

## Lesson 35: The Status Of Piety, Asceticism and Self-discipline

The fulcrum of this section of the Noble Prophet's (S) words is piety [*taqwa*]. There has been a great deal of discussion in various cases and ethical books in regard to piety, and we too have discussed this topic a lot. In this section, we will embark upon explaining and discussing the words of the Noble Prophet (S) and some of the basic and fundamental issues which are related to piety but, to begin with, we will explain the concept of piety.

### The Concept of Piety and Its Relationship with Divine Fear

#### [Khawf]

The word '*taqwa*' literally means protecting or guarding oneself from danger and it does not make any difference what that danger might be, but when the word *taqwa* is employed in ethical or Qur'anic discussions it does not mean protecting oneself from every kind of danger; in fact, it denotes danger which is directed at man's prosperity and hereafter although in the Qur'an, as well, *taqwa* has been employed to mean guarding oneself from the danger which other human beings direct at an individual:

...لَا يَتَّخِذُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَمَنْ يَفْعَلْ ذَلِكَ فَلَيْسَ مِنَ اللَّهِ فِي شَيْءٍ إِلَّا أَنْ تَتَّقُوا مِنْهُمْ تُقَاةً

***“The faithful should not take the faithless for allies instead of the faithful, and whoever does this he shall have nothing of (the guardianship of) Allah, but you should guard yourselves against them, guarding carefully...”<sup>1</sup>***

Even so, when discussion concerns '*taqwa*' or the verses of the Qur'an and the *hadiths* regard piety and the pious, the purport is piety before Allah and the discussion concerns people who fear danger in regard to their religious and spiritual affairs and try to protect themselves from danger because they have fear in regard to their religion. Therefore, the fountainhead of piety [*taqwa*] is fear and dread of

danger and after feeling fear and dread, man takes action to remain safe from or at least stay far from danger.

In the Qur'an, sometimes the Day of Resurrection has been mentioned as pertaining to piety because on that day the dangers and results of reprehensible deeds will become apparent. In this regard, Allah, the Exalted, states:

... وَاتَّقُوا يَوْمًا لَا تَجْزِي نَفْسٌ عَنْ نَفْسٍ شَيْئًا

***“And be on your guard against the Day when no soul shall compensate for another soul in the least.”<sup>2</sup>***

And sometimes someone has been mentioned pertaining to piety because He punishes man for the sins which he commits, for instance:

وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَأَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الْمُتَّقِينَ ...

***“And be wary of (your duty to) Allah, and know that Allah is with the pious.”<sup>3</sup>***

This means that one must fear the danger arising from divine retribution that will be directed at him. For this reason, fear of Allah means fearing the punishment which derives from man's reprehensible deeds.

In any case, in regard to the meaning of piety [*taqwa*], fear [*khawf*] is implicitly implied in its meaning on account of its origin, and for this reason it can also be interpreted as fear of Allah. Sometimes, piety refers to a habit or second nature which arises in man as a result of repeated abstinence and refraining from sin. When man abstains from sin once, it is not said that he is pious.

However, when he constantly abstains from sin so much so that keeping aloof from sin becomes his habit and second nature, others say that he is pious. For this reason, sometimes piety is applied to the fountainhead of a deed, which is fear of Allah, and sometimes it is applied to a spiritual and divine state which arises in man as a result of repeated abstinence from sin.

Imam 'Ali ('a) defines piety [*taqwa*] as a spiritual and divine state which prevents man from sin and deviation and counts fear of Allah as one of its effects:

“O creatures of Allah! Certainly piety has saved the lovers of Allah from committing the unlawful and put His dread in their hearts so that their nights are passed in wakefulness and their days in thirst.

Therefore, they achieve comfort through trouble and abundant watering through thirst. They regarded death to be near, so hastened towards (good) actions. They rejected their desires and kept death in sight.”<sup>4</sup>

Elsewhere, he states:

“The responsibility for what I say is guaranteed and I am answerable for it. If a person takes past experience (given by Allah to peoples) as a mirror for the future, he is prevented by piety from falling into doubtful actions.”<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, piety is the greatest asset which helps man seek the path of prosperity as he traverses the course of life which is filled with fears and hazards. Piety aids man on this sea full of dangerous and turbulent storms with horrendous waves of affliction and sin. Without piety man cannot traverse this way.

## The Importance of Piety and Ways of Attaining It

The significance of piety and the amount of emphasis which has been laid on it makes it clear that fundamentally religion, the sending of prophets and revealing of divine books have been so that human beings can find the way toward salvation and prosperity as well as traverse that path with diligent endeavor to attain the original goal of creation which is infinite divine mercy in the hereafter.

Therefore, the more effective piety is in attaining this goal, the more significant it is. In other words, because the reality of the prophetic mission and divine legal codes is showing mankind the way of salvation and prosperity and Allah, the Exalted, on account of His infinite mercy, has made it incumbent upon Himself to guide people, in the divine verses and that which has reached people by means of the saints [awliya] of Allah, effort has been made to train people in such a way that they act upon divine instructions, and because man's deeds often spring from sensual origins, that is to say, man's volitional deeds often arise from his desire and the bulk of his will is found in fear and hope, the prophets (‘a) and their successors have made use of the method of awakening fear and hope in man and making him aware of the true goal of his creation.

