Al-Islam.org
Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project
Published on *Al-Islam.org* (https://www.al-islam.org)

Lesson Seventeen: The Criteria by Which Our Deeds will be Judged

Let us now examine how our deeds will be judged and weighed after resurrection. As we have previously remarked, the mental pictures we form of scenes that have no precedent in our lives nor bear any similarity to it will necessarily be imaginary; they will be unable to advance us to the direct perception of the reality in question.

It would be futile were one to expect to trace out in his mind something of the nature and characteristics of the hereafter. For we are now confined in the prison of the world and a clear boundary has been drawn between us and the next world; how might we perceive the splendor and profundity and the perfection of the life that awaits us there? A finite being subject to change cannot possibly conceive an accurate notion of the eternal.

When, therefore, we speak of accounting and judgement in the hereafter, it should not be imagined that this corresponds precisely to the drawing up of dossiers and the investigations and trials that take place in this world. The true nature of the matter is hidden in obscurity, and whatever image we form of it ought to be forgotten.

Those who follow the path of truth know that when we speak of a world which is utterly different from the present one and the means that will be applied there to judge men's deeds with respect to good and evil, it should not be thought that men will be faced with some prosecutor who carefully weighs their deeds in some huge scale, and that then they are given the opportunity to defend themselves before the court issues its verdict for implementation by the executive branch. The concept of the scale or the balance presented in the Qur'an is infinitely more comprehensive than what is implied by this picture. Thus God says:

"He raised the heavens and He placed in all things a balance and means of accounting" (**55:7**).

"At the time of resurrection, We shall set up the scales of justice, and none will be wronged on

that day. Everyone will be requited in accordance with his deeds. We shall take into reckoning the smallest of deeds, even if it be no greater than a mustard grain, for it is We Who shall call them to account" (**21:47**).

"The day of resurrection is in truth the day on which deeds shall be weighed. Those whose good deeds weigh heavy in the balance shall be saved and those whose deeds are slight are those who have wronged themselves by transgressing against the signs and messengers of God" (**7:8–9**).

These verses point out that those who have squandered the capital of their existence will suffer eternal and irredeemable loss, for the loss that results in the corruption of the very essence of man's being is the greatest of all losses and no compensation can be made for it.

It should be remembered that we cannot always apply the criteria with which we are familiar to understanding the words of the Qur'an; we must seek to understand the concepts that underlie them and the results to which they give rise. Moreover, the words to which we have recourse in attempting to explain matters are inevitably defective.

* * * * *

Thanks to the progress of science, man has discovered means for measuring air and blood, the temperature of the body, and electrical currents. However, he does not possess means for measuring the motives and intentions of men's deeds or their good and their evil. It is in the hereafter that means exist for the measurement and assessment of such matters.

Precise criteria and means of measurement exist there for assessing the spiritual and moral dimensions of men's deeds, permitting a division of them into good and evil. In our present circumstances we are unaware of the exact nature of those means, for our knowledge of the mutable world in which we live is derived from the experiences we derived from it. The other world possesses a content and characteristics which are beyond our capacity to perceive directly or even to guess; the possibility of experiencing it is totally excluded.

Hisham relates that he asked Imam as–Sadiq, upon whom be peace, the meaning of the verse, ***"At the time of resurrection, We shall set up the scales of justice"*** (**21:47**).

The Imam replied: "The prophets and the legatees are the scales." (*Bihar al–Anwar,* Vol. VII, p. 252)

What he meant by this was that everyone can measure his own weight and value by comparing his faith and his deeds to theirs.

Even in the present world, there are pure, virtuous and God–fearing persons who represent a criterion of measurement. In this world, however, many realities are hidden; on the day of resurrection, which is the day on which inner realities will become manifest, the nature of the scales will also become apparent. If

the word “scales” is in the plural in the Qur'an, this is because the friends of God, the true exemplars of humanity who furnish the measure against whom all persons should be measured, are several.

