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Lord we have wronged ourselves and if You do not forgive us, and have mercy upon us, we shall surely be among the lost. (7:23)

In my previous discourse, I explained that repentance is the first step of the devotees on the journey of affinity to God and I promised to mention in this discourse the explanation of Imam Ali (as), peace be upon him, about the conditions and phases of repentance. Before doing so, I wish to answer this question, "When is the time for repentance and when is it accepted?"

A person has the opportunity to repent as long as that person is alive and before death comes. When a person is in the clutches of death, no time is left to be saved through repentance. According to traditional interpretations, this death time is the moment that one feels and sees death and gets a glimpse of the next world.

Repentance in the next world has no meaning for one is not in a position to repent nor can it be real. But the reason why at the time of death repentance is not acceptable, is explained in the Quran.

"Then when they saw Our might, they said: We believe in God alone and we disbelieve in that we were associating with Him. But their belief when they saw Our might did not profit them... (40:84–85)

Why is it so? Because repentance does not mean simply regret or a return from the wrong path due to one factor or another. Repentance is real when an internal revolution takes place in a person, causing a rise against all lustful, evil forces and wicked deeds, and domination over them all.

Seeing divine vengeance approaching and then experiencing belief and repenting is not an internal revolution. The Quran says about Pharaoh,

Till when the drowning overtook him, he said, 'I believe that there is no god but He in whom the Children of Israel believe. (10:90)

As long as Pharaoh alive he acts like a despot and nothing and no counsel convinced him. He resorts to

a contest between his magicians and Moses; he shows more rebelliousness and decides to kill Moses and his tribe. He chases them in their flight and, when he is at the point of drowning in the sea and there is no escape, he repents and expresses his belief in the God of Moses. But it is too late for his repentance to be acceptable for it is not a real, internal revolution. His repentance is only due to his helplessness in a calamity. So they say to him, "Now? When you previously rebelled?" In other words, "Why did you not repent an hour before when you were quite free to do so?" For, then, it would have been a true change of heart. What criminal in the world is not penitent at the moment of punishment? But if he shows a regret and penitence before he is caught, then we can say he is changing spiritually.

Now, as for why repentance in the next world is unacceptable, this is because the criminal witnesses punishment there and the consequence of his deeds and therefore his repentance would not be a true revolution. Moreover, death is like the fall of a fruit from the tree. As long as it is a part of the tree, it is dependent on the air, water and nourishment that the tree obtains. Even an hour before falling, there is the chance for that fruit to become more ripe and sweet but the moment it falls every possibility of development comes to an end for it.

The human being is the fruit of nature with all the potentials for that person to be good or bad. If we adopt worship and devotion, we are being ripened. If we sin, we are plagued like a rotten fruit. Repentance is one of the ways by which one is nourished when one is alive, not in death or after it. All the changes and revolution and ups and downs are connected with this world while in the next world, they all come to an end and stop.

Another example is a baby in the mother's womb. All its nourishment and health are through the mother but the moment it is born, total dependance comes to an end and, a new order is established for its life that is quite different from the previous one. In the next world, too, everything is different from the order of this world.

Imam Ali (as), peace be upon him, says, 'Today is the time of deeds and not reckoning and tomorrow (in the hereafter) is the time for reckoning and not for deeds.' He does not mean that there is no punishment in this world. Some of the misfortunes which befall us are punishments. But again it does not mean that all punishments for wicked deeds are inflicted in this world. Therefore, if one receives no punishment here it does not mean that one is quite chaste and that one's account is clear.

On the other hand, if a happening like a flood destroys people, is it due to their deeds and their punishment in the world? No. The above saying of Imam Ali (as) says that as this world is for deeds and not for reckoning, the next world is for reckoning and not deeds. That is the reason why repentance must take place before death to be valid, that is, it must take place where there is still time and opportunity for it.