After understanding the notion of piety [taqwa] and its significance, it is necessary to understand the ways of obtaining piety. We will briefly mention three ways of attaining piety:

### 1. One's attitude about the future

With attention to the fact that piety is the main provision for man's eternal life, love of the self by way of foresight and the intellect's judgment that man has to struggle for his future and attain that which is beneficial for his eternal life should be awakened. The Qur'an states:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَانظُرُوا نَفْسَ مَا قَدَّمْتُمْ لِغَدٍ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

***“O you who have faith! Be wary of (your duty to) Allah, and let every soul consider what it sends ahead for tomorrow and be wary of (your duty to) Allah. Allah is indeed well aware of what you do.”***<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Attention to knowledge and awareness of Allah in regard to deeds and conduct

This method has also been mentioned in the above verse:

وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ...

***“...And be wary of (your duty to) Allah. Allah is indeed well aware of what you do.”***

That is to say, in regard to Allah’s attribute of knowing whatever you do, fear Him and have piety. This is another method of instruction which Allah has chosen to help man to acquire piety because people have special psychological characteristics and one of these is that when one knows and pays heed to the fact that there is someone watching his deeds and Allah sees whatever he does and is aware of his good as well as bad acts, he refrains from doing objectionable deeds.

In reality, Allah has created man in such a way that he feels ashamed to do bad deeds in the presence of someone who knows the deed is bad. For this reason, if man constantly reflects on the fact that he is in the presence of Allah and that not only are the outward aspects of his deeds being witnessed but Allah is also aware of that which is in his heart, he feels ashamed of even the corrupt thoughts and fantasies which arise in heart.

The more man respects someone as great, the more he desires to be cleaner and purer in the eyes of that person. In other words, he wants his personality to be respected. In regard to Allah’s awareness of the deeds of man, the Glorious Qur’an states:

أَوَلَا يَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا يُسِرُّونَ وَمَا يُعْلِنُونَ

***“Do they not know that Allah knows whatever they hide and whatever they disclose?”<sup>7</sup>***

## 3. Realization that piety is beneficial even in the world

...وَمَنْ يَتَّقِ اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ مَخْرَجًا \* وَيَرْزُقْهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَا يَحْتَسِبُ

***“And whoever is careful of (his duty to) Allah, He shall make a way out for him from whence he shall not reckon...”<sup>8</sup>***

And also Imam ‘Ali (‘a) states:

“Know that whoever adopts piety and fears Allah, Allah will show him the way out of sedition and corruption and the way leading from the darkness to the light.”<sup>9</sup>

In the first way of attaining piety [*taqwa*], we have been told to think about what we are saving for tomorrow. In this method, it is said that one has to reflect about the benefits piety has for one in this world. In the entire course of one's life, whether we like it or not, we are afflicted by seditions, sorrows, troubles and obscurities. If we want Allah to help right in this world and liberate us from wandering and predicaments, we must adopt piety.

In places where a pious man has to ascertain and discern the way, Allah grants him a light which makes everything manifest so that he may see the correct path. It is for this reason that sometimes we see very complicated and puzzling problems occur which cannot be solved by people with strong minds and sharp intellects whereas people lacking strong minds and intellects can solve such problems with the help of Allah because they have adopted a pious life. In reality, it is the help and aid of Allah which helps some of his servants who have adopted piety.

Therefore, one of the ways to encourage people to attain piety is introducing the positive effects which result from it because man is often only prepared to act on something or avoid what he loves when he knows that doing so makes him attain good results. Therefore, if we want to encourage other people to attain high values and to refrain from things which have spiritual harm for their hereafter, we have to do something which incites motivation in them. In order for people to overlook the pleasures of sin, they need to have motivation.

In order for them to easily wake up at night for the sake of worship, they have to have motivation. When the call of duty necessitates that they have to go to the battlefield and put their lives at risk as well as perform other good deeds for the pleasure of Allah, the Exalted, a person has to have motivation and the best way to incite motivation in him is to make him realize the benefits and good effects which result from his deeds because man's natural disposition seeks those effects.

Man, at whatever level of knowledge and faith, seeks goodness and, if his knowledge and faith are weak, he at least desires the good of the world. All people want abundant and lawful sustenance, and they want to earn it without exerting a great deal of effort. It is for this reason that one of the methods that has been employed in the Glorious Qur'an and also in *hadiths* to encourage piety is mentioning the worldly benefits of piety.

One of these benefits is that if a person is pious, Allah, the Exalted, shows him the way to escape and free himself from hardships and problems because sometimes a person finds himself in an impossible situation with no means of escape and does not see any solution for his problems and becomes obliged to bear with patience the bitterness and hardships of life.