A good act has two dimensions, one being its outward effect and the other its relationship to the one who performs it. When examined with respect to the first dimension, its external beneficial effect, the act is seen to have “practical goodness.” When is examined with respect to the second dimension, the spiritual causes that gave rise to it, it is seen to have a “goodness of agent.”

Islam thus establishes criteria for the deeds and conduct of man. Not every deed is acceptable; a deed acquires moral value only when it arises from a pure motive. It is basing one's choices and acts on pure motives, pleasing to God, that enables man to develop himself morally, and it is according to those motives that he is judged.

Sometimes man bows his head in submission to the urgings of his instinctual self acts accordingly. On other occasions he is heedful of God, the source of all being, and reins in his self, satisfied with what God has given him. In the former case he will have permitted the negative dimensions of his nature to flourish, and in the latter case he will have contributed to the growth of his positive and truly human dimensions.

How might these two types of motivation be regarded as equal: one leading to a deed characterized by pure spirituality, and the other to a deed tainted with hypocrisy and deceit?

Those who are heedful of God never forget that God watches vigilantly over their behavior at all times.

The Qur'an says:

“You are never in a state, nor do you ever recite a verse of the Qur'an or engage in any other action, without My being instantly aware of it. Not a single atom in the heavens and the earth is hidden from your Lord; whatever exists, whether smaller than an atom or bigger than it, is recorded in a clear book (***divine knowledge***)***”*** (**10:61**).

Criteria for Establishing the Worth of a Deed

Many people imagine that the worth of a deed depends on the extent of the benefits to which it gives rise. They therefore assign the highest value to a deed which appears to have greatest quantitative benefit.

Such judgements of value are based on external and socially determined criteria, and the intention underlying a given act is never taken into consideration. It makes no difference whether a certain benefactor simply wishes to show off and attract the attention of society or whether he is motivated by considerations of higher order such as a pure and lofty intention.

From a social point of view, therefore, the goodness of an action depends on its benefit to society; the motive underlying it and the purpose informing it are judged immaterial.

From the divine vantage point, however, the quantitative aspect of the deed is not important at all; that which is measured to determine its acceptability to God is the quality of the deed, the nature of the inner motives that led to its performance. If someone embarks on a deed without being inspired by a spirit of truthfulness and without connection to God, the source of all being, and if his motive be hypocritical pretense and the winning of transient fame and respect, the result will be a lowering of his moral status.

Such lowly motivations strip apparently beneficial acts of all sincerity; the acts become like corpses, lifeless and valueless.

To put it differently, they are like tainted goods, quite unacceptable to God, for the author of such acts will have sold his religion in exchange for worldly considerations and will no longer deserve God's gaze of favor and compassion.

When judging the value of a deed, it is therefore totally incorrect simply to examine the degree to which it benefits society; matters cannot be judged in this pseudo-mathematical way.

A deed acquires value from the point of spiritual development only when it acquires a heavenly aspect i.e., is oriented to the divine realm through the flight of the spirit from the narrow cage of the instinctual self and its acquisition of pure sincerity.

Man should become so devoted and attached to God's commands that he submits to them unconditionally; his actions and deeds are done purely for God's sake, his steadfastness in obedience is for God's sake, and His reward is correspondingly with God.

It is a pure intention and aim, one in which the desire to earn God's pleasure is present, that makes man's deeds acceptable to God and enables him to earn lofty rank. The value of a deed is not then absolute, to be measured by some quantitative yardstick or in accordance with human perceptions; it is sincerity of intention that fixes its worth.

When the forces of Islam were readying themselves to fight the enemy at the Battle of Tabuk, they needed financial support. The Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, asked some wealthy individuals to assume the costs of the battle, and each of them contributed to the Muslim army to the extent his resources permitted.

A person by the name of Abu `Aqil al-Ansari was able to earn two pounds of dates by working extra hours at night, and he offered one pound to the Prophet as his contribution. The hypocrites took advantage of the occasion to mock the Muslims by ridiculing Abu `Aqil's contribution. Thereupon a verse was revealed which reprimanded the hypocrites and threatened them with severe punishment in the hereafter. This is the verse:

"Those who on account of their own evil nature find fault with the contributions of obedient believers, who mock those who do not grudge spending in the way of God whatever they are able, God mocks them and He will punish them; a painful torment will be theirs." **(9:79)**.

