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Birr and Abrar

لَنْ تَنَالُوا الْبِرَّ حَتَّىٰ تُنْفِقُوا مِمَّا تُحِبُّونَ ۚ وَمَا تُنْفِقُوا مِنْ شَيْءٍ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ بِهِ عَلِيمٌ

***By no means shall you attain to righteousness until you spend* (*benevolently*) *out of what you love; and whatever thing you spend, Allah surely knows it.* [*Qur'an, 3:92*]**

It was the usual gathering on Saturday evening after *maghrib* and *'isha* prayers in the yard of Seyyid's house and he began his lecture with the recitation of above verse of Qur'an to the limited audience....

He began: 'The word '*birr*' in Arabic has many meanings, all pointing towards righteous deed. Every good deed doesn't fall into the category of '*birr*' or righteous deed. Many human beings do good deeds; however, either because of their intention or the circumstances in which the good deed was done or their words, gestures or actions after doing that deed, it is excluded from being '*birr*'. In the Holy Qur'an, this word is used in different contexts, all of which point to high quality good deeds for the sake of God.

The person who is pious is called '*barr*' in Arabic and its plural is '*abrar*', those who do pious deeds and they have a very high place in heaven. The verse I have recited points to many deeper aspects of human life and the way human beings live and treat each other.

Under normal circumstances, human beings usually help each other because it's the human nature and God has created human beings as such. It is also the custom or norm of a society or people of a locality or members of a family or a group or close friends to help each other and provide support in difficult times. Most of the times, it is a give and take relationship. However, doing a righteous action [*birr*] only for the sake of God is really very difficult, if not impossible, because it is not based on a give and take good done usually.

The prime criterion set by the Holy Qur'an for achieving '*birr*' is that one has to spend or give something in the way of God that is very valuable, something that is highly loved by a person or towards which a person has very much emotional attachment or one is in need of it at the time of giving it in the way of God. It doesn't mean only money or valuable material possession; it can be other things also such as

one's own normal peaceful life, one's daily routine, one's family, one's valuable time, expertise, social prestige, career, and other highly valuable and dear things that one loves more dearly than any other thing.

Secondly, one should not expect anything in return, not even thanks for the good action. One should consider it only a duty carried out for the sake of God's pleasure. One should try to do the good action before the person in need asks for it. This means that one should be aware of those near him and be quick and also search for those in need so that timely help and support can be offered at the right time and to protect self-respect of a person who doesn't like to ask for help. One should make utmost effort to preserve it, keep it a secret until death and protect it from ostentation (*riya*). Finally, one should be thankful and pray for the person to whom he has done good because it was due to him that he was able to do the righteous action.'

He continued.... 'Most of the times good actions are done but the intentions are not clear. Sometimes, because a person likes to do it or it is his habit, while at other times, it is out of external force or pressure such as to save one's prestige or to show one's generosity or to preserve one's social status. Sometimes, it is out of strong emotional feeling while at other times, it is due to a feeling of escape out of anxiety or depression. Sometimes, the intention is known to the doer and seems good to him, but in reality it is not. Sometimes, the good action is done to make a show of it and gain worldly benefit or profit. And sometimes, the intention is also pure for the sake of God and the action is done for the sake of God. However, after sometime, the person cannot protect the good action and makes show of it, talks about it, hints at it to draw someone's attention, or subtly expresses it indirectly by a bodily gesture and so the action no longer remains in the category of *birr*... It is nullified by ostentation, when God doesn't give reward for it and the meager return for that action then comes from creatures.

Another beauty of good action is to do it under the most difficult circumstances, for example, doing the good action right at the time when it should be done even though a person is very tired, under stress, depressed, or under his own personal difficulties or problems. The more severe the difficulty, the better will be the quality of good action and acceptance by God. Another example is to do good and help someone whom a person doesn't like or someone who has harmed or angered him unjustly. Several examples of such good actions are found in the life of Ahlul Bayt (as). In addition, the good action should be done in such a way so as to not make the person who is helped feel ashamed. It should be done secretly. One should also protect that action while one deals with that person or meets him and should not make show of it which is very difficult.

Best example of *birr* is in the life of Ahlul Bayt (as) when Imam Ali (as), Hazrat Fatima (sa), Imam Hasan (as) and Imam Husayn (as) observed fast for three days and gave away their food to needy persons at the time of *iftar* for those three days. They had no food to eat for three days while they fasted. They didn't inform anyone of this highly noble action of self-sacrifice and worship of God until Prophet (swas) was informed by angel Jibraeel and then verses of Qur'an were revealed in praise of their sincere action

for the pleasure of God. God thanked them for their utmost sincere action.....

The reason Qur'an mentions that '*abrar*' are in high place in heavens is perhaps these righteous individuals keep their good deeds hidden and safe from any ostentation, showing off and other such acts that would give a worldly return until their death. However, it doesn't mean that one should not do any good deed openly in a society that is necessary to be done in public or for the sake of rescuing and helping poor or downtrodden people. Here the intention is divine and remains hidden while the deed becomes known to most of the people. Such difficult deeds in this world makes '*abrar*' eligible for divine reward reserved for ''*illiyun*'. The best example of such a great personality is Imam Husayn (as) who did the highest good deed of enjoining the right and forbidding the evil against the despotic tyrant of his time, Yazid, to save Islam and sacrificed his life, his own family members and his loyal friends in Karbala under the most difficult circumstances.

I wish you all try to do only one good action for the sake of God, keep it safe until you die and become *abrar,* the righteous ones God has mentioned in this holy verse. You have to be vigilant and careful while doing it. You have to be careful even after doing it. Make a firm will with sincere intention and pray to God for help, He will help you... I will specially ask few of you who are regular and close to me about your experience of a good action after one year... *Insha'Allah*...'

After the lecture, Seyyid sat on the floor as usual with audience and then looked at some of the university students and smiled. Those students included Sobhan, Qamar, Asad, Bilal, Shahid, Yusuf, Shareef, Ahmad, Mostafa, Ibrahim, Vaheed and Husayn who were very close to him and were among his regular audience. They were from different family and social backgrounds. Several other people were also present and Seyyid's house was always open for anyone seeking advice on different issues.

People then started asking him their questions and seeking his guidance on various personal matters. It was the weekly *tafsir* of Qur'an lecture on Saturday evening after *maghrib* prayers. The students close to Seyyid who were very good friends were now seriously discussing how to taste the righteous action according to the criteria explained by Seyyid. They moved a bit away from where Seyyid was sitting with others so that they could discuss in private. A few minutes later, the dinner was being served but their discussion was continuing. Ahmad said that he has recorded Seyyid's lecture and will email the important points to them. After dinner they went near Seyyid requesting him to pray for them to achieve success and said goodbye to him.

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