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Lesson 14: Extolling Pursuit of the Hereafter, Asceticism and Spiritual Discernment in Religion and Reproaching Materialism

Parts of this *hadith* are concerned with reproaching the world, sections of which have been explained and now we shall study the other part. As has been mentioned frequently, censure of this world does not mean that man ought to give up work and earning and endeavor in the various aspects of social life and not to pursue wealth and possessions; on the contrary, criticism [of the world] denotes not getting attached to it and not setting it as a goal. In reality, this is the intention and motivation which gives direction to man's works and becomes the cause of that work being considered as a commendable or abhorred and foul act.

According to the verses of the Noble Qur'an, man arrives at the hereafter by means of the world and the world is a preparatory field for the next world. Therefore, man ought to work and make effort. If his endeavors and worldly activities are meant for the good pleasure of Allah, he attains prosperity and if his activities are intended for acquiring the world and its pleasures, he will be impelled to commit sin whether he likes or not, and that is the path leading to the eternal fire and divine retribution.

[Reproaching Materialism and Elucidating the Highness of Faith](#)

In order to stop the believers from getting enamored with the world and its pleasures, like the medical officers, try by various means to caution the patients from things which are harmful to them, the saints [*awliya*] of Allah too have tried with different elucidations to make the world abhorred in the believer's point of view, one of those explanations is a saying which will be pointed at in this discourse:

“O Abu Dharr! The world and all that is in it has been cursed, except that which is a means of attaining Allah's pleasure.”

It is evident from the contents of this *hadith* that the curse which has been cast on the blessings of the world has not been directed at things like the ground, trees and the sky because a thing which can be a means of attaining the good pleasure of Allah is not only blessed but is also desirable; therefore, the curse has been cast on setting it as a goal and giving primacy to the world, for the reason that the creation of the world and its blessings are meant to make it a channel in the direction of man's proximity to Allah. The world has been placed at the disposal of the man so that he may reach Allah by means of it.

Now, if this man perceives the world as means of arriving at Allah, the mercy of Allah will always descend upon him because he is pursuing the [right] goal and is proceeding in the correct direction. An intelligent man never gets heedless of the goal and always sets his eyes on the destination and selects the path which makes him draw nigh to the destination. In other than this case, the merciful look of Allah is withdrawn from man because he has turned his heels and back against his goal and the aim of the world's creation. Instead of trudging the course of prosperity, he has traversed the course of misery and wretchedness.

A companion of one of the slaves was sad because of the largeness of his income and occupation. The Imam ('a) met him and asked, "Why are you unhappy?" The companion answered, "Your Highness, my wealth has increased, [and] I have become a victim of the world." The Imam asked, "Why do you go after wealth and the acquisition of possessions?" The companion answered, "In order for me and my children not to be a burden to other people and so that I may manage to help my believing brothers." His Holiness the Imam stated, "This is otherworldliness and is not materialism, and there is no need to be worried about it. You ought to be worried when you get enamored with the gratifications of the world and be sad once you covet the world."

"There is nothing more abhorred by Allah than the world. He created it and then turned it upside down and cut off the look of compassion and will not glance upon it till the Day of Resurrection."

The purport of this saying has been explained in a lot of ethical books by a large number of the great men of letters, especially the deceased Imam Khomeini, and dependence has been laid on it. (It is very strange that for people of mystical knowledge, this very expression is enough to make them not inclined to the world in all their lives.)

There is no doubt that Allah, the Exalted, loves all his creatures and they are the effects of the beautiful Names and Attributes of Allah and from the viewpoint that the whole world is a manifestation of the perfect Attributes and Names of Allah, he pays attention to them and grants them grace until the Day of Resurrection. Allah does not pay attention to the world from the perspective that it is considered independent of him and primacy is given to it. Now, this question arises as to what thing this divine grace and loving look of Allah is attached; in explaining this point, His Holiness ('a) states:

"Allah loves nothing more than faith and abstaining from the forbidden acts."

The most beloved thing before Allah in the first place is faith and second is fear of Allah and quitting forbidden acts. It can be gathered from this *hadith* that quitting sins is more desirable than performing obligatory actions, even if it can be said that discharging obligatory actions is considered as a level of faith, for the reason that faith consists of both acts of the heart [or inward acts] and apparent [or outward] acts which are performed by means of the limbs and members of the body. Anything in the world that is a means of attaining faith and abstaining from sins is beloved in the sight of Allah. Therefore, Allah has strongly recommended worldly affairs for the reason that man attains piety and proximity to Allah by means of them:

Imam al-Sadiq (‘a) narrates that the Noble Prophet (S) stated,

“Nine tenths of worship is in trade and work.”¹

In another *hadith*, Imam al-Sadiq (‘a) states,

“A person who marries has procured half of his religion, therefore let him enjoin piety in the other half.”²

Or in another *hadith*, the Noble Prophet (S) states,

“In Islam, there is no foundation more beloved than marriage.”³

There is no doubt that these are affairs of the world but for the reason that they become channels for worship and devotional servitude to Allah and forsaking sins, they are beloved by Allah.

