

Lesson 5: Castigating the Acquisition of Knowledge for Worldly Goals

The Consequences Of Not Acting Upon Knowledge And Attaining Social Rank By Means Of It

In this section the Prophet (S) has addressed the scholars; His Holiness urges the scholars to conform their actions to their knowledge and reminds them about the ill-effects of not conforming conduct to knowledge.

Even if His Holiness’ statements are clear and need no expounding, but for the sake of making this issue more transparent so as to make it clearer in the hearts, we will hint at some of the *hadiths* whose purport is the same as that of the Noble Prophet’s (S) statements. But before that we shall be reminded that from the Islamic point of view a rational man cannot be without responsibilities, but the standards and limitations of obligations differ. Therefore, an ignorant man and a scholar equally have responsibilities, even though the burdens of a scholar are more than those of an ignorant man.

Therefore, for the reason that the ignorant man has obligations too, he is obliged to learn the divine duties and religious issues of his needs and not knowing religious issues does not result in man being divested of religious duties, that is why Imam al-Sadiq (‘a) states:

“On the Day of Resurrection, when Allah’s slave who did not fulfill his duties [in the world] is called for questioning, Allah, the Exalted, will ask him, ‘Were you aware of your duties and obligations?’ If in response he says, ‘Yes, I was aware of my duties’, Allah will say, ‘Why did you not act upon that which you were aware of?’ And if the slave says, ‘I was an ignorant man’, Allah will say, ‘Why did you not go to learn your responsibilities so as to act upon them...’”¹

The basic difference between a scholar and an ignorant man is that Allah’s divine proof has fully been presented to him and no pretexts will be accepted for his not discharging his responsibilities, and he will

[even] be dealt with in a more strict manner than the ignorant.

With regard to this, Imam al-Sadiq (‘a) states:

“Seventy sins of an ignorant man will be forgiven before one sin of a scholar is forgiven...”²

It ought not to be imagined that quitting education is better in order not to be worse off than the ignorant, because one who fled from acquiring knowledge and awareness will be asked too [why they did so] and responsibility will not be divested of him because of his taking flight from education. In addition to that, why ought we not to be among those scholars who act upon their knowledge and will get envied in the hereafter in the same way that other people used to envy them in the world?

In our sources of *hadith*, a great deal of sections with different titles have been recorded with regard to the virtue of acquiring knowledge, to the extent that it has been recorded in some of the *hadiths* that even the birds of the air and the fish of the sea and the animals of the wilderness all seek Allah’s forgiveness for a person who is seeking divine knowledge.

For every reason His Holiness’ states in this section that a scholar whose actions are not in accord with his knowledge will be in the worst position and rank on the Day of Resurrection and will not smell the sweet scent of paradise. All too often [it occurs that] a person who embarks upon acquisition of knowledge initially does so with the intention of serving the religion and discharging his obligations but encumbrances crop up along the way; However, some people do not have a divine intention and objective from the beginning.

Not only do they lack sincerity, but have ill-intentions as well, like acquiring knowledge for the sake of attracting other people’s attention and respect and acquiring social rank and popularity. It is natural that right from the beginning such an individual is heading towards deviation and collapse and consequently gets entangled in the filth of meanness and misery and will not smell the scent of paradise on the Day of Resurrection.

It is likely that a person who goes to learn secular knowledge for the sake of attaining position, opportunity and the acquisition of daily bread does not get reproached and blamed, but a person who learns divine sciences, which have been designed for the prosperity of the hereafter, for the sake of attaining the world deserves to be castigated. In reality, such an individual believes that the position and status of the world is higher than that of the hereafter. In other words, he has believed in the primacy of the world and not that of religion. This thought is a result of lack of faith in the basic principles and values of religion and has no end save being driven away from Allah, as the Prophet states:

“A person whose knowledge and awareness have been increased but [he] has not become detached from the world has in fact got very far from Allah.”³

The Consequences Of Acquiring Knowledge For The Sake Of Deceiving Others

“O Abu Dharr! A person who acquires knowledge for the sake of deceiving people will not smell the sweet scent of paradise.”

Some people not only embark upon acquiring knowledge for the sake of attaining fame and position but worse than that, they get education in order to deceive and mislead people.