The Qur'an also says:

"The good deeds of those who have no belief are like a mirage on a flat and waterless plain: the thirsty man imagines it to be water and he hastens towards it, but when he reaches it, he finds nothing." **(24:39)**.

Or again:

"The deeds of those who believe not in God are like ashes that are blown away by a strong wind; no result remains for their strivings. This is misguidance, far removed from the right path." **(14:18)**

"Whosoever wishes to reap the fruit of his deeds in the hereafter, We will bestow on him a reward greater than the outcome of his deeds. Whosoever wishes to reap the fruit of his deeds in this world, We will permit him to enjoy it here in this world, but he shall have no share or portion in the hereafter" **(42:20)**.

The Most Noble Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, said:

"When resurrection comes, a summons will be heard by all on the plain of gathering. The summoner will say: `Where are those who worshipped other human beings? Rise up; go, seek your reward from those whom you desired to please with your acts. I do not accept deeds tainted by worldly intent.'" (*Mishkat al-Anwar*, p. 312)

He also said:

"The value of deeds depends on the intentions underlying them." (*Nahj al-Fasaha,* p. 190)

Concerning the Qur'anic expression, ***"in order that He might test you to see which of you is better in deeds"*** **(67:2)** Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, said:

"What is meant here is not the extent or the quantity of deeds, but the highest degree of righteousness. Righteousness consists of the fear of God, sincerity of intention and purity of deed. To keep a deed utterly sincere and free of all contamination is more difficult than doing the deed itself. A sincere deed is one in which only God's pleasure is sought and not someone's praise. The intention is better than the deed, or is even identical with the deed, for ***"Everyone acts in accordance with his own nature,"*** **(7:84)** which means his intention" (*Usul al-Kafi,* Vol. III, chapter "Ikhlas")

The verses and traditions we have just cited all indicate that from the point of view of the Creator it is the

spiritual state of man that determines whether his acts will be accepted or not, the same spiritual state that man is aware of in himself whenever he performs any deed. This is the criterion by which God measures and which He has communicated to mankind.

The Qur'an says:

"The similitude of those who spend their wealth in God's path and rejoice in God's favor is a seed sown in fertile ground; it receives abundant rain in due season and bears twice the yield that was expected" **(2:265)**.

The more a person's belief in God increases, the more clearly will the signs of sincere devotion become manifest in his conduct, so that the desire to earn God's pleasure comes to prevail over all other wishes.

The Qur'an informs us that the Prophet Sulayman (Solomon), upon whom be peace, addressed God in prayer as follows:

"O God, inspire me to thank you for the bounties you bestowed on me and my parents, and to perform acts that are worthy of Your pleasure" **(27:19)**.

Yusuf (Joseph), that sincere devotee of God, preferred the terrors of prison to rebellion against God and becoming submersed in the whirlpool of lust. Desirous of observing God's commands and preserving thereby his own purity, he prayed:

"O Creator, the pain of prison is better and more pleasant for me than the pollution of sin and rebellion against You" **(12:33)**.

He firmly turned his back on outward freedom that would have drawn him in the direction of sin, proudly choosing a dungeon in which he would enjoy inner freedom and moral purity.

The Commander of the Faithful, `Ali, upon whom be peace, said the following in the course of the counsel he gave to Imam al-Hasan, upon whom be peace:

"Blessed and fortunate is he whose knowledge and action, friendship and enmity, seizing and loosing, speaking and remaining silent, conduct and speech, are all devoted exclusively to gaining the pleasure of God the Unique." (*Tuhaf al-`Uqul,* p. 91)

This represents the highest ideal that might possibly be imagined.

Certain Islamic traditions regard obedience to divine command without any fear of punishment or hope of reward as the special characteristic of those who consider themselves always protected and favored by God. It is they who attain the highest degree of sincere devotion to God and knowledge of Him; they think of nothing but earning God's favor and worshipping Him in obedience. This is indeed the way in which God wishes to be worshipped.