The Need for Loving the Hereafter

“O Abu Dharr! Allah, the Exalted and Blessed, inspired revelation to my brother Jesus [‘Isa]: O Jesus [‘Isa], do not treasure the world, because I do not love it. Take pleasure in the hereafter since it is the abode of the last world.”

The Noble Prophet (S) quotes the saying of Prophet Jesus (‘a) that Allah inspired revelation that He did not love the world and Prophet Jesus too ought not to be friends with it. It is natural that the Noble Prophet [of Islam] (S) is an enemy of the world too, because the criteria for the friendship and enmity of the Infallibles (‘a) with a person or thing is friendship and enmity with Allah. It is natural that the best role model for the believers and the followers of right in encountering the world is the conduct or way of life of the Prophets (S) and the Infallibles.

With regard to the Noble Prophet’s (S) perception of the world, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) states:

“The Holy Prophet treated this world disdainfully and regarded it low. He held it contemptible and hated it. He realized that Allah kept it away from him with intention and spread it out for others by way of contempt. Therefore, he remained away from it by his heart, banished its recollection from his mind and wished that its attraction should remain hidden from his eyes so that he should acquire any clothing from

it, or hope for staying in it. He conveyed from Allah the pleas (against committing sins), counseled his people as an admonisher (against divine chastisement) and called (people) towards paradise as a conveyor of good tidings.”[4](#)

This was despite that the Noble Prophet (S) had the jurisdiction of making use of all the material blessings of the world and according to his own statement, all the treasures of the world were presented to him but he did not accept them:

“O Abu Dharr! Gabriel brought the treasures of the world on black and white mules and said, ‘O Muhammad! These are the treasures of the world and taking possession of them in the world will not decrease your share before Allah’.”

That the Noble Prophet (S) states that Gabriel came to him with the treasures of the world mounted on black and white mules is probably an illusion that the world is intertwined with pleasure and pain and good and evil. No person will be found who only has pain and sorrow in his life and derives no pleasure and vice versa no individual will be found who only derives gratification in life and/or not encounter any pain and sorrow. In reality, beside every pain there is pleasure and beside every pleasure there is pain, and both of them are means of trial for man:

...وَنَبْلُوكُمْ بِالشَّرِّ وَالْخَيْرِ فِتْنَةً...

“... We have made you entangled in good and bad so that we may try you...”[5](#)

The other point is that Gabriel says to the Noble Prophet (S) that if you make use of all the treasures of the world, nothing of your share of the hereafter will be decreased. One of the defects of material pleasures is that the more man derives pleasure from them, the more the possibility of his getting deprived of the gratifications of the next world. But the saints [*awliya*] of Allah and the prophets (*‘a*) are not like this; it is for this reason that Gabriel says that no share of the Noble Prophet (S) will be reduced in exchange for your making use of all the treasures of the world.

In response, the Noble Prophet (S) states:

“My friend Gabriel, I do not need them. I thank Allah whenever I get satiated and I ask from Him whenever I get hungry.”

The best request a believer can have is that he should derive benefit from the blessings of Allah, on the one hand, and thank for it and, on the other hand, feel abjectness and in need of Allah and always open his hand [in supplication] to him because man is an existent [made up] of two equal parts; he has to both derive benefit from the blessings of Allah and thank for them—and this very attention and thanksgiving to the blessings of Allah results in prosperity—and on the other hand always feel abjectness and need, so as not to become proud and negligent and not conceive himself as superior

than others. The Noble Prophet (S) states that having all the riches of the world at my disposal does not benefit me in any way. I always ought to be dependent on Allah all the time and always ask for blessings from him and be thankful in return for those blessings.

Allah's Benevolence and Awareness of Religion and Asceticism in the World

In continuation of the *hadith*, the Prophet (S) states:

“O Abu Dharr! Whenever Allah intends good for a person, He gives him religious knowledge and expertise and makes him ascetic in the world and aware of his faults.”

Whenever Allah intends to do good to a slave [of His], He grants him three things:

1. Awareness of religion.
2. Asceticism in the world and disinclination to its pleasures.
3. Awareness of his faults and defects.

(In contrast to these three characteristics, the worst thing for man is ignorance about religion, love of the world and self-conceit and being preoccupied with fault-finding in other people.)