Allah, the Exalted, promises that if a person has piety, the way of deliverance from hardships and problems will be made available. This is a very great promise which Allah gives to man and encourages him to choose a way whose fruits and results will be liberation from hardships and problems.

During the period of the struggles of the Muslim people of Iran and the Islamic movement, sometimes

very hard conditions would arise and no one knew the way of rescue from those conditions, but because this revolution was founded on the basis of piety and for the sake of spreading divine piety in the Islamic society and bringing about a spirit of servitude and the rule of Allah, Allah would grant His assistance and inspire the way of deliverance at every juncture and in the end the people would find a way out of the hardships. An example of this is the twenty second day of the month of Bahman: [10](#)

When the satanic regime announced martial law and fiercely stopped the people from coming out of their homes in order to execute its satanic plans, Imam Khomeini (may Allah be pleased with him) with his foresight and sharp-sightedness and, without the least doubt, divine inspiration, ordered the people to overlook and turn a blind eye to the military government and come out of their homes to occupy the streets and as a result of this the enemy's conspiracy was frustrated and the victory of the revolution became certain.

If Allah, the Exalted, invites us to acquire piety, it is because in this way we attain great results and benefits both in this world and in the hereafter. We attain high levels in heaven and spiritual perfection in the hereafter and also worldly good, but Allah does not derive any benefit from our piety:

لَنْ يَنَالَ اللَّهُ لُحُومَهَا وَلَا دِمَاؤَهَا وَلَكِنَّ يَنَالُهُ التَّقْوَىٰ مِنكُمْ كَذَلِكَ سَخَّرَهَا لَكُمْ لِتُكَبِّرُوا اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ مَا هَدَاكُمْ وَبَشِّرِ  
الْمُحْسِنِينَ

***“It is not their flesh or their blood that reaches Allah. Rather it is the piety that reaches Him. Thus, has He disposed them for your benefit so that you may magnify Allah for His guiding you, and give good news to the virtuous.”*** [11](#)

What connects us to Allah is piety which is the cause of our perfection and ascendancy and because Allah wants us to attain perfection, He encourages us to endeavor at attaining piety by enumerating the benefits of piety in this world so that in the end we may also attain heavenly reward. In reality, He enumerates for us the sensible and readily available advantages of piety in order to encourage us to attain piety even if the reality is that heavenly rewards are not, as we wrongly imagine, on credit and their occurrence is near and certain but we do not conceive them as such.

## **A Glance at the Levels of Piety**

Keeping in mind that all spiritual perfections have levels, piety, being one of the highest spiritual perfections, has various gradations also. From one perspective scholars of ethics have mentioned three stages of piety:

1. Protecting the soul from the punishment of hell and from living in eternal divine retribution by doing commendable deeds and having correct beliefs: this is because piety connotes safeguarding the soul and preventing oneself from opposing Allah and does not only mean abstaining from sin. It is for this

reason that piety pertains both to the beliefs and to other than the beliefs.

Piety in regard to the beliefs denotes that man has to meditate about the fundamentals of belief and not deviate from them and endeavor to be honest and firm both in words as well as action in regard to beliefs. Man has to truly become faithful to his Lord and have certainty that the other unreal gods and objects of worship are false. He has to truly believe all existents are creations of the real Object of Worship and a created thing must be submissive and obedient to its Object of Worship and prostrate on the ground in humility to Him and never turn his back on Him.

After observing piety in relation to Allah, the Exalted, he also has to abide by piety in regard to the prophets and their successors too and willingly follow their orders with all his heart and soul.

2. The second level of piety is that, in addition to renunciation of sin, man also has to abstain from dubious and objectionable acts [*makruh*] even though they are not considered to be sins and are not punishable.

3. The third level of piety is that in addition to protecting the body parts and limbs from forbidden [*muharramat*], objectionable [*makruhat*] and dubious acts [*mushtabahat*], man must guard the heart from that which is not pleasing to Allah and also not think about sin and disagreeable deeds but try to reflect about Allah and that which is pleasing to Him.

It is natural that no matter how much one worships, he will not derive any benefit from his acts of devotion if he does not pay a blind eye to sin. Therefore, in order for us to derive benefit from our acts of worship, we first of all have to protect their bounds and limits and refrain from deeds that are displeasing to Allah. It has been narrated in a *hadith* that:

“One who refrains from forbidden things [*muharramat*] is the most virtuous of people.”<sup>12</sup>

## **A Glance at the Effects of Piety**

Another issue that is worth dealing with is the effects of piety. Some of these effects include:

### **1. The effects and role of piety in the perception of truths**

... يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِن تَتَّقُوا اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَكُمْ فُرْقَانًا

***“O you who have faith! If you are wary of Allah, He shall appoint a criterion<sup>13</sup> for you...”<sup>14</sup>***

The faculty of cogitation which makes us aware of realities becomes sharper and works better when one does not act in an unrestricted and immoral way and observes correct standards of behavior because perversion inhibits the intellect from functioning correctly. In more technical terms, the origin of unrestrictedness is in the animal instincts, whether in regard to food or sexual matters or whether related

to the faculty of anger, and if a person does not recognize any bounds and limits in regard to these aspects, he strengthens them.

