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### **Discourse 6: Worship and Prayer 1**

We sometimes notice points in our Islamic interpretations that raise questions for some of us in connection with worship. For example we are told in the case of prayer that either the Prophet or the Imams have said, "Prayer is the pillar of religion," or if we think of religion as a tent, 'prayer is the pole that keeps it standing." This remark is also quoted from the narrations attributed to the Prophet, "The requisite for the acceptance of other human deeds is the acceptance of prayer". In other words, the good deeds of the human being will be null and void if prayer is incorrect and thereby unacceptable.

Another Tradition says, "Prayer is the means of proximity of every virtuous being to God." Another Tradition says that the devil is always uneasy with a believer and shuns him who is devoted to his prayer. The Quran, too, shows the remarkable importance of prayer in many verses.

But sometimes it is stated by some persons that all these traditions about prayer must be forged and unreliable and uttered not by the Prophet and his successors but by some devotees in order to win more followers particularly in the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the hegira when the matter of worship had gone to such excess that it had more or less led to monasticism and Sufism.

We see that some people concentrated all their efforts on acts of worship to such an extent that they ignored other religious duties. For example there was among Ali's companions a man called Rabi' ibn Husain, who was later known as Khajah Rabi' whose tomb is in Mashhad. He was known as one of the eight famous ascetics of the Islamic world and he went so far in asceticism and devotion that he had dug his own grave long before his death. (It is said that for twenty years he never spoke a word about worldly matters). Sometimes he went and lay in it reminding himself that the grave was his home. The only words he was ever heard to say besides prayer was on the occasion of hearing of Imam Husain's martyrdom. He said, "Woe upon these people who murdered the dear descendant of their Prophet." It is reported that afterwards he repented having uttered a sentence other than the invocation of God.

He was a warrior in the time of Ali, peace be upon him, and one day he came to Hadrat Ali and said that they had doubts about that war they were fighting, as it seemed to them to be unlawful, for they were fighting against those who in their prayer turned their faces to Mecca and uttered the formulas of the Islamic creed. This man at the same time did not want to abandon Ali, peace be upon him, so he asked

to be given a task in which there was no doubt.

Ali, peace be upon him, agreed and sent him to a frontier again as a soldier so that in case of fighting he would face non–Muslims or idolaters. This man was a type of ascetic of the time but of what worth was his asceticism and worship? It is useless to be the follower of a man like Ali, peace be upon him, and at the same time have doubts about the way shown by him in a holy war. Sometimes people use the phrase, "Why should one observe a fast based on doubt and uncertainty? It is worthless." Islam requires insight combined with practice but Khajah Rabi' had no insight. He lived in the time of Mu'awiyyah and his son Yazid. He had nothing to do with the social problems of the Islamic society and he used to retire to a corner praying day and night and uttering nothing but the Name of God and regretting his own remark about the martyrdom of Imam Husain, peace be upon him.

This kind of thing does not accord with Islamic teachings and as the saying goes, "An ignorant person either goes too fast or too slowly." Some may say that the phrase, "Prayer is the pillar of religion," is not in harmony with Islamic teachings since Islam pays more attention to social matters than any other. Islam says,

### "God orders to do justice and benevolence. " (16:92)

## We sent our prophets with manifestations and the Book and justice to make people do justice also." (57:25)

It commands people to direct others to goodness and forbid evil (3:110). Islam as a great religion is the creed of activity and work. If these matters are important in Islam, then acts of worship and devotion are not so significant. Thus, according to such people, one should follow social teachings and leave acts of devotion and prayer to idle people who have no other task to perform.

But such thoughts are wrong and very dangerous. Islam should be recognized as it is. I emphasize this point since I feel that our society is suffering from a sickness. Unfortunately those who have religious ardor are two groups: One group follow the way of Rabi' and think of Islam only as a creed for prayers, hymns and pilgrimage and refer to certain standard books of theology to guide them. They have nothing to do with the world or social regulations or Islamic principles and education.

The reaction to the slowness of this group is the appearance of a second group who go too fast and move on the path of excess. They pay all their attention to social matters, which in itself is a worthy attitude, but ignore acts of worship. I have met people who can well afford to go on a pilgrimage to Mecca, an injunction which is regarded as an important matter in Islam. They ignore prayers, and put aside the matter of imitating a religious leader. They believe that problems related to acts of worship should be solved by oneself, without the need of the guidance of others. Thus everyone is assumed to be a religious expert or a jurisprudent.

One is one's own physician and has no need of consulting a doctor or a specialist. There are some who

are slack in fasting and its conditions in the case of permanent residence or on a journey and do not believe in making amends for failure to perform acts of worship in their proper time and place.

Both groups consider themselves Muslims but they are not wholly so. Islam does not agree with the phrase, "To believe in some things and disbelieve in other things."79It cannot agree with the acceptance of worship coupled with the rejection of its moral and social questions, or vice versa. You notice that whenever the Quran says, "Perform your ritual prayer," it is followed by, "Pay your alms."