The Commander of the Faithful, `Ali, upon whom be peace, describes this group of men, in a profound and eloquent expression, as “free men.” He says:

“Some men worship God in order to attain reward, and this is the worship of traders. Others worship Him out of fear of punishment, and this is the worship of slaves. But there are others again who worship Him out of gratitude and recognition that He is fit to be worshipped, and this is the worship of free men.” (*Nahj al-Balagha,* ed. Fayd, p. 1182)

Such untainted worship may also be regarded as a general and universal phenomenon, in the sense that every existent phenomenon praises and glorifies God through its implicit proclamation of the purpose for which it was created and its motion toward perfection within its own particular sphere.

Man is an inseparable part of the order of creation and is indeed its most highly developed part, and for him to separate from it would mean his collapse and destruction. He must therefore follow the universal law of nature which is the praise and glorification of God and sanctify all his relations with nature by worshipping the Creator in utter sincerity.

By orienting himself clearly and unambiguously to this aim, man is able to establish complete harmony among all the dimensions of his being and to open the gates of well-being and salvation in this world and the hereafter.

A human action can, then, be regarded as truly good and deserving of reward in the hereafter only when it arises from a pure and sacred motivation that accords with a broad and profound understanding of the universe resulting in sincere worship and an unbreakable link with the Creator. Man will then live in the shadow of God's favor and protection and be truly worthy of functioning as God's vice-regent on earth.

The Commander of the Faithful, `Ali, upon whom be peace, humbly prayed in these terms:

“I ask of you, by Your Sacred Essence and by the greatest of Your blessed names and attributes, that You adorn all the moments of my life, night and day, with the remembrance of You and cause them to pass in service and worship of You. Make my deeds worthy of Your acceptance, so that all my acts and speech are devoted to You in utter sincerity and my inward states are marked by submission to You.

“O Master, O Being upon whom all my trust is placed, and to whom my being complains of its distraught state!

“O God, O God, O God! Strengthen my limbs and members in service to You; bestow firm resolve on my heart; establish the foundations of my being on fear of You; and keep me in everlasting service at Your threshold, so that I may outstrip in devotion to You all who have preceded me; hasten toward Your presence more swiftly than the swiftest, draw nigh to You with a heart overflowing with love; and be sheltered by Your mercy together with the people of sincerity and faith.” (*Du'a Kumayl*)

It is necessary for such utter sincerity to be continuous in order for one's acts to be acceptable to God,

for it is possible at all times that righteous deeds be endangered by the effacement of their positive effects and for their authors thus to be deprived of God's reward.

Thus Imam al-Baqir, upon whom be peace, said:

“The preservation of a righteous deed is more difficult than performing that deed in the first place.” He was then asked: “What is meant by the preservation of the deed?” He answered: “Let us suppose that someone makes a gift of charity in order to earn God's pleasure and to have it recorded in his register of deeds as an act of charity unknown to men. Then he tells someone about what he has done. The reward for hidden charity is annulled for his act will have become public. He then tells someone else of what he has done, and this time sincerity with which he had performed it will be completely annulled, and he register of his deeds will record that his act was hypocritical.” (*al-Kafi,* Vol. II, p. 297)

We should be aware, however, that the effect of a righteous deed disappears and the reward for it become annulled only when the reason for making it publicly known is hypocritical self-display, not a motive of a higher order such as encouraging emulation by others.

The aim of Islam is to create a permanent, unbreakable and all-embracing relationship between man and God, in such a way that man recognizes Him as the authority to which he should turn in all things and the commands and laws of which he should obey in every instant of his life. The presence of this firm and lasting attachment of the heart to God makes all things in life perfect and complete, and its absence reduces all things to meaninglessness and absurdity.

Can anything other than belief in God and the day of resurrection and requital impel man to act in righteousness and sincerity and to shun all forms of personal aim and motivation?

Source URL:
https://www.al-islam.org/resurrection-judgement-and-hereafter-sayyid-mujtaba-musavi-lari/lesson-seventeen-criteria-which-our#comment-0