A person, whose devotion is to food, is like a sheep whose only concern is herbage. Without the least doubt, such a person cannot manage to bolster his more human aspects and intellection is one of the human faculties which, in the case of becoming overly devoted to food, becomes either weak or suspended. In the same way, the thoughts and activities of a human being whose preoccupation is sexual passion revolve around his lusts and he is like a animal immersed in passion from morning until night.

Such a human being chases after scenes which serve his passions and hears and speaks words which only serve his animal instincts. This person only studies books which discuss carnal issues and pleasures of the flesh. Without the least doubt, such a person cannot be expected to reflect about divine knowledge, to conceive the truth and distinguish right from wrong. In the same way, a person who is like a predator only strives to strengthen his faculty of anger and his only concern is domination and subjugation of other people. For this reason, the focal point of such a man's thoughts is his animal instinct of subjugation and domination.

The exigency of piety is that man ought to control his animal faculties and in this case the faculty of rationalization and intellection controls and reigns. Now, if the meaning of *furqan* (criterion) in the above-quoted verse is the intellect—because the intellect distinguishes between right and falsehood—we infer that by restricting the control of animal instincts and letting the faculty of thought take charge of affairs, and by subjugating the rest of the faculties by means of the intellect, we will attain the criterion.

The other possible interpretation of *furqan* (criterion) is that *furqan* is the light higher than the intellect because the intellect exists in all human beings; it exists more in some people and less in others. Therefore, by knowing Allah and having divine fear [*khawf*], man observes bounds and limits in his life and with the help of the piety which appears in him, he attains the aptitude for Allah to grant him the light of the criterion [*furqan*] which is a confirmer of the faculty of intellection.

## **2. The role of piety in clear-sightedness**

There are a great deal of Qur'anic verses and *hadiths* which denote the fact that one of the invaluable benefits of divine piety is clear-sightedness and the opening up of apertures of knowledge for man. In this regard, Allah, the Exalted, states:

...وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَيَعْلَمَكُمُ اللَّهُ...

**“...And be careful of (your duty to) Allah and Allah shall teach you...”<sup>15</sup>**

This verse emphasizes this point that piety is very effective in increasing knowledge and awareness

which comes from Allah, the Exalted.

In a *hadith*, the Noble Prophet (S) states:

“Springs of wisdom flow from the heart onto the tongue of a person who for forty days sincerely purifies himself for Allah.”<sup>16</sup>

In reality piety wipes out the rust covering the heart of man and removes the curtains and veils which the devil have established over man’s heart and then man perceives true knowledge clearly. Imam al-Sadiq (‘a) states:

“If it were not for the devils which constantly move around the hearts of the children of Adam, they would witness the spiritual realm of the heavens.”<sup>17</sup>

There are many such sayings in our religious manuscripts and they indicate the fact that piety and purity are effective for spiritual insight and foresight and indirectly warn us that worshipping the soul and losing the reins of piety result in the darkening of the soul and dullness of the heart and diminish spiritual insight.

### 3. The role of piety in captivating and securing the love of Allah

بَلَىٰ مَنْ أَوْفَىٰ بِعَهْدِهِ وَاتَّقَىٰ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُتَّقِينَ

***“Yes, whoever fulfills his commitments and guards (against evil)—Allah indeed loves the pious.”***<sup>18</sup>

It is clear what benefits will be directed at the person whom Allah loves. Once man loves some individual, he always tries to win their pleasure and he is not remiss in this regard and tries to do what the other person desires at whatever cost.

Now, when Allah who is the Almighty, has all perfections and is All-powerful loves someone it is clear what He can do for that person. Often times, we love someone and we would like to do something good for him but we are unable to on account of lacking facilities and means. However, Allah, the Exalted, is able to do all that He wishes and all things are within His will and power and He can do whatever He wants for one He loves.

### 4. Not having fear and sorrow

As Allah, the Exalted, states:

فَمَنْ اتَّقَىٰ وَأَصْلَحَ فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ ...

**“... Then those who are pious and righteous will have no fear, nor will they grieve.”<sup>19</sup>**

## **5. Receiving divine help**

In regard to granting invisible aid to the pious, Allah, the Exalted, states:

بَلَىٰ إِن تَصْبِرُوا وَتَتَّقُوا وَيَأْتُوكُم مِّن فَوْرِهِمْ هَذَا يُمْدِدْكُمْ رَبُّكُمْ بِخَمْسَةِ آلَافٍ مِّن الْمَلَائِكَةِ مُسَوِّمِينَ

**“Yes, if you are steadfast and pious, and should they come at you suddenly, your Lord will aid you with five thousand marked angels.”<sup>20</sup>**

It has been narrated in a *hadith*:

“Verily Allah, the Honored and High, confirms the believer with His spirit and whenever the believer does good and acts piously, that spirit draws near to confirm him and it leaves him when he sins and transgresses.”<sup>21</sup>

## **6. Acquisition of dignity and proximity [qurb] to Allah**

In regard to the role of piety in man’s acquisition of dignity and proximity [*qurb*] to Allah, the Qur’an states:

إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ ...

