



Devil in the Details: An Analysis of the Dark Side of the Self

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Abstract

The ability to distinguish between right and wrong is an essential skill in the life of a Muslim. But what makes something good or evil may often come down to a very subtle distinction—the devil really is in the details, both literally and figuratively. Often such distinctions are rooted in the consciousness, or ‘soul,’ of a human being. Each person has an aspect of the Self, called *nafs ammarah bi-su*’, that instigates them to commit evil deeds and which is exploited by Satan and his devils in their battle against the believers and the forces of good. This article offers an analysis of this dark side of the Self. It conceptualizes the *nafs ammarah bi-su*’ and the resulting spiritual struggle, or *jihad*, against it. Then, commonly understood virtues are contrasted with their subtly corrupted counterparts: love of Allah vs. love for other than Allah, reverence vs. hypocrisy, inspiring gratitude vs. boasting, friendly competition vs. envy, authentic leadership vs. love of authority, reliance upon Allah vs. laziness, advising vs. condemning, and esteem vs. pride. The purpose of this research is to equip us with knowledge and tools we can use to help us succeed in the *jihad* within.

Introduction

The transformation of the human soul, from a state enshrouded in darkness to the light of faith, should be the most important personal struggle of every Muslim. Every human individual’s soul has characteristics of both good and evil, and authentic spiritual transformation involves confronting the dark side of the Self known as *nafs ammarah bi-su*’, the aspect of the human soul, or ego, that suggests evil.

The first step in this journey is simply to become aware of the nature of the self, its light and its dark sides. As if awakening from a slumber, a person must acknowledge his or her own potential to succumb to malevolent forces. Everyone has a predatory nature inclining to aggression and a gluttonous nature inclining to desire and appetite, as well as a moral nature inclining to charity and a spiritual nature inclining to the Divine. Accepting these facts at the start sets the stage for

the internal battle against Satan and his relentless attempts to take advantage of a human being's dark side by evil whisperings and suggestions (*al-waswasah*).

Becoming conscious of these sinister urges is crucial to a person's success on their spiritual journey toward Allah in the Hereafter. Through daily acts of worship such as prayer, remembrance, reciting the Qur'an, and contemplation—according to their inward and outward etiquettes—a Muslim cultivates mindfulness of Allah and an awareness of their own inner states of being, polishing the mirror of the heart from the rust of sin and allowing divine light to reflect off themselves into the world.¹ Islamic acts of worship, properly practiced, result in good character and the acquisition of virtues such as authentic love, patience, compassion, and temperance.

This spiritual transformation involves a constant struggle against the lower nature of the soul. Mindfulness of Allah is a state of being we must constantly maintain, returning to it again and again, through worship and vigilant self-examination; the potential for relapse into sin exists until the end of life itself. The bell will only ring, so to speak, at the moment the soul is separated from the body. When we lower our guard or fall back into negligence, it creates an opening in our lines of defense for Satan to exploit. Even small holes in our mental fortress can easily burst into chasms that allow the enemy's soldiers to storm the castles of our hearts.

According to Ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597 H):

Indeed, Iblis (Satan) only enters people by the measure he is able. His ability to do so is increased or decreased according to the degree of their mindfulness, their negligence, their ignorance, and their deeds. Know that the heart is like a fortress. Upon that fortress are walls and the walls have gates, and in it are chambers in which the mind resides. The angels often visit that fortress. To its side are siege towers, in which are desires and devils frequently occupying them, with none to stop them. War is declared between the inhabitants of the fortress and

¹ For more on mindfulness from an Islamic perspective, see Justin Parrott's "How to be a Mindful Muslim: An Exercise in Islamic Meditation." *Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research*. November 21, 2017. yaqeeninstitute.org/en/justin-parrott/how-to-be-a-mindful-muslim-an-exercise-in-islamic-meditation/

*the inhabitants of the siege towers. The devils continuously circle around the fortress, seeking the negligence of the guards and passage into some of its chambers. Thus, the guards should know all of the gates of the fortress, upon which its protection depends.*²

In the event Satan gains access to our intellect, thereby utilizing the dark side of the self for his purposes, we must learn how to reclaim our inner territory. The first step can be the most difficult, especially if a person has not cultivated the mindfulness necessary to recognize the subtlest of evil changes in their mind, heart, and behavior. People might be under the control of Satan without even realizing it, mistakenly thinking they are actually righteous or ‘good’ people.

