

Status of a sincere servant of God

From: *Provisions of the Journey Vol.2*, by Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi

O Abu Dharr! Your Lord boasts on account of three individuals over the angels; the first person that Allah praises over the angels is a man who recites the adhan and the iqamah in the midst of the desert and performs his ritual prayers. Allah tells his angels, 'Look at my servant maintaining the prayers regardless of the fact that no human being sees him.' Then, seventy thousand angels descend and act in accordance with him and seek forgiveness for him until the following day.

And [Allah boasts on account of] a person who wakes up from sleep at night to pray and prostrate before Allah and then falls into sleep while in the state of prostration. Allah states, 'O angels! Look at my servant whose soul is in my presence and whose body is in prostration.'

And [Allah boasts on account of] a man in the battlefield who is deserted by his companions but remains steadfast in fighting until he is killed

There is no doubt that among all his creatures, Allah, the Exalted, has made man enjoy certain distinctions and characteristics which are not to be found in other creatures. Among material creatures, He has made man enjoy the blessings of the intellect, reason and awareness. Furthermore, Allah created man having free will and self-determination such that he chooses the path of his prosperity or affliction of his own volition. Man enjoys the benefits of a divine natural disposition by means of which he is inclined towards all good values, merits and virtues and He has also shown him the way towards prosperity.

However, neither does that existential dignity bring about man's superiority over the angels nor his volition, because it is possible that instead of choosing the course of merit and prosperity, man may select the way of disobedience and wretchedness and deviate from the right course, fall into misguidance and become the lowest of creatures.

That which causes the status of man to rise higher than that of the angels and brings about his superiority is carrying out the orders of Allah and making effort to traverse the course of perfection by traveling the path of spirituality and eventually attaining perfection. That is, on the basis of his divine inclination, the human being must pursue the path of prosperity and trample his carnal desires underfoot and moderate his materialistic instincts.

When man, who has animalistic and materialistic inner faculties which incessantly pull him towards attention to material and animalistic gratifications, controls his animal faculties, selects what is right and acts on the basis of his divine predisposition when confronted with the choice between right and wrong, he becomes adored by the angels and his rank becomes higher than their status

A great deal of lessons can be learnt from this part of the *hadith*: the purport of Allah's boasting over the angels on account of some of His servants is due to their possessing values which are very invaluable in the viewpoint of Allah and if there were other characteristics which bring about more perfection for mankind and draw man to closer proximity with Allah, He would have mentioned them. When He wants to make known to the angels the high rank of some of His servants and to take pride in them, He in truth makes known the best of their values.

Now, we ought to see what common characteristics and qualities these three types of Allah's servants possess—the one who maintains his prayers with all its norms and recommendations in the wilderness far from the eyes of other human beings, that man who wakes up from his comfortable bed and embarks upon worship and supplication of Allah, and also the person who stands alone against a multitude of enemies and resists to the last breath of his life so as to be granted this extent of superiority and high rank by Allah. Without the least doubt characteristics such as spending wealth in the way of Allah, freely giving what is needed for the pleasure of Allah, performing acts of worship, and other good works which the divine revealed law has recommended are all valuable and bring about perfection in man, but we ought to observe what characteristics these three groups of human beings have and what common elements exist among them that cause them to be so highly emphasized.

The common characteristic and element among these three groups of people is aloneness; the first person worships Allah far from the eyes of other human beings and the second one wakes up from sleep alone in the middle of the night to invoke Allah and the third person stands alone in the battlefield in front of the enemy. Allah does not take pride in the prayer which a person maintains in the local or Friday mosque but instead takes pride in the prayer of a person who maintains prayer alone in the wilderness and the man who stands up to the enemy alone regardless of the fact that all his companions have taken flight from the battleground. It is likely that an individual might have taken part in many battles and skirmishes and have a great deal of courage and bravery and might have also produced victories and glory, but still despite all this emphasis is laid on a person who has remained alone and even so continues to discharge his duty.

The Role of Independence and Sincerity of Intention

a) Independence

Two important factors called independence or liberty (being free from the influence of other people) and sincerity have brought about the lofty values for the undertakings of these three types of individuals in solitude.