**“...Indeed the noblest<sup>22</sup> of you in the sight of Allah is the most pious among you. Indeed Allah is All-knowing, All-aware.”<sup>23</sup>**

## **7. Deliverance from problems and hardships**

In regard to the role and effects of piety in delivering man from problems and hardships, there is much discussion and verse twelve of *Surat al-Talaq* has been quoted. Here we will quote another verse which is related to a pious society:

... وَلَوْ أَنَّ أَهْلَ الْقُرَىٰ آمَنُوا وَاتَّقَوْا لَفَتَحْنَا عَلَيْهِم بَرَكَاتٍ مِّن السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ

**“If the people of the towns had been faithful and pious, We would have opened to them blessings from the heaven and the earth.”<sup>24</sup>**

## 8. The acceptance of deeds

In regard to the role and effects of piety in making man's deeds acceptable, Allah, the Exalted, states:

إِنَّمَا يَتَقَبَّلُ اللَّهُ مِنَ الْمُتَّقِينَ ...

***“...Allah accepts only from the pious.”<sup>25</sup>***

In this verse Allah, the Exalted, makes us aware of the point that if we want our deeds to be accepted, we have to have piety. Of course, if we discharge our religious and obligatory duties by observing their correct outward conditions, we are no longer duty-bound to discharge ‘divine duties’.

For instance, if out of laziness we hurriedly perform our morning prayer after the sky has become bright before the rising of the sun, we are not duty-bound to perform the compensational morning prayers but the fulfillment of our duty does not imply that our deed has risen to the level of acceptance and the level of acceptance of duty is higher and has its own special qualities one of which is the act accompanied by piety. Therefore, that effect which brings about loftiness of deeds (acceptance of deeds) in the eyes of Allah is piety and abstinence from opposing Allah.

“O Abu Dharr! Strive harder for piety rather than only performing deeds because an action done with piety is not insignificant. How can a deed which is accepted by Allah be insignificant? Allah, the Exalted, states, ‘Allah accepts only from the pious’.”

Whether in regard to the world or in regard to the hereafter, people do not strive with the same ambition and there are a lot of differences among them. In regard to the sustenance of life, some have few aspirations and exert effort from morning to night just for the sake of earning bread and butter and they are content with just that.

It is not true that this group of people has selected the course of abstinence, but their expectations are few and their ambitions are limited. Some people have higher ambitions and they are not content with less and strive to earn enormous benefits in this world and limited things do not content them. Other people have even higher aspirations than this group and they do not pay any heed to material and sensual benefits such as food and the stomach.

For them, what is important is attaining social position, honor and dignity. If they choose to do something, it is not with the intention of acquiring a lot of money, but because a certain job is suitable to their status and circumstances and results in granting honor and dignity to them. They do not do work that is not suitable even if they would earn more money from it. The ambitions of this group of people are high and dignity and honor is valuable for them.

Likewise, in regard to the hereafter, believers have different ambitions. Some only aspire to be saved

from hell and are only content with being redeemed. Some people are not content with this and seek to attain various levels of paradise. Some others have such high ambitions that they do not even look at hell and heaven but aspire to be beloved of Allah, the Exalted, and gain proximity to Him.

Indeed, those who have known Allah and have knowledge of the high value of honor before Him would be pleased and happy with this honor even if heaven and its blessings did not exist. The important for them is that Allah grants them merit and honor and they do not lay any importance upon the blessings of paradise. In the Qur'an, Allah, the Exalted, states:

...إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ...

***“..Indeed the noblest among you in the sight of Allah is the most pious among you...”<sup>26</sup>***

Allah does not state that paradise and its blessings are granted to the most pious among you or that such a person is delivered from the fire of hell, but He states that the pious has attained nobility and honor before Allah and is valuable in the sight of Allah. It becomes clear that earning the honor of Allah and becoming beloved in the sight of Allah is higher than deriving benefit from heaven and its palaces and eternal favors.

Now, how can such an individual who has attained this level of knowledge and awareness be encouraged to attain more piety? Can it be said to him that you have to increase your piety so as to earn more worldly reward? This human being has put all these things aside and attained higher levels.

Can it be said to him that you ought to increase your piety so as to derive benefit from the palaces of paradise and its pure virgin women as well as be delivered from hell? It is obvious that not one of these things will motivate him to increase his piety because he has already turned a blind eye to all of them.

He has reached a level of perfection and completion and his aspiration has reached its peak such that he desires nothing but the beatific vision [*liqa' Allah*] of Allah and winning divine love and honor. The only thing which can encourage such a person to increase his piety is the promise of meeting his Lord and attaining the pleasure of the Beloved.