God says in the Quran, He promises them and fills them with fancies but there is nothing satan promises then? except delusion. (4: 120)

A man came to Hadrat Imam Ali (as) to repent and when the Imam realized that the man was ignorant of the importance of repentance, he said to him, "Do you know the meaning of repentance? It has an exalted position. It has six conditions for its acceptance and the last two are the conditions of its completion." What are those six points?

The first one is regretting what has passed. It means looking at the dark deed and being so sorry and ashamed of it that it makes your heart burn. The Quran says,

Oh believers, wine and arrow-shuffling, idols and divining arrows are an abomination, some of satan's work, so avoid it; haply you will prosper. (5:90)

Everyone knows how despicable dead flesh is and there is nothing more fitting than comparing backbiting with it. Calumny is in the same category of sins. Some people in accusing others begin their words by the phrase, "It is said," and suppose that in this way they acquit themselves of the sin of calumny and later on they disclaim their remark and say that they have quoted others' words. This too is a sin and the Quran has forbidden it in the following verse.

Those who love that indecency should be spread abroad concerning those who believe there awaits them a painful chastisement. (24:19)

Those who spread accusations of others are committing a great sin. The same applies to unclean glances at people's wives or daughters to the abandonment of prayer and fasting and showing indifference to sacred rites in the months of mourning and fasting. Being inadequately dressed in public is another such sin.

The Prophet in speaking of his ascension says, "I saw women there hung by their hair and beaten with fiery scourges and women who were hung by their breasts and beaten with whips. I asked who they were and was told, "These are the women who exhibited their bodies in public."

Of what worth is this brief span of life to expose oneself to such heavenly punishments. Is it not time to come to oneself, to feel humble and show interest in what is ordained by God? The Quran says,

Is it not time that the hearts of those who believe should be humbled to the remembrance of God and the Truth which He has sent down (57: 16)

What is the use of shedding one tear drop occasionally for appearance's sake instead of repenting and checking ourselves and others from sinning?

The second condition that forms the basis of reference is a decisive resolution not to repeat the foul deed again. Repentance does not depend on the enormity of sin. Every kind of sin, whether big or small, lends itself to repentance provided the Penitent is serious in his or her intention.

One of the two conditions for the acceptance of repentance is to return what belongs to others, whether

it is something that is seized or a right that has been trampled on. It must either be returned itself or, at least, the rightful owner must be given satisfaction. God will not forget him and the same applies to a person who has been backbitten. He must be given satisfaction. He must accept the apology.

I wish to narrate something that concerns myself. I was a young religious student attending a group in which someone started to slander the late Ayatullah Hujjat whose pupil I had been for years. I felt this to be quite wrong but I did nothing about it. One day I went to his house and asked to see him. I was let in and I explained that he had spoken about him behind his back a great deal and had done nothing to stop them. I felt penitent about it and asked for his forgiveness. With the greatness that this man had, he said, "There are two kinds of slander about people like us, one is an insult to Islam and the other concerns our person." I explained that he had not said anything offensive about Islam but had spoken only of his person.

He told me I was forgiven.

In repentance everything that is unlawfully acquired belongs to others whether it is a religious task, bribery or any illegitimate gain or any damage done and it must be repaid and amended so that the rightful owner or the person who has received the damage should be satisfied. If you have nothing left to give back and for example the rightful owner is no longer living, seek forgiveness from God. God willing, He will make that person satisfied. Similarly, heavenly rights must also be restored. What are heavenly rights? If you have failed to observe the fast or perform your ritual prayer or failed to make your obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca in spite of being able to bear it physically and financially, you must make up for all these failures. This is the second condition for the acceptance of your repentance.

A lady who attended one of my discourses had written to me saying that she was deeply influenced by my remarks about a total change of heart. She confessed that inspite of the higher education and her job as the head of a school, she was unfortunate enough not to be properly acquainted with the Quran and she asked for guidance and advice.