In explanation of the first factor, that is to say independence, it must be said that by and large people submit to the influence and conduct of other people. One of the characteristics of man is that once he perceives a group of people proceeding along a certain course and following a particular type of behavior, he as well drifts in that direction and becomes inclined to that habit. It seems as though the movement and tendency of other people is a factor which helps man to choose his course of direction and progression. Once he observes a group of people making

strides along the path of good and wellbeing, he also follows suit. Of course, this is a sign of man's weakness and Allah has put this factor in man's nature so that those who are weak may traverse the right path by following righteous people. Unfortunately, these people also fall under the influence of bad elements and all too often being attached to other human beings becomes a cause for them to proceed on the path of falsehood. As a result of imitating other people they change their colors and in order not to be disgraced or stigmatized, they acquire the same habits that are prevalent in the society.

Man is encouraged to do praiseworthy deeds when he sees other people doing the same but, once alone, he raises pretexts for himself and there is no inclination as such in his inner being to impel him to make a decision. In any case, he finds every possible excuse to put off doing that job. Or, once he sees that lights are on late at night in the rooms of other students and everyone is busy studying, the eagerness to study arises in him and he too studies for hours on end but when it is time for holidays and there is no one in school except himself, there is no longer that inner pull within and he does not have the desire at all, either. That which has been mentioned were only examples and there are a great number of other examples to be found in our social and political conduct.

The factor for this sluggishness and dependence on others is weakness of resolution and faith. Does a deed acquire value when done by others? Does it lose its value when not done by others? If the Supplication of Kumayl has value, we ought to strive to recite it in privacy and solitude as well, not only when a public session is organized. It is a sign of weakness in man to become motivated to only recite the Supplication of Kumayl when he sees other people doing so or only to go to the mosque for Friday prayers when he sees others doing the same. This is not a thing to take pride in. The cause of pride for a person is worship in private when no one sees what we distinguish as a duty—not expecting other human beings to accompany us as we worship.

One of the *hadiths* which Jabir narrates from Imam al-Baqir (‘a) is the following: “You will not be one of our friends unless you become such that if the people of your city unanimously oppose you and say, ‘You are a bad person’, you do not become offended and angry, and if all of them say, ‘You are a very good man’, you will not become happy, rather you must evaluate yourself according [to the standards of] the Book of Allah and if you perceive yourself moving along the path of that Book and you renounce what that Book has recommended that you abstain from, and incline towards what it has advised, and fear what it has warned you against, persevere and be glad because what people say will not harm you.

Therefore, the first factor [for encouraging deeds in solitude] is that Allah loves a believer who is independent in distinguishing his duties and also in carrying out his deeds and who does not wait for others nor endeavor to have the same habits as the crowd. Of course, it should not to be mistakenly imagined on account of what has been said that a human being ought to always be alone and move against other people all the time and always do the opposite of what everyone is doing.

This is an unacceptable and reproachable habit that is very foolish. That which is being asserted is that man ought to be independent in decision making, distinguishing duties and acting upon them and not wait for the encouragement, accompaniment and confirmation of other people. However, it is good and pleasing if once he has made a decision, other people accompany him, too.

Nevertheless, a person must not be such that once he has determined something to be his duty and later on finds out that he has made a mistake, persists right up to the end; this is an unbecoming habit and an obstinate mental condition. Man has to always re-examine his morals, conducts and thoughts and admit his errors with all his courage once he perceives that he has made mistakes and not stubbornly persist in his blunders nor insist on his erroneous remarks. A believer acts on what is right once guided to it.

b) Sincerity of Intention

The second factor which causes Allah's pride on account of the three groups of His slaves is sincerity of intention. A person who recites his prayers alone in the desert is not tainted by ostentation and sanctimony. There is no one watching so as to observe him and relate what he is doing to other people. With all certainty, the sincerity of such an individual is more than that of a person who discharges his duties in the presence of others.

If one recites his prayers with all its formalities in the presence of a number of people, there is the possibility of Satan tempting him because the devil is extremely deceitful and no matter how much a person has engaged in self-purification, there is still the possibility of being defeated by the devil and hypocrisy may appear in his heart and he might become pleased that other people are witnessing his deeds or hearing his voice.

However, when he is alone in the desert and recites *adhan* and *iqamah* and then recites the prayers, it is not possible for him to be ostentatious. Also, a person who wakes up in the middle of the night in the absence of any witnesses and embarks upon worshipping Allah and prostrates so long that he falls asleep is not likely to be sanctimonious because there is no one to observe what he is doing.

A person who remains alone on the battlefield and fights single-handedly is not likely to be hypocritical since there are no companions to cheer him saying how much courage he has and to narrate his gallantry to other people after he has attained martyrdom—the enemy will obviously not recount his bravery.

Therefore, the other common characteristic existing among those three individuals which is the cause of Allah's pride is the utmost sincerity of intention that exists in their deeds which has purified them from ostentation and sanctimony.