We have to bear in mind that the Gracious Qur'an has not chosen one method of training people, but it has advanced a particular method suitable for every type of person. It is for this reason that the Glorious Qur'an has various methods of instruction which are not confined to the saints [*awliya*] of Allah and those who have attained high levels because the Qur'an is a book of guidance and invites all human beings to perfection and edification of character.

For this reason, it has also mentioned benefits and set forth rewards for people who have a lower level of ambition and are traversing the course of perfection so that they may not remain without any benefits. It has promised them material benefits, paradise and deliverance from hell but the promise of divine

honor and attaining the pleasure of Allah and becoming beloved by Him is offered to those who have reached perfected levels of knowledge.

## The Quality of Accountability and Other Characteristics of the Pious

Another subject worth discussing is the attributes of the pious. After comprehending the greatness and value of piety, we have to know the qualities of the pious so as to learn the way of attaining piety. In this regard the Noble Prophet (S) states:

“O Abu Dharr! No man is considered pious until he takes an account of himself more strictly than a partner who is accounting for his partner in order to find out by what means that which he eats, drinks and wears is acquired. Is it earned in a legitimate [halal] or illegitimate [haram] way?”

The Noble Prophet (S) regards the attribute of accountability as one of the qualities of the pious and states that a pious person is one who is not indifferent and negligent and holds himself accountable. If he acquires food, he observes whether he has acquired it in a legitimate or illegitimate way. If he acquires clothes, he is careful of where the money for buying those clothes comes from. Likewise, he considers and examines his incentive for acquiring a house—is it for him to better serve Allah, prepare more comfort for his household, engage in spiritual devotion in a better way as well as be able to bring up his children in a good environment or does he acquire a house in order to boast to other people and show off to them?

When he intends to spend his money, he considers whether Allah will be pleased or not and also whether there is another more obligatory duty for which he can spend his money. In any case, he weighs all aspects and holds himself accountable. A person ought not to be such that he gains money from whatever source and spends it on every whim and fancy. He has to observe whether the facilities he brings to hand are earned in a legitimate way or not. If they are earned illicitly, he has to return them to where they belong and not cause himself problems.

Sometimes, a person becomes so corrupted by the world and entangles himself to such an extent in worldly affairs that he cannot liberate himself later. He becomes so preoccupied with seeking opportunities and enormous wealth that he even sells his dignity to acquire things, not caring who or what is sacrificed along the way. He does not care in what manner he earns his money.

If we have not attained high levels of piety so as to abstain from dubious [*mushtabah*] and reprehensible [*makruh*] acts, then at least we ought to refrain from forbidden [*haram*] things and observe the bounds and limits of *halal* and *haram* lest there is someone else's right in the money we bring to hand. Every believer has certain bounds which he must not transgress. A butcher has to observe certain divine laws and a civil servant follows other laws and all people must see to it that other people's rights are not trampled underfoot.

A worker has to be sure that he fulfills his duties during working hours and does not engage in leisure activities and smoking cigarettes as well as talking to this and that other worker. Some believers are very diligent in their acts of worship and imagine that merely worshipping and keeping vigil at night is enough for them and when they are in their offices, they content themselves with only sitting behind their desk and not working because they imagine that keeping vigil at night compensates for laziness.

Government workers and those working for the private sector have to know that their working hours belong to their employers and they do not have the right to use that time for personal purposes. Even the telephones that are in their offices cannot be exploited for personal use. Unfortunately, we do not pay heed to these points.

Likewise, using money from the public treasury must only be used for public purposes and in the public interest. Therefore, if we are obliged to be working during certain specified hours, we have to be careful not to spend those hours for personal purposes. When we have been hired to do a certain job, we have no right even to perform prayers unless we initially agree on this condition with our employer and we have his permission to do so.

In addition, any money which is earned by means of assassinating the characters of other people or by means of flattery and bootlicking is illicit.

In continuation, the Noble Prophet (S) states:

“O Abu Dharr! Allah does not take notice of where in hell He casts a man who does not take notice of how he earns his living.”

Man has to be cautious and observe the method by which he earns his income and reflect on where his income comes from. He must not earn his money by means of flattering people and he must be concerned whether his assets and his work are legitimate or not because if they are not Allah will cast him into hell.

“O Abu Dharr! Every person who desires to be the most honored among the people must be pious.”

“O Abu Dharr! The most beloved person in the sight of Allah is he who remembers Allah most and the most honored among you is the one who is more pious and the furthest from divine retribution is the one who fears Allah more.”

(As we have already mentioned, fear [*khawf*] is one of the foundations of piety and without it piety is not attainable.)

“O Abu Dharr! The pious are those who abstain from things that are not generally abstained from, so as not to fall into dubious matters.”

It has been said that there are levels for piety and that some people only abstain from prohibited things

while others go a step further and refrain from things that are doubtful as well, and still other human beings have reached such a high level that they keep aloof from objectionable [*makruh*] things lest they may mistakenly fall into error. Thereafter, in order to explain the superior level of piety, the Noble Prophet (S) states:

“O Abu Dharr! He who obeys Allah, the Exalted, has remembered Him even though his prayers and fasting are few and he recites the Qur’an little.”

