

Lesson 27: The Status of a Sincere Servant in the Sight of Allah

The theme of this part of the Noble Prophet's (S) counsels is that Allah, the Exalted, takes pride in and praises three types of His servants above the angels. The meaning of Allah's pride and how He venerates His servants above the angels is not exactly clear to us. What can be gathered from this section of the *hadith* is that the rank of three groups of Allah's servants is higher than the angels and Allah venerates these groups on account of their superior and high status.

Basis of Man's Superiority and Pre-eminence

There is no doubt that among all his creatures, Allah, the Exalted, has made man enjoy certain distinctions and characteristics which are not to be found in other creatures. Among material creatures, He has made man enjoy the blessings of the intellect, reason and awareness, to the extent that he has been granted charismatic and miraculous powers to subdue the dry lands and seas:

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى كَثِيرٍ مِمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا

“Certainly We have honored the Children of Adam, and carried them over the land and sea, and provided them with all the good things, and given them advantage over many of those We have created with a complete preference.”¹

Furthermore, Allah created man having free will and self-determination such that he chooses the path of his prosperity or affliction of his own volition. Man enjoys the benefits of a divine natural disposition by means of which he is inclined towards all good values, merits and virtues and He has also shown him the way towards prosperity.

However, neither does that existential dignity bring about man's superiority over the angels nor his volition, because it is possible that instead of choosing the course of merit and prosperity, man may

select the way of disobedience and wretchedness and deviate from the right course, fall into misguidance and become the lowest of creatures:

إِنَّ شَرَّ الدَّوَابِّ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا فَهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

“Indeed the worst of beasts in Allah’s sight are those who are faithless, so they will not believe.”²

That which causes the status of man to rise higher than that of the angels and brings about his superiority is carrying out the orders of Allah and making effort to traverse the course of perfection by traveling the path of spirituality and eventually attaining perfection. That is, on the basis of his divine inclination, the human being must pursue the path of prosperity and trample his carnal desires underfoot and moderate his materialistic instincts.

When man, who has animalistic and materialistic inner faculties which incessantly pull him towards attention to material and animalistic gratifications, controls his animal faculties, selects what is right and acts on the basis of his divine predisposition when confronted with the choice between right and wrong, he becomes adored by the angels and his rank becomes higher than their status. It is for this reason that in this section of the *hadith*, the Noble Prophet (S) states:

“O Abu Dharr! Your Lord boasts on account of three individuals over the angels; the first person that Allah praises over the angels is a man who recites the *adhan*³ and the *iqamah*⁴ in the midst of the desert and performs his ritual prayers. Allah tells his angels, ‘Look at my servant maintaining the prayers regardless of the fact that no human being sees him.’ Then, seventy thousand angels descend and act in accordance with him and seek forgiveness for him until the following day.”

This is a man who recites the *adhan* and *iqamah* in a dry desert devoid of herbage and far from the sight of people and thereafter performs the prayers and does not consider that, because no one sees, it suffices to recite the obligatory prayers and there is no need to recite the *adhan* and *iqamah* for the reason that no one is there to listen. Due to obedience and his station of servitude, he performs his prayers with all its formalities and norms and it is for this reason that Allah venerates him over the angels and seventy thousand angels descend and recite their prayers behind him and seek forgiveness for him.

The second person on account of whom Allah boasts over the angels:

“And [Allah boasts on account of] a person who wakes up from sleep at night to pray and prostrate before Allah and then falls into sleep while in the state of prostration. Allah states, ‘O angels! Look at my servant whose soul is in my presence and whose body is in prostration’.”

In regard to a man who wakes in the middle of the night from a comfortable, warm bed and from sweet sleep to embark upon worship and invocation of his Lord and is so immersed in supplication of his Object of Worship that he does not raise his head from the place of prostration to the extent that he falls

asleep while in that state, Allah tells the angels, “Look at my servant who has arisen from his restful bed in the middle of the night and embarked upon my invocation and worship far from the eyes of other people. He lengthens his worship so much that he becomes tired and falls asleep while in a state of prostration. His soul is in my presence while his body is in prostration.” Allah, the Exalted, states that the soul of the man in prostration is in His presence because man’s soul during sleep returns to Allah and this is a point which has been hinted at in the Qur’an:

اللَّهُ يَتَوَفَّى الْأَنفُسَ حِينَ مَوْتِهَا وَالَّتِي لَمْ تَمُتْ فِي مَنَامِهَا فَيُمْسِكُ الَّتِي قَضَىٰ عَلَيْهَا الْمَوْتَ وَيُرْسِلُ الْأُخْرَىٰ إِلَىٰ أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى...