Up to this section of the *hadith*, mention has been made about the importance of harmonizing our actions in accord with our knowledge and purifying the intention: that man ought to conceive of what intention he has when he embarks upon the acquisition of knowledge and should not let evil intentions appear in his heart. He ought not to set out gathering knowledge for the sake of titles such as ‘Hujjat al-Islam’, ‘Ayatullah’, ‘Philosopher’ [*filisuf*] and ‘Interpreter of the Qur’an’ [*mufasssir*] and attracting the people’s respect [and attention].

Maybe people who take the trouble of getting education for the sake of attaining fame imagine that every person who is more popular among the people is more beloved by Allah too. This illusion is vain and void. Has every one who is popular among the people discharged his responsibilities in order for him to be beloved by Allah and [thus] attain prosperity? Even if he is very popular among the people, he is still the most ashamed and disgraced of all people in the sight of Allah because the criteria of man’s works are knowledge, action and piety. The standard of judgment is that man ought to be beloved by Allah, not by the people.

Admitting Ignorance is a Quality of the Divine Scholars

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

“Every person who learns divine knowledge, which is supposed to be learnt only for [the good pleasure of] Allah, for attaining worldly goals and position will not smell the sweet scent of paradise on the Day of Resurrection.”⁴

“O Abu Dharr! Whenever they ask you about something which you do not know, say that you do not know so as to remain safe and do not pronounce an edict over what you have no knowledge of in order to escape Allah’s wrath on the Day of Resurrection. (It is not permissible for man to say that of which he has no knowledge, all too often, that word becomes a cause of deviation).”

One of the greatest misfortunes which a scholarly man may be afflicted by is feeling ashamed to admit his ignorance when he does not know something. This confession is very easy for an ignorant man, but man evades saying “I do not know” when he is known as an academic. When they ask him something that he does not know, it is hard for him to let the question go unanswered because he fears lest the

people speculate about the authenticity of his scholarly credentials if he does not know the answer to questions.

What wrong is there with saying that I do not know in response to the people's questions? Has it been made incumbent upon the people to know everything? Only Allah knows everything and the others have only used a drop of His knowledge, as has been stated in the Qur'an:

وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ...

“... and you are not given out of knowledge but a little.”⁵

The late ‘Allamah Tabataba’i, may Allah be pleased with him, used to hold class sessions on Thursday and Friday nights which were attended by a number of his students and philosophical and non-philosophical discussions were held. If we had any questions to ask, we used to present them before the class session or along the way [when going back home after class]. One night along the way I asked him a philosophical question. He answered, “I do not know.” I asked a second question, to which he easily replied that he did not know, then after a moment’s reflection, said, “Can a response be presented in this form?” Then, he propounded an agreeable and satisfying answer. That night, he stated, “We ought to compare the things unknown to us with the things known to Allah. It is in that case that we will perceive that we do not know anything and the things unknown to us are like the known to Allah, endless.”

This is the way of those who have been trained in the school of thought of the Prophets (‘a) and the saints [awliya] of Allah, that if they were not certain about anything, they gave a doubtful response. All too often, the answers he used to give us were more convincing than the ones we had, but if he was not certain and fully convinced, he was bound to initially say, “I do not know.” In reality, this way had been attained as a result of fighting against the carnal soul and subduing it.

This is the method of people who have spent sixty or seventy years of their blessed lives along the course of purification of the soul, teaching and learning. In any case, after we have learnt [only] a few words and expressions, it is hard for us to say that we do not know when we return to our cities. We ought to practice and accustom ourselves to easily admitting ignorance when we do not know something, and if we have doubts, to say that what we are offering is a possible response. In this case, we will have freed ourselves from the troubles of the hereafter.

Man’s Biggest Regret On The Day Of Resurrection

“O Abu Dharr! A group of the dwellers of heaven will glance [down] upon the inmates of the fire and ask them, ‘What made you enter hell? Despite that we entered heaven as a result of your teaching and training us.’ In response, they will say, ‘We enjoined others to perform good works but we ourselves did

not do what we advised others to do.’.”

One of the scenes which has been described in the Qur'an is that the dwellers of heaven are at a higher level above the inmates of the infernal hell fire and see them and talk to them, as if paradise is situated at an elevated place and hell is positioned at a low place, and that is why the dwellers of the Garden are at a higher level.