## **Self-restraint and Asceticism in the Words of the Noble Prophet**

### **(S)**

Thereafter, in regard to self-discipline, the Noble Prophet (S) states:

“O Abu Dharr! The foundation of religion is self-restraint [*wara'*]—restraining from sin and dubious matters—and its pinnacle is obedience to Allah. O Abu Dharr! Engage in self-restraint so that you may become one of the most devout of worshippers, for the best part of your religion is self-restraint.”

Originally, the word *wara'* had the meaning of restraining oneself from the unlawful or avoiding the prohibited completely; then, later it was used more generally to mean self-restraint, and its meaning is very close to the meaning of piety. However, predominantly self-restraint [*wara'*] is used to refer to a habit of abstinence and asceticism, which is an inner quality, while piety is more generally applied to the prerequisites of deeds, the praiseworthy deeds themselves and also to the inner habit.

In order to explain the role of *wara'* in restraining a person from sin and deviation, Imam 'Ali ('a) states:

“There is no distinction higher than Islam; no honor more honorable than piety [*taqwa*]; no asylum better than self-restraint [*wara'*].”[27](#)

Imam al-Sadiq ('a) states:

“Adopt piety [*taqwa*] and protect your religion with self-restraint [*wara'*].”[28](#)

Restraining oneself from prohibited things is the most important factor for attaining prosperity and high spiritual levels and escaping from decadence or falling into the whirlwind of perdition. In reality, self-restraint from sins and doubtful acts is the most difficult level of worship and devotion to Allah and it is for this reason that Imam al-Baqir ('a) states:

“Self-restraint [*wara'*] is the most difficult form of worship.”[29](#)

Again bearing in mind the role of self-restraint in making the other constituents of worship sound, Imam 'Ali ('a) states:

“Worship which is devoid of self-restraint [*wara'*] is devoid of goodness and benefit.”[30](#)

Also, regarding the necessity to accompany worship with self-restraint, the Noble Prophet (S) states:

“O Abu Dharr! The excellence of knowledge is more than the excellence of worship. Understand that even if you perform the prayers so much that you bend like a bow and fast so much that you become as thin as an arrow, these will not benefit you unless they are accompanied by self-restraint.”

He also states:

“O Abu Dharr! Those people who practice self-restraint and asceticism [zuhd] in the world are truly the saints [awliya'] of Allah.”

*Zuhd* literally means lack of inclination and reluctance and is contrasted with affection, appetite and inclination to the world; that is to say, one has no inclination and attachment to the world and is content with a simple life.

It is necessary to say that asceticism and abstinence that is desirable in Islam is when man adopts a life of simplicity and refrains from ostentation in order to discharge his duties better and turns a blind eye to the glamorous and glittering manifestations of life. It is self-evident that this kind of conduct is not a result of conceiving the world and its manifestations as filthy nor is it due to a conflict between the world and the hereafter and it is also not on account of shirking social obligations.

Asceticism in Islam is adopted for the sake of discharging duties in a better way, to hold sway over excessive inclinations and extreme attitudes and in order to control fondness with the world and infatuation with outward material manifestations of life. This helps restrain man's over-desirous soul and rid a person of a state of self-loss vis-à-vis the manifestations of the life of this world.

Therefore, asceticism in Islam is not incongruous with having wealth and power and in reality an ascetic is a person that is not in love with the outward manifestations of the world more than he loves the Truth and Allah and he does not sacrifice divine goals for the sake of worldly aims. On the contrary, he has set the hereafter as the main goal and this world as a means and pre-requisite for attaining the next.

With regard to what has been mentioned, the difference between asceticism [*zuhd*] and monasticism [*rahbaniyyah*], which is prevalent among Christians and Jews, becomes clear. Monasticism includes quitting the world and escaping from societal responsibility and this ideology is incongruous with the spirit of Islam.

From the viewpoint of Islam, the outward aspects of life including money, children, leadership, etc. are all means of perfection and development and are blessings of Allah and deriving appropriate benefit from them and observing balance in making use of them, in addition to bringing about prosperity in this world, generate bliss for man in the hereafter.

Correct use of the manifestations of the world means that man should not consider the world and its outward aspects to have value in and of themselves rather they are blessings that must be used for the

purpose of attaining perfection and prosperity in the hereafter. Allah, the Exalted, states:

...وَابْتَغِ فِيمَا آتَاكَ اللَّهُ الدَّارَ الْآخِرَةَ وَلَا تَنْسَ نَصِيبَكَ مِنَ الدُّنْيَا

***“By the means of what Allah has given you, seek the abode of the hereafter, while not forgetting your share in this world...”***[31](#)

According to Islam, everything in the world that has acquired the color of existence is good, and Allah has not created anything bad. For this reason, neither is the world with its manifestations bad nor is interest in them which arises from natural tendencies that have been placed in man. The Noble Prophet (S) states:

“Asceticism and abstinence [zuhd] in the world does mean that you have to turn the halal (permitted) into haram (forbidden) for yourselves or disperse your wealth. Asceticism means that you should not rely more on what is in your hands than that which is with Allah.”[32](#)

Imam ‘Ali (‘a) states:

“O people! Abstinence [zuhd] is to shorten the desires, to thank for bounties and to avoid prohibitions [maharim]...”[33](#)

In addition to what has been said, the Glorious Qur’an reproaches monasticism and considers it to be an innovation which was introduced into religion as a result of the incorrect idea that there is incongruity between religion and the world. The Qur’an states:

ثُمَّ فَفَّيْنَا عَلَى آثَارِهِم بِرُسُلِنَا وَقَفَّيْنَا بِعِيسَى ابْنِ مَرْيَمَ وَآتَيْنَاهُ الْإِنْجِيلَ وَجَعَلْنَا فِي قُلُوبِ الَّذِينَ اتَّبَعُوهُ رَأْفَةً وَرَحْمَةً  
وَرَهْبَانِيَّةً ابْتَدَعُوهَا مَا كَتَبْنَاهَا عَلَيْهِمْ إِلَّا ابْتِغَاءَ رِضْوَانِ اللَّهِ فَمَا رَعَوْهَا حَقَّ رِعَايَتِهَا فَآتَيْنَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ  
وَكَثِيرٌ مِنْهُمْ فَاسِقُونَ

***“Then We followed them up with Our apostles and We followed [them] with Jesus son of Mary, and We gave him the Evangel, and We put in the hearts of those who followed him kindness and mercy. But as for monasticism, they innovated it We had not prescribed it for them—only seeking Allah’s pleasure. Yet they did not observe it with due observance. So We gave to the faithful among them their [due] reward, but many of them are transgressors.”***[34](#)

One day the wives of ‘Uthman ibn Maz’un came to the Noble Prophet (S) and complained that her husband fasted all day and kept vigil all night. He also was not at the service of his family during the day and did not sleep with his wife at night. After hearing this, the Noble Prophet (S) angrily got up and went to see ‘Uthman who was busy performing his prayers. When he saw the Noble Prophet (S), he shortened his prayer. The Noble Prophet told him:

“O ‘Uthman! Allah did not raise me to preach monasticism [rahbaniyyah] and shunning the world but to preach a moderate and easy religion. I fast, pray and sleep with my wives.”<sup>35</sup>

- [1.](#) Surat Al ‘Imran 3:28.
- [2.](#) Surat al–Baqarah 2: 123.
- [3.](#) Surat al–Baqarah 2: 194.
- [4.](#) Nahj al–Balaghah, p. 353, sermon [khutbah] 113, trans. Fayd al–Islam.
- [5.](#) Ibid., p. 66, sermon [khutbah] 16, trans. Fayd al–Islam.
- [6.](#) Surat al–Hashr 59: 18.
- [7.](#) Surat al–Baqarah 2:77.
- [8.](#) Surat al–Talaq 65:2–3.
- [9.](#) Nahj al–Balaghah, p. 602, sermon [khutbah] 182, trans. Fayd al–Islam.
- [10.](#) The eleventh month of the Iranian calendar; the Iranian Islamic Revolution took place in Bahman 22nd, 1357 AHS.
- [11.](#) Surat al–Hajj 22:37.
- [12.](#) Bihar al–Anwar, vol. 77, p. 64.
- [13.](#) That is, knowledge that will enable one to distinguish between truth and falsehood.
- [14.](#) Surat al–Anfal 8:29.
- [15.](#) Surat al–Baqarah 2:282.
- [16.](#) Bihar al–Anwar, vol. 70, p. 24.
- [17.](#) Ibid., vol. 59, p. 163.
- [18.](#) Surat Al ‘Imran 3:76.
- [19.](#) Surat al–A‘raf 7:35.
- [20.](#) Surat Al ‘Imran 3:125.
- [21.](#) Wasa‘il al–Shi‘ah, vol. 11, p. 235.
- [22.](#) Or: ‘the most honored’.
- [23.](#) Surat al–Hujurat 49:13.
- [24.](#) Surat al–A‘raf 7:96.
- [25.](#) Surat al–Ma‘idah 5:27.
- [26.](#) Surat al–Hujurat 49:13.
- [27.](#) Nahj al–Balaghah, p. 126, wisdom [hikmat] 363, trans. Fayd al–Islam.
- [28.](#) Bihar al–Anwar, vol. 70, p. 297.
- [29.](#) Ibid., p. 298.
- [30.](#) Ibid., p. 307.
- [31.](#) Surat al–Qasas 28:77.
- [32.](#) Nahj al–Fasahah, p. 358, hadith 1712.
- [33.](#) Nahj al–Balaghah, p. 180, sermon [khutbah] 80, trans. Fayd al–Islam.
- [34.](#) Surat al–Hadid 57:27.
- [35.](#) Bihar al–Anwar, vol. 22, p. 264.

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