“Allah takes the souls at their death, and those who have not died in their sleep. Then He retains those for whom He has ordained death and releases the others until a specified time...”⁵

From the viewpoint of the Glorious Qur’an a true believer is a person who wakes up in the middle of the night and forbids himself from sleeping:

...تَتَجَافَىٰ جُنُوبَهُمْ عَنِ الْمَضَاجِعِ يَدْعُونَ رَبَّهُمْ خَوْفًا وَطَمَعًا

“Their sides vacate their beds⁶ to supplicate their Lord in fear and hope...”⁷

Yes, maintaining the night prayers far from the eyes of other human beings and performing long prostrations and bowing down for Allah, the Exalted, causes Allah, the Exalted, to boast on one’s behalf.

The third person that Allah praises over the angels is as follows:

“And [Allah boasts on account of] a man in the battlefield who is deserted by his companions but remains steadfast in fighting until he is killed.”

Allah, the Exalted, boasts on account of the fighting champion who stands alone on the battlefield contending with the enemy until the last breath of his life after his companions have fled the battleground in defeat because they lacked the power of resistance. Although he could have taken flight like the rest of his friends and saved his own life, he preferred to be martyred in the way of Allah, the Exalted. Yes, Allah boasts on account of a man who stands up against a multitude of enemies and resists regardless of the fact that in such circumstances resistance is not incumbent. During the early days of Islam, it was initially incumbent for one Muslim to resist against ten people and later on a concession was offered and it became obligatory for one Muslim to resist two people, but if everyone took flight and no one remained on the battleground, it was no longer binding for that one fighter to remain.

There is not the least doubt that fleeing from the battlefield while it was possible to resist the enemy is a great sin and the Glorious Qur’an explicitly forbids running away from war. This action is hated by Allah

and the abode of a deserter from the battlefield is believed to be the infernal fire:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا لَقِيتُمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا زَحَفًا فَلَا تُولُوهُمْ الْأَدْبَارَ * وَمَنْ يُولِهِمْ يُؤَمِّدْ دُبْرَهُ إِلَّا مُتَحَرِّفًا لِقِتَالٍ أَوْ مُتَحَيِّزًا
إِلَى فِتْنَةٍ فَقَدْ بَاءَ بِغَضَبٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَمَأْوَاهُ جَهَنَّمُ وَبِئْسَ الْمَصِيرُ

“O you who have faith! When you encounter the faithless [for battle], do not turn your backs [to flee] from them. Whoever turns his back [to flee] from them that day—unless [he is] diverting to fight or retiring towards another troop—shall certainly earn Allah’s wrath and his abode is hell; and an evil destination shall it be.”⁸

A great deal of lessons can be learnt from this part of the *hadith*: the purport of Allah’s boasting over the angels on account of some of His servants is due to their possessing values which are very invaluable in the viewpoint of Allah and if there were other characteristics which bring about more perfection for mankind and draw man to closer proximity with Allah, He would have mentioned them. When He wants to make known to the angels the high rank of some of His servants and to take pride in them, He in truth makes known the best of their values.

Now, we ought to see what common characteristics and qualities these three types of Allah’s servants possess—the one who maintains his prayers with all its norms and recommendations in the wilderness far from the eyes of other human beings, that man who wakes up from his comfortable bed and embarks upon worship and supplication of Allah, and also the person who stands alone against a multitude of enemies and resists to the last breath of his life so as to be granted this extent of superiority and high rank by Allah.

Without the least doubt characteristics such as spending wealth in the way of Allah, freely giving what is needed for the pleasure of Allah, performing acts of worship, and other good works which the divine revealed law has recommended are all valuable and bring about perfection in man, but we ought to observe what characteristics these three groups of human beings have and what common elements exist among them that cause them to be so highly emphasized.

The common characteristic and element among these three groups of people is aloneness; the first person worships Allah far from the eyes of other human beings and the second one wakes up from sleep alone in the middle of the night to invoke Allah and the third person stands alone in the battlefield in front of the enemy.

Allah does not take pride in the prayer which a person maintains in the local or Friday mosque but instead takes pride in the prayer of a person who maintains prayer alone in the wilderness and the man who stands up to the enemy alone regardless of the fact that all his companions have taken flight from the battleground. It is likely that an individual might have taken part in many battles and skirmishes and have a great deal of courage and bravery and might have also produced victories and glory, but still

despite all this emphasis is laid on a person who has remained alone and even so continues to discharge his duty.

The Role of Independence and Sincerity of Intention

a) Independence

Two important factors called independence or liberty (being free from the influence of other people) and sincerity have brought about the lofty values for the undertakings of these three types of individuals in solitude.