Allow me to give a general answer. It is necessary for every Muslim to know Arabic in order to understand the Quran and his own prayer. But as it happens English is at present the international language and a means of increasing one's income and every school boy and girl is taught that language, while Arabic is entirely neglected even though it is religiously and spiritually greatly needed by us.

The next point Imam Ali (as), peace be upon him, mentioned about the condition for the acceptance of repentance is to rid oneself of all the flesh that has grown on one by illegitimate means. This requires the mortification of the flesh, abstinence and self-discipline. It means benefitting from what is legitimate, honest and proper.

My father narrated that the late Razavi Khorasani, who was a religious sage, had a very corpulent body. In the last years of his life he met a devout ascetic and through his influence, he decided to get rid of his extra flesh to such an extent that he became quite lean and thin. I am not so insolent as to say that his

fatness was due to lose living, but anyhow he himself had come to the conclusion that a religious person must not be so corpulent.

The last condition that I wish to explain is to let the body which has tasted the sweetness of sin, also taste the pain of deviation and worship. Fasting is not an easy matter especially if you spend the night in prayer. The Quran in speaking of repentance mentions the following points:

God loves those who repent and He loves those who cleanse themselves. (2:222)

This means that you must cleanse yourself not only physically but also spiritually. The Prophet was a fine example of both kinds of cleanliness.

The Quran also speaks of reforming oneself in connection with repentance.

And he who repents, after his evil doing and makes amends, God is All-compassionate. (5:39)

I have already mentioned that sometimes one half of a person rebels against the other half and this rebellion may be by the lower side of a person such as his lust, anger or devilry or by his higher side like his intellect, conscience, his true nature and his depth of heart.

Those who have suffered sexual deprivations in the name of worship and virtue suddenly turn into libertines and make rebels of themselves. But a revolution which is started by a belief in God by recognizing the higher side of the human being, is holy and accompanied by reform.

One of the peculiarities of the Prophets as compared with other human leaders is that their revolution is different from a revolution begun by leaders in a society. The latter manage only to arouse one group or class against another class or classes of society and equip them with the means or vanquishing the adversaries. This kind of revolution has its use in cases where a class of oppressors and a class of the oppressed have come into existence. Calling upon the oppressed to seize the right is human and this action has been both recommended and carried out by Islam and all the Prophets. One of the testaments of Imam Ali (as), peace be upon him, to his two sons, was, "Always be an enemy of an oppressor and an ally of the oppressed."

But what revolutionary leaders are unable to do what Prophets can do is to arouse the human being against the self and make him or her repent, they can also make the oppressors rise against their own wicked deeds. You meet many figures like Abu Sufiyan and Abu Jahl in the history of Islam against whom the poor and weak people have arisen and also tyrants like these have rebelled against themselves.

Imam Musa ibn Ja'far was passing through a market in Baghdad. He heard the sound of music and merry-making from a house. As he was passing by it, he saw a girl servant coming out with a bucket of rubbish. He asked her whether the owner of the house was a free man or a slave. The girl was surprised at this question and answered that he was naturally a free man and a man of consequence in that town.

It took her some time before she returned to the house. The master asked her why she had been away so long. She told him about her talk with the man and gave a description of him. She said that his last remark was that if the master of the house did not consider himself a free man, he would not engage in such revelry and merry–making.

The man realized by her description that the man was none but the Imam. He gave himself no time even to put on his shoes and hurried to the door, bare-footed to see the Imam. He ran in the direction that he was told the Imam had taken and on catching up with him, knelt down and said, "You were quite right. I am a slave but I knew it not. I want from this hour to be God's slave and begin again with my repentance."

He returned home and threw away all the means of revelry and from then on he walked the streets of Baghdad in his bare feet receiving the nickname, 'the barefooted Bashar'. He was asked the reason for not wearing shoes and he answered, "As I had the honor of meeting the Imam as I am now I wish to preserve the memory of it by going bare–footed."

