

16) Piety And Prayer

As it can be inferred from traditions, prayer is the best act after the acknowledgement of God. Mo'awiyah ibn Wahab reports that Imam Sadiq (AS) was asked: "What is the best act which takes servants near to their Lord?" The Imam (AS) said: "I do not consider any act better than prayer after the acknowledgement of God. Do you not know that the righteous servant of God Jesus (AS) said: 'God has recommended prayer to me.' In the Holy Quran, there are about sixty or seventy occasions on which God has spoken of it."

It is for the same reason that the acknowledges and sworn enemy of human beings, Satan, works hard to mislead worshippers in different ways like making a worshipper perform his prayer not within the divine boundary, making it invalid or dissuading the person from performing his prayer at all. Hence, the Lord of the universe has recommended his messenger to tell His servants:

"Shall we call on that besides Allah, which does not benefit us nor harm us, and shall we be returned back on our heels after Allah has guided us, like him whom the devils have made to fall down perplexed in the earth? He has companions who call him to the right way, (saying): Come to us. Say: Surely the guidance of Allah, that is the (true) guidance, and we are commanded that we should submit to the Lord of the worlds. And you should keep up prayer and be careful of (your duty to) Him; and He it is to Whom you shall be gathered."¹

Should you have a look at the prayer of the Muslims of the world and think about its quality and quantity, you will see many deviations and negligence in it, whereas God has recommended Taqwa after ordering the prayer.

There are among Muslims ones who do not perform prayer, as if prayer is a mountain and they are charged to carry it. Some of them even mock at prayer. Should they deny it, they will be considered as apostate then. There are another group of Muslims who do not deny prayer nor do they mock at it, but they are indifferent. Some others perform prayer, but what a prayer! Neither correct purification nor correct ablution! Neither perfect recitation of prayer nor perfect genuflection and prostration! Neither the permissibility of the place of prayer nor of their clothes is important to them! Neither lawful nor unlawful issues of prayer are of any importance to them!

There are other Muslims who perform their prayer correctly, but their prayer has no spirituality. There are people who have performed prayer for their whole lives, but have not reached any spiritual position. Perhaps, most of us are included in this category.

It is perhaps for the same reason that after ordering prayer, God Almighty has ordered Taqwa, that is to be careful of negligence, waywardness, laziness, intoxication, idle sport, and the adherence to anyone other than God, the Prophet, and his household.

What is this prayer, which has been so emphasized by God?

We should know that the greatest factor which prevents indecency and evil is prayer that too accompanied by Taqwa. In this relation, God says: ***“Surely prayer keeps (one) away from indecency and evil.”***²

Indecency has been defined as something whose ugliness in behavior and speech is evident. Evil (denied deeds) is an act considered ugly by sound reason or considered ugly by religion when sound reason cannot pass a judgment on it. Even if there was no benefit for prayer other than what we said, it would suffice.

Prayer has been recommended to all prophets including Jesus, John, Abraham (AS) and others. Above all, the prophets themselves ask the Lord of the universe to make them keep up prayer. Prophet Abraham (AS) asks God: ***“My Lord! Make me keep up prayer and from my offspring (too)...”***³

To keep up prayer is one of the features of believers, benefactors, the pious and men of understanding. There are numerous verses in the Holy Quran, which refer to the same subject: ***“Those who believe in the unseen and keep up prayer”***⁴

Elsewhere, the Holy Quran says: ***“These are verses of the Book of Wisdom, guidance and a mercy for the doers of goodness, those who keep up prayer...”***⁵

The Holy prophet (SAW) has been reported as saying: “The best of deeds to God the most High and Exalted is prayer, benevolence, and Jihad.”⁶

Imam Ali (AS) has been reported as saying: “I advise you to keep to prayer and be careful of it. Surely, that is the best act and it is the pillar of your religion.”⁷

There are many benefits in prayer about which a separate book can be written. Prayer is the best way to talk with God. That is why Imam Ali (AS), Imam Sajjad (AS), and other Imams (AS) performed a thousand rak'as of prayer during a day and a night; the prayer that was offered in the highest spirituality and acknowledgement of God, the prayer they themselves recommended to us: “Offer your prayer as if it is the last one. Therefore, perform it with humbleness, in congregation, in the mosque, at its proper time, in clean clothes, with mindfulness, long prostration and full submission.”