With consideration of the previous issues and what will be mentioned later, the main attention is on the sentence ‘and makes him ascetic in the world’ because the discussion concerns the station and status of the world. Therefore, if a person feels in his heart that he has no inclination to the world and only derive benefit from it to the extent of remedying his needs and engage in worldly affairs for the sake of discharging divine duties, he ought to know that Allah intends good for him.

Of course, in one sense Allah intends good for all people, but on the basis of His institutionalized will, He has made certain duties incumbent upon all people and has cautioned them against forbidden acts, now if free-willed man selects a correct path—even if the prerequisites of selection of the correct path are brought about by the grace of Allah—and has set the foundation to traverse the course of servitude and loves things which are pleasing to Allah, and make friends with the friends of Allah and takes strides in the way of Allah, the special existential will of Allah is responsible for making him successful:

وَمَنْ أَرَادَ الْآخِرَةَ وَسَعَىٰ لَهَا سَعْيَهَا وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَأُولَٰئِكَ كَانَ سَعْيُهُمْ مَشْكُورًا

“And whoever desires the hereafter and strives for it as he ought to strive and he is a believer, (as for) these, their striving shall surely be accepted.”⁶

In contrast, Allah has no enmity with any person and does not send man to hell without cause. Therefore, if a person, of his own volition and as a result of his own bad choice, selects a path of infidelity and sin; the existential will of Allah makes him low and deprives him of the opportunity to perform good works.

مَنْ كَانَ يُرِيدُ الْعَاجِلَةَ عَجَّلْنَا لَهُ فِيهَا مَا نَشَاءُ لِمَنْ نُرِيدُ ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَا لَهُ جَهَنَّمَ يَصْلِيهَا مَذْمُومًا مَدْحُورًا

“Whoever desires this present life, We hasten to make him therein what We please for whomever We desire, the We assign to him the hell, he shall enter it despised, driven away.”⁷

Therefore, a person for whom Allah intends good is granted success in three things (by Allah):

Firstly, the opportunity to acquire knowledge, and in contrast, if Allah does not intend good for a person, He deprives him of the opportunity to acquire knowledge, as has been narrated in the *hadiths*:

“Whenever Allah drives a slave away, He deprives him of acquisition of knowledge.”⁸

We thank Allah that of all his countless slaves, He has granted us the opportunity to learn religious knowledge. We ought to appreciate the worthiness of this great honor which has been allotted to us because with this great divine grace, the ground [or prerequisite] for attaining perfection has been provided. It has been narrated in a *hadith* that:

“All perfections [or virtues] are summed up in three things: 1) expertise in religious knowledge; 2) arranging an orderly program for the daily affairs of life; 3) patience and perseverance of hardships.”⁹

The second grace of Allah is disinclination to the world and that man’s heart ought not to covet the allurements and enticements of the world. Unfortunately, this characteristic lacks in most of us and we are more or less attached to the pleasures of the world. If man is too obsessed with rank and dignity in life and if he is always chasing after better cars, a better house, or better clothes, he is attached to the world and is deprived of attaining the blessings of the eternal Garden of bliss; as the Qur’an states:

...تَلِكِ الدَّارُ الْآخِرَةُ نَجْعَلُهَا لِلَّذِينَ لَا يُرِيدُونَ عُلُوًّا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا فَسَادًا

“As for that future abode, We assign it to those who have no desire to exalt themselves in the earth nor to make mischief and the good end is for those who guard against evil...”¹⁰

In interpreting this verse, a *hadith* has been narrated even if man’s desire is only that he ought to have a better shoe lace than that of another person, this is an instance of seeking superiority and predominance over the others.¹¹ So, man ought to try not to be trapped in the snare of the world, not even to the extent of desiring to have a better shoe lace than the others around. The heart has to be directed at Allah and

the hereafter, not at shoe laces, houses, cars and et cetera et cetera, because the heart is a place for the descending of Allah's light:

“The heart of a believer is Allah's abode.” [12](#)

To whatever extent man's heart deviates and gets preoccupied with the world, man gets deprived of the spiritual perfections [or virtues] to the same extent.

Elucidating on the perception of the prophets (S) with regard to the world, Imam 'Ali ('a) states:

“Certainly, in the Prophet of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him and his Progeny) was sufficient example for you and a proof concerning the vices of the world, its defects, the multitude of its disgraces and its evils, because its sides had been constrained for him while its flanks had been spread for others; he was deprived of its milk and turned away from its adornments.

“If you want, I will, as a second example, relate to you concerning Moses ('a), the Interlocutor of Allah, when he said, ***'O Allah! I need whatever good Thou may grant me.'*** (Qur'an 28:24) By Allah, he asked Him only for bread to eat because he was used to eating the herbs of the earth, and the greenness of the herbs could be seen from the delicate skin of his belly due to his thinness and paucity of his flesh.