Concerning the affair of the Jewish tribe of the Bani Quraida who had acted treacherously against Islam and the Muslims, the Prophet decided to settle the question for good. They asked him to dispatch Abul Babah who had an inclination towards them for consultation. The Prophet agreed and sent him to them. He betrayed this trust by some remark which was in favor of the Jews and against the Muslims. As he was returning to Medina he felt ashamed of his action and went home, not to see his wife and children, but to get a piece of rope to go to the mosque of the Prophet. He tied himself to a pillar and cried, "Oh God I will not untie myself until my repentance is accepted." Only at the time of ritual prayers or to ease nature did his daughter untie him tor a few moments and gave him some food and again he asked to be bound, spending long hours lamenting and regretting what he had done and wishing to be dead unless he was absolved from his sin.

They reported this to the Prophet and he said, "If he had come to me I would have begged God to forgive him but as he has made a direct request of God, He will deal with him." After two or three days, divine revelation informed the Prophet that Abul Babah was forgiven. When the people of Medina heard this, they poured into the mosque to release him but he requested the Prophet to do so, which he did.

Those who have made a pilgrimage to Medina know that on one of the pillars of the Prophet's mosque it is written, 'pillar of repentance'. This is the pillar where Abul Babah repented and in his time it was a wooden column. After his absolution, Abul Babah, as a sign of gratitude offered all his wealth to be used in the way of God but the Prophet did not agree. He offered two–thirds of it. Again the Prophet refused. For the third time he offered one third and the Prophet agreed. This was just since Abul Babah had the duty of supporting his family.

It is narrated that a man died and the Prophet went to perform his burial prayer. He asked how many children the man had and what wealth he had left. They said he was well-off but had given away his

wealth for charity before his death. The Prophet said, "If I had known this before, I would not have prayed for him since he has bequeathed hungry children to society."

It is also said that if a sick man intends to leave more than one third of his wealth to charity, his bequest is not acceptable since he has done so on his death bed even if this is not done by bequest but as an ordinary act of transfer.

I have discussed the question of repentance throughout these nights hecause these sacred nights of staying awake are the best time for penitence and begging God's forgiveness so that you may be absolved from your sins. But in this repentance all the conditions that I mentioned before must be fulfilled.

Another example of repentance was Zuhair ibn al Qain who became a companion of Imam Husain, peace be upon him. He was one of the followers of Uthman who believed that Imam Ali (as), peace be upon him, God forbid, had a hand in the murder of Uthman. He was returning from Mecca to Iraq and as Imam Husain, peace be upon him, was taking the same route, he wondered whether he should meet the Imam or not. As he was at heart a true believer he feared that the Imam, as the grandson of the Prophet, might ask him something which he would be unwilling to perform which would be very bad so he kept away from the Imam. But in one of the stopping places on their way they happened to alight by a well at the same time. The Imam sent someone to bring Zuhair to him. Zuhair, as the head of the tribe, was dining in his tent with his family and companions. He went pale on hearing the summons and said, "What I did not wish for has happened."

He did not know what to say. He had a wife full of belief who said to him, 'Are you not ashamed by showing hesitation in obeying the call of the Prophet's grandson which you should consider an honor? Go at once.' Zuhair unwillingly arose and went to meet the Imam. No one knows what passed between them but when Zuhair returned he looked quite a different man. He was now very cheerful and happy. We do not know how the Imam transformed him but a holy revolution had taken place in him. At once he started giving instructions about his will concerning his wealth and members of his family and hastened to join the Imam. In Karbala he was in the front line of the Imam's followers, where he achieved martyrdom with them all. When his wife sent a servant with a shroud for his body, the servant saw a shameful sight. They discovered that not only Zubair's body but also his master's body lacked a shroud.

In conclusion I pray to God for a good end for us all and for the chance of true repentance by us and forgiveness by Him.

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