In explanation of the first factor, that is to say independence, it must be said that by and large people submit to the influence and conduct of other people. One of the characteristics of man is that once he perceives a group of people proceeding along a certain course and following a particular type of behavior, he as well drifts in that direction and becomes inclined to that habit. It seems as though the movement and tendency of other people is a factor which helps man to choose his course of direction and progression. Once he observes a group of people making strides along the path of good and wellbeing, he also follows suit.

Of course, this is a sign of man's weakness and Allah has put this factor in man's nature so that those who are weak may traverse the right path by following righteous people. Unfortunately, these people also fall under the influence of bad elements and all too often being attached to other human beings becomes a cause for them to proceed on the path of falsehood. As a result of imitating other people they change their colors and in order not to be disgraced or stigmatized, they acquire the same habits that are prevalent in the society.

Allah, the Exalted, in condemnation of these people of weak determination who pander to every whim of their associates without thinking, reflecting and observing the consequences of blindly following the people of vanity and falsehood and those who entrust the reins of their free will to others, states:

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمُ اتَّبِعُوا مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ قَالُوا بَلْ نَتَّبِعُ مَا أَلْفَيْنَا عَلَيْهِ آبَاءَنَا أَوَلَوْ كَانَ آبَاؤُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَهْتَدُونَ

“And when they are told, ‘Follow what Allah has sent down,’ They say, ‘We rather follow what we found our fathers following.’ What, even if their fathers neither applied reason nor were guided?!”⁹

Of course, in connection with the laws of Allah and divine duties, a person without knowledge is obliged to ask religious scholars whenever he is ignorant about an injunction of Allah or the concept of an injunction. This means that he ought to follow and bind himself to the opinions and religious-judicial decrees of a Muslim jurist [*mujtahid*].

However, an individual who becomes acquainted with the laws of Allah by means of following the decrees of a Muslim jurist is not equal with one who independently and personally strives to deduce and infer the laws of Allah from their sources because the knowledge of the Muslim jurist and independent scholar is not the same as the awareness which the imitator acquires by means of following the decrees of the jurist. Without the least doubt independent knowledge is superior.

Likewise, in connection with concepts, especially social concepts, the majority of people do not have sufficient awareness and they are impelled to follow individuals who have knowledge of those subjects. This following and submission is not blameworthy and reproachable if it does not go off the right path, but the person who is learned and, by means of the lamp which he carries, guides and leads other human beings occupies a superior status and position.

Beyond the stage of independent knowledge, and more important, is the stage of decision making and action. Sometimes, man knows a concept either by means of independent reason or by following the opinion of a religious jurist [*mujtahid*], but there is no certainty that he will act according to what he knows. Indeed, when one is in a group, especially if that group is a large crowd, he takes action; but he is lazy when alone.

Every person has a great deal of examples for this instance in his own personal life; for example, a religious student who lives in a seminary where the Supplication of Kumayl [*Du'a' al-Kumayl*] is recited on Thursday nights is encouraged to attend the supplication recitals when he sees other seminarians attending the sessions in great numbers, but it is very hard for him to recite the Supplication of Kumayl on a Thursday night alone when everyone else in the seminary has gone out.

In the same way in regard to performing other good works, man is encouraged to do praiseworthy deeds when he sees other people doing the same but, once alone, he raises pretexts for himself and there is no inclination as such in his inner being to impel him to make a decision. In any case, he finds every possible excuse to put off doing that job.

Or, once he sees that lights are on late at night in the rooms of other students and everyone is busy studying, the eagerness to study arises in him and he too studies for hours on end but when it is time for holidays and there is no one in school except himself, there is no longer that inner pull within and he does not have the desire at all, either. That which has been mentioned were only examples and there are a great number of other examples to be found in our social and political conduct.

The factor for this sluggishness and dependence on others is weakness of resolution and faith. Does a deed acquire value when done by others? Does it lose its value when not done by others? If the Supplication of Kumayl has value, we ought to strive to recite it in privacy and solitude as well, not only when a public session is organized.

It is a sign of weakness in man to become motivated to only recite the Supplication of Kumayl when he sees other people doing so or only to go to the mosque for Friday prayers when he sees others doing

the same. This is not a thing to take pride in. The cause of pride for a person is worship in private when no one sees what we distinguish as a duty—not expecting other human beings to accompany us as we worship.

When I know that Allah wants me to perform a specific deed, I must endeavor to discharge that duty and I must not be concerned about whether others go along with me or not because the lack of support from other people does not reduce the value of that deed in the least. It is in this very case that man enjoys the benefits of a strong will and accepts his duties with strong and superior faith.

