secrets has control over his affairs.
- 103. Vanity hinders progress.
- 104. Obsession to secure a gain becomes a hindrance to achieving many other gains.
- 105. One who strives for the sake of God receives His help.
- 106. Your advantage over others is in proportion to your knowledge and wisdom.
- 107. Counter an evildoer by rewarding a good-doer.
- 108. To remove evil from others, first give it up yourself!
- 109. Obstinacy hinders good advice.
- 110. Greed is (akin to) slavery.
- 111. To keep silent when you can say something wise and useful is as bad as promoting foolish ideas.
- 112. Death is never very far.
- 113. One who forsakes truth earns eternal damnation.
- 114. If you have collected (wealth) more than you need, then you (in reality) act as its trustee for

someone else to use it (after your death).

115. Lack of gratitude (by a person) for your favor should not make you discouraged. There will be another person showing gratitude for much smaller favor. The reward for your goodness is with God.

116. Forbearance will make people side with you against the one who wronged you.

# 117. The past is a good teacher for the following:

- One who derives lessons from the events of life thus gains vision; the vision makes him wise, and wisdom makes him gain knowledge.
- © One who is cognizant of his shortcomings will benefit from it, and one who is unmindful of his shortcomings will suffer consequences.
- One who fears the Day of Judgment is safe from the punishment of God.
- 118. Happiness is to bear sorrows and calamities patiently.
- 119. Power leads to abuse.
- 120. Adversity shows one's mettle.
- 121. Jealousy betrays sincere friendship.
- 122. Greed dulls the faculties of judgment and wisdom.
- 123. Oppression earns the worst provisions in the Hereafter.
- 124. It is the highest act of nobility to ignore others' faults.
- 125. Advice:
- Silence will earn respect and dignity.
- 1 Justice and fair play will make more friends.
- Benevolence and charity will enhance prestige and status.
- © Courtesy will earn benevolence from others.
- Service to humanity will secure leadership.
- Good words will overcome powerful enemies.
- 126. A greedy person is (always) in the shackles of disgrace.

- 127. There are people who worship God to earn rewards; this is the worship of merchants. There are some who worship Him seeking safety from His punishment; this is the worship of slaves. A few worship God out of their sense of gratitude; their worship is that of the free and noble.
- 128. Every blessing carries a right of God. If one fulfills that right, then the blessing increases, but if one falls short, the blessing might be lost.
- 129. The sourness of this world is (in fact) sweetness of the next world, and sweetness of this world is bitterness of the next world.
- 130. Anger is akin to madness, and the person usually repents; if not, then the madness is confirmed.
- 131. Love your friend to a limit, for it is possible that one day he may turn into your enemy. Detest your enemy to a limit, for it is possible that one day he may become your friend.
- 132. When optional acts interfere with your obligatory acts, then omit the optional ones.
- 133. Even if there were no chastisement for disobedience, it would still be obligatory to obey God out of gratitude for His blessings.
- 134. God, the Glorified, has fixed the livelihood of the poor in the wealth of the affluent. Consequently, when a destitute one remains hungry, it is because some affluent person had denied him (his share). God, the Sublime, will question him (the affluent) about it.

### 135. Gems about knowledge:

- I Knowledge is of two kinds: one that is absorbed, and one that is not. The latter will not benefit unless absorbed
- I Knowledge is better than wealth. Knowledge guards you, while you have to guard wealth.
- 1 Wealth decreases by spending, while knowledge multiplies by spending.
- 19 With knowledge, one commands obedience, and after death leaves a good name.
- In Knowledge is ruler, while wealth is ruled upon.
- ! Knowledge calls for action, otherwise it departs.
- 136. Do not be one who regards others faults as significant, yet downplays his own faults.
- 137. Awareness of one's own shortcomings prevents one from looking into others'.
- 138. He who talks much commits more errors, and the one who knows that his words are a component of his actions is careful what he says.

- 139. Contentment is a capital that never dwindles. He who remembers death often is satisfied with receiving even small favors in this world.
- 140. The greatest defect in a person is to point out a defect in others while he has it himself.
- 141. Self-improvement is to avoid what you consider bad in others.
- 142. O people! Fear God; for a human is not created for naught to waste oneself away, nor to be left unaccounted to commit nonsensical acts.
- 143. Livelihood is of two kinds: the livelihood that you seek and the livelihood that seeks you. Even if you do not seek the latter, it will come to you.
- 144. Words are in your control before you utter them, but once you have uttered them, you are under their control. Therefore, guard your tongue as you guard your gold and silver. One expression may make you lose a blessing or invite punishment.
- 145. When you are strong, be strong in obedience to God, and when you are weak, be weak in committing sins.
- 146. Beware, destitution is a calamity; worse than destitution is ailment of the body; and worse than ailment of the body is ailment of the heart (soul).
- 147. Beware, wealth is a blessing; better is the health of the body, and (even) better than health of the body is purity of the heart.
- 148. Speak, so that you may be known. An individual is hidden behind his tongue.
- 149. Asking for forgiveness of God requires fulfilling the following six conditions:
- 1. Repent for the sin committed.
- 2. Make a firm determination not to repeat it.
- 3. Discharge the rights of others.
- 4. Fulfill the obligation ignored.
- 5. Consume lawfully earned sustenance, so that the body is cleansed of (spiritual) defects.
- 6. Make the body taste the hardship of obedience, as you had tasted the pleasures of disobedience.
- 150. Whoever sets right his/her inner self, God will set right the outward self. Whoever performs acts (of service) for the religion, God will provide him/ her with the needs of this world. If the dealings of an individual are good between himself and God, then God will make the dealings good between that

individual and other people.

151. Forbearance is like a covering (for the defects), and wisdom is like a sharp sword that kills excessive desires.

# 152. The lovers of God:

- They look at the inner side of things (while others look at the outer).
- They busy themselves with the lasting benefits (of the next world) while others seek immediate (worldly) benefits.
- 1 They suppress those desires that they fear would hurt them (in the next world).
- They regard accumulation of wealth by others as a matter of lesser importance.
- 1 They do not regard worldly hopes higher than their hope in the Hereafter.
- They do not regard worldly fear greater than the fear of disconnecting from God.
- 153. The worst sin is that which the committer takes lightly.
  - $\underline{\mathbf{1}}$ . For explanation of the term "Saying", please refer to the section on abbreviations in the beginning of this book.

The numbering here is for convenience. Please refer to Appendix G for key to original numbering assigned to the sayings in the book Peak of Eloquence, Nahjul Balagha.

- 2. Statements in parentheses are for explanation, and not part of the text.
- 3. For explanation, please refer to the Glossary section.

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