“If you desire I can give you a third example of David ('a). He is the holder of the Psalms and the narrator among the people of paradise. He used to prepare baskets of date palm leaves with his own hands and would say to his companions, 'Who among you will help me by purchasing it?' He used to eat barley bread bought out of its price.

“If you desire, I will tell you about 'Isa ('a), son of Mary ('a). He used a stone for a pillow, put on coarse clothes and ate rough food. His condiment was hunger. His lamp at night was the moon. His shade during the winter was just the expanse of the earth eastward and westward. His fruits and flowers were only what grows from the earth for the cattle. He had no wife to allure him, nor any son to give grief, nor wealth to deviate his attention, nor greed to disgrace him. His two feet were his conveyance and his two hands his servant.” [13](#)

Has Allah got enmity with His saints [*awliya'*] so as to deprive them of worldly pleasures? Or are the hardships and problems of the world a means of their perfection and a sign of divine love for them? It is necessary to emphasize this point that it ought not to be imagined that wantonness and laziness have to be preferred and we ought to quit our obligations by seeking self-seclusion and retirement and not seek what is permissible [of the pleasures of this world] or quit going after protecting the honor of Islam!

The discussion is concerned with not falling in love with the world. If all the treasures and riches of the world were placed at the disposal of an individual and he derived all the pleasure from it but did not fall in love with it, no harm touches him. Thus, was Solomon, the son of David, who did not let all that wealth

and that great kingdom [which he possessed] harm his prophetic mission and authority because he did not fall in love with it?

He himself used to eat dry bread and employed his wealth and power to protect the honor of Allah's religion. If he went to or threatened to go to war with the Queen of Sheba, it was for the expansion of the divine government and in order to uproot polytheism from the surface of the world; not because he wanted to derive more pleasure from the world for himself.

The sum of the *hadiths* consecutively narrated by several authorities does not leave any doubt with regard to the asceticism of the lives of the Infallibles and that they endured hardships and they were not worldly and pleasure-seeking. Their method was that of cautioning men from worldliness. In the same way that there is no doubt regarding the existence of the Infallible Imams ('a), there is no doubt too concerning the way of their lives. One of their most delicate characteristics was worshipping Allah, rising up early in the morning [for prayer], supplicating, and crying. Friend and foe, Shi'ah and Sunni, have all acknowledged and written books about these truths.

Their method of character training was that of cautioning people against the world and inciting abhorrence of material gratifications. Attention has to be paid to this fact that the Infallible Imams ('a) always encouraged others to work and earn livelihoods in order not to be burdens of other people [in the society]. In reality, this means a medium between the world and Allah's pleasure, which is not possible for ordinary people.

In the early days of Islam wrong interpretations were made from the *hadiths* which reproached and castigated the world. When the world was reproached, people used to imagine that they ought not to derive any benefit from the world at all and man ought to live in a cave and wear clothes made of leaves. On the other hand, when they saw work and endeavor being praised in some of the *hadiths*, they imagined that everything [in the world] has to be sacrificed for the stomach.

Those who had been trained and schooled in the school of the *Ahl al-Bayt* ('a) used to know that there is no disparity or incompatibility between deriving benefit from the blessings of the world and seeking the hereafter, but that love of the world is incompatible with love of the hereafter and there is no possibility of combining those two. It is not possible to both love Allah and what is hated by Him. The world as a means of attaining the hereafter and the good pleasure of Allah is not abhorred.

In order to conceive the balance between love of the world and/or lack of love for the world, man's outward works are not the criteria, but the standard is inward intention and motivation. Of course, sometimes works themselves show [the intention] of those who claim not to be in love with the world but break their heads and hands for the sake of the world and do not even abstain from what is prohibited. Without the slightest doubt, the intention of such an individual is seeking the world.

Therefore, nothing is achieved by making empty claims and the intention in the heart has to be taken into consideration. There are some Sufis who make pretentious claims in poetic language about being

disinclined and disregardful of the world but will not let go of a single coin whatsoever!

- [1.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 85, p. 319, hadith 2.
- [2.](#) Ibid., vol. 103, p. 219, hadith 14.
- [3.](#) Ibid., p. 222, hadith 40.
- [4.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, p. 336, sermon [khutbah] 108, trans. Fayd al-Islam.
- [5.](#) Surat al-Anbiya' 21:35.
- [6.](#) Surat al-Isra' (or Bani Isra'il) 17:19.
- [7.](#) Surat al-Isra' (or Bani Isra'il) 17:18.
- [8.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 1, p. 196.
- [9.](#) Ibid., vol. 78, p. 172, hadith 5.
- [10.](#) Surat al-Qasas 28:83.
- [11.](#) Tafsir al-Mizan, vol. 16, p. 85.
- [12.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 58, p. 39.
- [13.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, p. 508, sermon [khutbah] 159.

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