The first injunction concerns the relation between a creature and God and the second one shows the relation between one creature and others. Thus a true Muslim has a dual responsibility towards God and towards human beings and to their society in a permanent way. No Islamic society can be built without worship and invocation of God and prayer and fasting. In the same way, no pious society can exist without directing to goodness and forbidding evils and without kindly relations between individuals, even though a person may be a pious individual.

We see Ali, peace be upon him, as the most exalted, pious man, so much so that his worship was proverbial, a worship full of terror and love and tears. After his death, a man called Zirar, who was a companion of his, met Mu'awiyyah who asked him to describe Ali, peace be upon him, for him. Zirar narrated something he had witnessed about Ali, peace be upon him. He said, "One night I saw him in his special worshipping place of worship.' He was twisting with the fear of God like a man bitten by a snake and weeping with deep sorrow and saying, 'Oh, for the fire of hell"; Mu'awiyyah wept on hearing this.

Before Ali's death, Mu'awiyyah met Adass bin Hatam and intended to provoke him against Ali, peace be upon him, so he asked him about his three sons who had been killed fighting for Ali, peace be upon him. He wished to hear Adass blame Ali, peace be upon him and so he said, "Was it fair of him to deprive you of your three sons and save his own sons from death in the battlefield?"

Adass answered, "It was I who was unfair to him. I should not be alive while he is buried in the earth." When Mu'awiyyah saw that he had failed in his purpose, he asked Adass to describe Ali, peace be upon him, fully for him, which he did. When he ended his narration, he noticed tears flowing down Mu'awiyyah's beard and wiping them with his sleeve, saying, "Alas! Time is too sterile to produce a man like Ali." You see how truth reveals itself.

But was Hadrat Ali only a pious man of the altar? No. We see him also as the most social being, well aware of the conditions of the poor and helpless and all who brought their complaints to him. Though he was a Caliph, he went among the people, dealing with their affairs. When he met merchants he shouted, "You should first go and learn Islamic questions of trade." In other words, before engaging in commerce, they should know divine injunctions about what is lawful and unlawful in every deal. He is also reported to have used a phrase to a poor beggar who begged him for something. Ali, peace be upon him, looked at him and saw that he was capable of working but had chosen begging as a trade. He gave him advice and said, "Follow your honor and dignity", a phrase that he addressed to every person. For work brings

dignity and honor.

Ali, peace be upon him, is thus a true Muslim: Pious in worship, a just judge in the court, a brave soldier and commander on the battlefield, a fine orator at the pulpit, a remarkable teacher in his chair, and a wonderful and perfect example in every other accomplishment.

Islam can never approve of half-hearted acceptance of its injunctions or belief in some of them and not in others. This is a wrong way adopted by some ascetics who considered Islam to consist of praying, or those who ignored acts of devotion altogether.

The Quran says,

# "Muhammad is the Prophet of God and those who are with him are hard against the unbelievers, compassionate among themselves." (48:29)

In this sentence, the feature of an Islamic community is portrayed. In the first part of it, the matter of following faith and the Prophet is expressed and in the latter part, the question of standing firmly against infidels is mentioned. Thus these seeming devotees who make a mosque their home and say no word when they are driven on by a single soldier, are not Muslims. The most important quality of a Muslim according to the Quran is showing firmness and strength against an enemy.

The Quran says,

#### "Faint not, neither sorrow; you shall be the upper ones if you are believers." (3: 133)

Islam does not allow weakness in religion. Will Durant says in his History of Civilization that no religion but Islam calls upon its followers to be so strong and steadfast.

To bend the neck with helplessness, to dress poorly and in a dirty way, to walk lazily and to pretend to be forlorn and indifferent to all around you and sigh and groan are all contrary to Islam. The Quran says,

#### "And as for the favor of your Lord, announce (it)." (93:11)

God has given you blessings like health and strength. Why do you show yourself so helpless? This is ingratitude. Ali, peace be upon him, was never such a man. He stood ably and strongly against enemies.

What about being kind to others? We sometimes meet devotees who are never kind and are usually glum and unsociable. They never laugh and seldom smile as if the whole of humanity is indebted to them and yet they suppose themselves to be attached to Islam. Is it enough to stand firmly against enemies and be kind to Muslims? The answer is no. The Quran says,

"You will see them bowing down, prostrating themselves, seeking grace from God and good pleasure." (48:29)

This speaks of those who have the two above qualities of steadfastness and kindness and in their prayers and prostrations sink so deeply in their devotion that you can see in their faces all signs of chastity and godliness.