Therefore, he independently makes the decision to perform works whether he is accompanied by other people or not. Without the least doubt, independence in regard to decision making is very valuable; once it is time to make a decision, an individual must not wait to see what way others choose so that he too may take the same course. He who has a strong will and faith fulfills his duty once he distinguishes it as pleasing to Allah and does not wait for others to give their consent.

Jabir ibn Yazid Ju'fi is one of the trusted companions who kept the secrets of the Imams ('a) and has narrated many hadiths from Imam al-Baqir ('a). A lot of the hadiths which the Imam ('a) stated to Jabir were secrets and Jabir was not allowed to divulge those hadiths. He was despondent because he could not present those pure doctrines to those thirsty and desirous for knowledge; it was for this reason that [one day] he went to see Imam al-Baqir ('a) and said, "As a result of the secrets which you have narrated to me and have ordered that I must not divulge to a single human being, a heavy load has been placed on my shoulders so much so that sometimes I feel intense pressure in my chest and it seems as if I will go mad!" The Imam ('a) told him, "Yes Jabir, if such a state arises in you, go to the mountainside or to the deserts and dig a ditch and put your head in it and say, 'Muhammad ibn 'Ali ('a) narrated this hadith to me...'"[10](#)

After that Jabir used to immerse his head in a well and recite the *hadiths* which Imam al-Baqir ('a) had narrated to him in order to lighten himself. One of the *hadiths* which Jabir narrates from Imam al-Baqir ('a) is the following:

"You will not be one of our friends unless you become such that if the people of your city unanimously oppose you and say, 'You are a bad person', you do not become offended and angry, and if all of them say, 'You are a very good man', you will not become happy, rather you must evaluate yourself according [to the standards of] the Book of Allah and if you perceive yourself moving along the path of that Book and you renounce what that Book has recommended that you abstain from, and incline towards what it has advised, and fear what it has warned you against, persevere and be glad because what people say will not harm you."[11](#)

The Imam ('a) invites Jabir towards faith and reliance on Allah—that he must have so much trust in Allah that people won't have any effect on him whether they curse or bless him and he must evaluate his conduct and speech according to the standards of the Book of Allah. He ought to be pleased if he sees

that his deeds are in conformity with the Book of Allah and thank Allah for this grace and he ought to be upset when he conceives his behavior as not conforming to the Book of Allah because in that case Allah would not be pleased with him. Therefore, the criteria for contentment and displeasure are the injunctions of Allah not the pleasure and displeasure of human beings.

In decision making, if man has enough academic ability to distinguish his duties, he must be independent and not follow other people. With the help of the intellect which Allah has granted him, he must take time to think and identify his duties while paying heed to the Qur'an and the *hadiths* and not be concerned about what other people say. Thereafter, when the turn for action comes, he ought to act according to what he has ascertained and not wait for other people to act accordingly.

Even if he remains alone in the battlefield against the enemy and even in the case that resistance is no longer incumbent upon him, he still continues to fight all alone although he knows that he will be martyred because resistance against the enemy is more pleasing to Allah. Without the least doubt, such bravery and valor is invaluable, and it brings about Allah's praise when an individual stands alone guarding his aims without losing his way and continues to resist regardless of being left alone. In this regard, Imam 'Ali ('a) states:

"I swear upon Allah that if all the Arabs unite to fight me, I will not flee from them and I will make haste to advance my attack on them once I find the opportunity to do so."¹²

Therefore, the first factor [for encouraging deeds in solitude] is that Allah loves a believer who is independent in distinguishing his duties and also in carrying out his deeds and who does not wait for others nor endeavor to have the same habits as the crowd. Of course, it should not be mistakenly imagined on account of what has been said that a human being ought to always be alone and move against other people all the time and always do the opposite of what everyone is doing.

This is an unacceptable and reproachable habit that is very foolish. That which is being asserted is that man ought to be independent in decision making, distinguishing duties and acting upon them and not wait for the encouragement, accompaniment and confirmation of other people. However, it is good and pleasing if once he has made a decision, other people accompany him, too.

Nevertheless, a person must not be such that once he has determined something to be his duty and later on finds out that he has made a mistake, persists right up to the end; this is an unbecoming habit and an obstinate mental condition. Man has to always re-examine his morals, conducts and thoughts and admit his errors with all his courage once he perceives that he has made mistakes and not stubbornly persist in his blunders nor insist on his erroneous remarks. A believer acts on what is right once guided to it.

b) Sincerity of Intention

The second factor which causes Allah's pride on account of the three groups of His slaves is sincerity of

intention. A person who recites his prayers alone in the desert is not tainted by ostentation and sanctimony. There is no one watching so as to observe him and relate what he is doing to other people. With all certainty, the sincerity of such an individual is more than that of a person who discharges his duties in the presence of others.