One should note that prayer is the best way to get near to God and for sins to be forgiven. Abu Hamzah ath-Thumali has reported: "I heard Imam Baqir (AS) and Imam Sadiq (AS) say: "Imam Ali (AS) asked people: 'What is the most hopeful verse in the book of Allah?' Some man said: 'It is this verse: ***"Surely Allah does not forgive that anything should be associated with Him, and forgives what is besides that to whomsoever He pleases."***"⁸

Imam Ali (AS) said: 'It is a good verse, but it is not the answer.'

Another man said: 'It is this verse: ***"And whoever does evil or acts unjustly to his soul then asks forgiveness of Allah, he shall find Allah Forgiver and Merciful."***"⁹

Imam Ali (AS) said: 'It is a good verse, but it is not the answer.'

A third one said: 'It is this verse: ***"O my servants! Who have acted extravagantly against their own souls, do not despair of the mercy of Allah; surely Allah forgives the faults altogether; surely He is the forgiving, the Merciful."***"¹⁰

Imam Ali (AS) said: 'It is a good verse, but it is not the answer.'

A fourth man said: 'The answer is this verse: ***"And those who when they commit an indecency or do injustice to their souls remember Allah and ask forgiveness for their fault- and who forgives the fault but Allah- and (who) do not knowingly persist in what they have done."***"¹¹

Imam Ali (AS) said: 'It is a good verse, but that is not the answer.'

(Abu Hamzah added) People rushed towards the imam, saying: 'By Allah, we have no knowledge of it.'

Imam Ali (AS) said: 'I heard from the Messenger of Allah his saying, 'The most hopeful verse in the book of Allah is ***"And keep up prayer at the two ends of the day and in the first hours of the night; surely good deeds take away evil deed; this is a reminder to the mindful."***"¹²

The messenger of Allah (SAW) said: "O Ali! I swear by Him Who has sent with the truth as a bearer of good tidings and a warner that whenever one of you gets up to perform wudu' (ablution), sins began falling away from his body, and when he stands up with his face and heart before God for prayer, nothing shall remain from his sins before he finishes his prayer. It is as if he has been born just then. And if he commits a sin between two prayers, shall it be for him as that (to be omitted by the next prayer as said before)." Until he counted five prayers.

Then the messenger of Allah (SAW) said: "O Ali! The example of the five prayers for my Ummah is the like a river flowing near the door of your house. If there is filth in the body of one of you and he purifies himself in that river five times a day, will there remain any filth in his body? By Allah, such are the five prayers for my Ummah."¹³

Considering what we have said, leaving prayer is blameworthy and entails severe punishment, which is Hell. That is why when the inhabitants of Hell shall be asked: ***“What has brought you into hell, they shall say: We were not of those who offered prayers.”***¹⁴

It is for the same reason that the forsakers of prayer are considered as unbelievers by the great jurisprudents of Islam, in the case if they think that giving up the prayer is lawful, but if they think it is unlawful, then after giving up intentionally three prayers, when there is a discretionary punishment between them, one deserves to be killed.

The Holy prophet (SAW) has been reported as saying: “One who is sluggish and careless in offering his prayer, will be afflicted with fifteen afflictions by God, blessing will be removed from his life and sustenance, the miens of the righteous shall be removed from his face, he shall not be rewarded for any good deed he does, his supplication shall not be raised to heaven, there shall be no share for him from the supplication of the righteous, he will die hungry and thirsty, God will assign an angel in his grave to torment him, his grave shall be dark, an angel shall be ordered to draw him on his face while people shall look at him, he will be reckoned a hard reckoning, God will not look at him with mercy, he shall not be purified, and there shall be a severe chastisement for him.”¹⁵

^{1.} Qur'an, 6:71–72.

^{2.} Qur'an, 29:45.

^{3.} Qur'an, 14:40.

^{4.} Qur'an, 2:3.

^{5.} Qur'an, 31:2–4.

^{6.} Bihar al- Anwar, vol. 82, p. 206.

^{7.} Ibid., p. 209

^{8.} Qur'an, 4:48.

^{9.} Qur'an, 4:110.

^{10.} Qur'an, 39:53.

^{11.} Qur'an, 3:135.

^{12.} Qur'an, 11:114.

^{13.} Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 82, p. 220.

^{14.} Qur'an, 74:42–43.

^{15.} Safeenat al- Bihar, vol. 2, p. 43.

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