The Qur'an's expression is that sometimes the dwellers of heaven address the dwellers of hell and sometimes the dwellers of hell address the dwellers of paradise:

وَنَادَىٰ أَصْحَابُ الْجَنَّةِ أَصْحَابَ النَّارِ أَن قَدْ وَجَدْنَا مَا وَعَدَنَا رَبُّنَا حَقًّا فَهَلْ وَجَدْتُمْ مَا وَعَدَ رَبُّكُمْ حَقًّا قَالُوا نَعَمْ فَأَذَّنَ مُؤَذِّنٌ بَيْنَهُمْ أَن لَعْنَةُ اللَّهِ عَلَى الظَّالِمِينَ

“And the dwellers of the garden will call out to the inmates of the fire, ‘Surely we have found what our Lord promised us to be true; have you found what your Lord promised to be true?’ They will say, ‘Yes.’ Then a crier will cry out among them that the curse of Allah is on the unjust.”⁶

Yes, as has been recorded in the *hadith*, the dwellers of hell will address a group of the inmates of the Fire saying, “We attained paradise thanks to the guidance, teaching and training which you gave us, what happened to you that you got caught up in Allah’s retribution?” They will respond with regret and remorse, saying, “We did not discharge what we enjoined others to do, we invited you to perform good works but we ourselves did not do what we said. We advised you to fulfill the recommendable works, but we ourselves did not execute them. We guided you away from sin and gossip, but we ourselves got contaminated by sin and gossip. You listened to our words and executed them and earned a place in that lofty abode, but we got entangled in this miserable and painful fate in spite of all our knowledge.”

This remorse and contrition is the destiny of people who did not discharge their obligations. This regret is certainly more painful than burning in divine retribution, because spiritual torture is more painful than physical torture. The pain of rejoicing at an enemy’s failure is more than that of physical torture and burning.

It is painful for man to feel that others found their way to the garden of bliss as a result of his guidance and he got into the predicament of hell despite the fact that he could have attained higher heights by means of his knowledge, and his disciples sit [in heaven] watching him. They are enjoying the pleasures and comforts of the Garden and he is being tormented in the Fire. If he did not have any torment, besides being deprived of the blessings that are at the disposal of his followers, this would be enough for him.

With due attention to the points which have been mentioned in this noble *hadith*, we have to initially correct our intention and embark upon the acquisition of knowledge for [the good pleasure of] Allah and discharging our responsibilities and execute what we say right from the outset so as to make this habit

firm in ourselves and be able to discharge our duties as we acquire more information. If at the outset we build the foundation upon laziness and heedlessness, we initially quit discharging a work and later on another duty until the habit of disobedience gets strengthened in us and fighting against the carnal soul is going to be hard later on.

The Categories Of Scholars In The Words Of ‘Ali (‘a)

“Scholars are of two kinds; the first kind is the scholar whose actions match his knowledge and he becomes prosperous.

“The second type is the academic whose works do not correspond with his knowledge and he falls into perdition and without doubt the dwellers of hell will be bothered by the bad smell of a scholar without good deeds. Verily, the most regretful and remorseful of the people of hell is the person who calls another one towards Allah and the other one accepts the invitation and obeys Allah and thereafter Allah makes him enter paradise, while the caller [himself] is taken to the eternal Fire because of not doing what he said [acting upon his knowledge].”^{[7](#)}

In an inspired *hadith*, Allah addresses Prophet David (‘a):

“The least punishment which I inflict on a scholar without works (good deeds) is harder than seventy punishments or requitals, and that is getting the sweetness of supplication away from him (and after that he does not derive pleasure from remembrance of me)...”^{[8](#)}

^{[1](#)}. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 7, p. 285.

^{[2](#)}. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 27.

^{[3](#)}. Ibid., p. 37.

^{[4](#)}. Ibid., p. 38.

^{[5](#)}. Surat al-Isra’ (or Bani Isra’il) 17:85.

^{[6](#)}. Surat al-A’raf 7:44.

^{[7](#)}. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 2, p. 34.

^{[8](#)}. Ibid., p. 32.

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