If one recites his prayers with all its formalities in the presence of a number of people, there is the possibility of Satan tempting him because the devil is extremely deceitful and no matter how much a person has engaged in self-purification, there is still the possibility of being defeated by the devil and hypocrisy may appear in his heart and he might become pleased that other people are witnessing his deeds or hearing his voice.

However, when he is alone in the desert and recites *adhan* and *iqamah* and then recites the prayers, it is not possible for him to be ostentatious. Also, a person who wakes up in the middle of the night in the absence of any witnesses and embarks upon worshiping Allah and prostrates so long that he falls asleep is not likely to be sanctimonious because there is no one to observe what he is doing.

A person who remains alone on the battlefield and fights single-handedly is not likely to be hypocritical since there are no companions to cheer him saying how much courage he has and to narrate his gallantry to other people after he has attained martyrdom—the enemy will obviously not recount his bravery.

Therefore, the other common characteristic existing among those three individuals which is the cause of Allah's pride is the utmost sincerity of intention that exists in their deeds which has purified them from ostentation and sanctimony.

As has been observed, it is likely that the type of the deeds of these three groups of people is similar to the type of works of other people; therefore, that which has granted superiority and distinction to their actions and has made their deeds so invaluable that Allah praises man over the angels on account of them is sincerity of intention.

Purity of intention is a factor for performing deeds only for Allah. It is for this reason that we see that it has been stated in the Qur'an and the *hadiths* that sincerity and purity of intention is the cause of the superiority of deeds and their being accepted by Allah:

...إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ فَاعْبُدِ اللَّهَ مُخْلِصًا لَهُ الدِّينَ * أَلَا لِلَّهِ الدِّينُ الْخَالِصُ

“Indeed We have sent down the Book to you with the truth; so worship Allah, putting pure faith in Him. Now, surely, sincere obedience is due to Allah (alone)...”¹³

It has been recorded in a *hadith* that:

“Springs of wisdom flow from the heart onto the tongue of a person who practices sincerity exclusively for Allah.” [14](#)

In regard to the blessed verse:

الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْغَفُورُ

“He, who created death and life that He may test you [to see] which of you is best in conduct. And He is the Mighty, the Forgiving.” [15](#)

Imam al-Sadiq stated:

“It is not numerousness of deeds that is desired by Allah, but correctness; and correctness of works means fear of Allah and having a sincere intention.”

Then, the Imam (‘a) said:

“Persistence in sincerity is harder than performing the deeds themselves and sincerity in one’s deeds means that one should not want any person to praise him for his works save Allah, the Exalted, so the intention is greater than the deed.” [16](#)

With regard to what has been said, it is possible for us to have done virtuous deeds deserving a great deal of reward, such as participating in congregational prayers—according to narrations the rewards of which cannot be counted by the angels—but it is not clear whether the sincerity of intention in such prayers is the same as that of the prayers of a person that recites in the desert in seclusion.

Certainly, the devil tempts man and does not allow him to perform his deeds with complete sincerity. The evidence for this is that it is more difficult for people to take action in worship once they are on their own, let alone fulfill all the formalities; this is because willpower and motivation are not very strong. However, if other people are present and there is external motivating force, people engage in worship much more easily.

[1.](#) Surat al-Isra’ 17:70.

[2.](#) Surat al-Anfal 8:55.

[3.](#) The call to prayer.

[4.](#) The second call to prayer made just before beginning the prayer.

[5.](#) Surat al-Zumar 39:42.

[6.](#) That is, they abandon their beds at night and forgo the pleasure of sleep to worship their Lord in a state of fear and hope.

[Footnote of ‘Ali Quli Qara’i’s translation of the Qur’an]

[7.](#) Surat al-Sajdah 32:16.

[8.](#) Surat al-Anfal 8:15–16.

[9.](#) Surat al-Baqarah 2:170.

[10.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 2, p. 69.

[11.](#) Ibid., vol. 78, p. 162, hadith 1.

[12.](#) Nahj al-Balaghah, p. 971, chapter [kitab] 45, trans. Fayd al-Islam.

[13.](#) Surat al-Zumar 39:2-3.

[14.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 67, p. 242.

[15.](#) Surat al-Mulk 67:2.

[16.](#) Usul al-Kafi, vol. 3, p. 26.

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