It is narrated from the Prophet that the disciples of Christ asked him with whom they should associate and he answered, "Sit with someone whose sight reminds you of God, whose speech increases your knowledge and whose conduct persuades you into doing good." The verse continues,

"That is their description in the Old Testament and their description in the New Testament like a seed-produce that puts forth its sprout, then strengthens it so it becomes stout and stands firmly on its stem, delighting the sowers that He may enrage the unbelievers on account of them." (48:29).

A nation possessing all the above attributes must be a remarkably find nation. Now, tell me, why should Muslims be so decadent, docile and miserable? Which of those qualities mentioned before do we possess? What should we expect? Although we admit that Islam is a social creed, why should we scorn worship and prayer and communion with God? Let me assure you that taking prayers lightly is a sin as ignoring them is a sin.

On the death of Imam Ja'far Sadiq, peace be upon him, as Abu Bassir came to offer Umm ul-Hanida his condolences, the latter wept and so did the former. Umm ul-Hanida then narrated something that had happened in the last moments of the life of the Imam. She said that he sank into a trance and then opened his eyes and asked for all his relatives to be present. After they had all gathered there, the Imam addressed them the following remark and then died. He said, "Those who take ritual prayers lightly will never gain our intercession." You see that he did not speak of those who ignore ritual prayers altogether, for, the consequence of that is obvious. What does 'taking the ritual prayers lightly' mean? It means that in spite of having time, an opportunity, one may postpone them and just before it is getting too late, perform the acts of devotion hastily and perfunctorily, without giving the mind and spirit the necessary tranquility before beginning to say the ritual prayer.

Experience has shown that in a household where ritual prayers are taken lightly, no interest is shown by its members to pray or to pray properly. One should choose a spot in the house allotted to acts of devotion, or, if possible, a separate room for them and carry on with ablution without haste and spread a clean prayer–carpet and accompany all the preliminary acts with the convocation of God. Ali, peace be upon him, began with, "In the Name of God and with the help of God. Oh God place me among those who repent; place me among those who cleanse themselves."

Two nights ago I spoke about repentance and explained that repentance meant purifying oneself. Washing the body is the prelude to purifying the spirit; it refreshens the face, but since the intention is to cleanse the spirit, too, it gives one a sacred aspect. Ali, peace be upon him, in his ablution prayed to God to illuminate his face on the Day of the Resurrection where many faces are black with shame and

sin. Then he said this prayer on washing his right hand, "Oh God, on the Day of Resurrection, put my book of deeds in my right hand," and on washing his left hand, he said, "Oh God, do not give me my book of deeds in my left hand nor from behind my back. Oh God, do not let it be shackled to my neck; I seek refuge from You from the fire of hell."

Then, on touching his forehead with water, he said, "Merge me into your grace and blessings." Then on touching his feet with water he said, "Oh God, direct my efforts towards such a path of your satisfaction."

Such an ablution which is accompanied by so many pleadings is of a different worth and merit than what most of us are accustomed to perform. We should not lightly disregard all these rites and confine ourselves only to the absolutely obligatory parts.

Let us see what religious authorities say about this. Should we repeat the following sentence three times or only once, "Glory be to God, praise be God, there is no god but God and God is great." An authority may say, "Once is enough, since it is obligatory but the second and third repetitions are recommended." Should we, on the basis of this verdict, confine ourselves to saying this prayer only once?

In the same way, fasting may be taken lightly. I am saying this as a joke, but if I were God I would not accept such fasts. I know some people who stay awake at night in the month of Ramadhan, not to worship and pray, but to drink tea, smoke and eat fruit. In the morning, they say their ritual prayers and go to sleep. Some of them sleep all day and wake up near sunset to say their daily ritual prayers hastily before it is too late and get ready to break their fast. What kind of a fast is this? When you do not give yourself the chance of feeling the pain of abstemiousness? This is fasting lightly and is really an insult to a fast.

Again we go on a pilgrimage to Mecca but perform the rites lightly in the same way as our prayers and fasts. Similarly the matter of the call to prayer may be taken lightly; it is said that the call to prayer should be uttered melodiously to attract and invite people to prayer, in the same way that the Quran should be recited clearly, fluently and with a fine voice. Some people are gifted will a fine voice, but if you ask them to sing out the call to prayer, they consider it below their dignity to be known as a muizzin. But it is really an honor to be one. All himself was one, even when he was a Caliph. There is no disgrace attached to this task and no nobility to forsake it.

Thus no act of worship should be taken lightly. The merit of Islam is in its comprehensiveness, not in being so absorbed in devotion as to ignore every other duty, nor to be so involved in social matters to forget acts of devotion. Although a prayer is for its own sake and for proximity to God, if we scorn worship, we are ignoring other duties, too. Worship is the executive and guarantor of other Islamic injunctions.

Here I end my discourse and pray God to make us true worshippers, to acquaint us with the comprehensiveness of Islam, to make us whole-hearted Muslims, grant us pure intentions, forgive our sins in these precious nights, and grant salvation to our deceased ones.

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