The Prophet ﷺ said about some forms of evil, such as ostentation (*al-riya'*), that “it is more inconspicuous than the creeping of ants.”³ Ignorance of this evil inside of us enables Satan to take control of the dark side, as if he were riding a horse with its reins, diverting us in whichever direction he pleases while cloaking his evil pursuits with noble appearances and soaring rhetoric. In such a situation, we are deceived by his use of the *nafs 'ammarah bi-su'* into being content with our current state, thinking that we are relatively ‘good’ individuals and rationalizing our misbehavior. Yet being a truly ‘good’ person is never possible without strong, active, and sustained effort.

The initial state of the self is characterized as *nafs ammarah bis-su'*, in need of divine guidance for transformation. Allah ﷻ said, speaking through the Prophet Joseph عليه السلام, “Verily, the self inclines toward evil, except for those upon whom my Lord has mercy.”⁴ That is, our egos incline to evil by default, unless Allah guides us to what is good. Every day, a person enters into the battlefield with their dark side, their lowly desires, and Satan. If we have no awareness of how these forces are at work inside of us every day, or that a battle is even taking place, then

² Ibn al-Jawzī. *Talbīs Iblīs* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr lil-Tibā'ah wal-Nashr, 2001), 36.

³ Al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-Adab al-Mufrad* (al-Rīyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif lil-Nashr wal-Tawzī', 1998), 1:377 #716; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the comments.

⁴ Sūrat Yūsuf 12:53.

we will be handed a resounding defeat. In such a state of unmindfulness, Satan plays with us “just as a child plays with a ball.”⁵

More insidious than simple unmindfulness, the devil also has a tendency to decorate our evil behavior with a veil of delusional self-righteousness, such that we do not even acknowledge or recognize the sinfulness of our deeds. As Allah said about the idolatrous tribes of ‘Ad and Thamud, “Satan beautified their deeds to them and barred them from the right path, though they were capable of insight.”⁶ Despite the sharp minds that they had been blessed with, Satan was still able to trick them into viewing their vices as good and justified. They were simply honoring the gods of their forefathers, they claimed. If they had reflected upon the signs of Allah delivered to them by the Prophets Hud and Salih عليهما السلام they would have realized that their gods, and the lowly desires they represented, were false. Instead, they rationalized their sins by appealing to the authority of their cultural heritage, succumbing to the fallacy of *argumentum ad verecundiam*.

This self-deception is quite subtle and hidden; it begins with a noble thought that becomes distorted over time by a constant stream of negative inward propaganda, when we are neglectful and unmindful of what the self is really suggesting to us. In this case, ‘Ad and Thamud claimed they only wanted to respect their forefathers, which is normally a good thing to do. But respecting one’s forefathers is not the same as accepting all of their ways wholesale, both good and evil. When the Prophets challenged their ways, they became defensive and doubled down on their worship of idols. They heard the little voice of their conscience speaking to them, but they chose to ignore it to the point that it was drowned out completely by the negative thoughts they nurtured.

All of us are vulnerable to such deception by Satan, his devils, and their whisperings. For instance, one might start out with the intention to sincerely advise another person for their own benefit, but the conversation quickly devolves into harshness, condemnation, or even damnation. Egos are challenged on both sides, feelings are hurt, vengeance is lusted for. Another person might begin an endeavor

⁵ Ibn Qudāmah al-Maqdisī. *Mukhtaṣar Minhāj al-Qāṣidīn* (Dimashq: Maktabat Dār al-Bayān, 1978), 178.

⁶ Sūrat al-ʿAnkabūt 29:38.

with an appropriate zeal for the sake of Allah, but it rapidly thereafter degenerates into extremism for the sake of the world. In these cases, a good initial spiritual state later morphs into a negative outcome. If we turn our attention away from our inward realities and are ignorant of the stratagems of Satan and his devils, we are in danger of becoming deluded by our own sense of self-righteousness, which is in reality merely a veil for a much darker part of ourselves.

In the following section, we will explore some of the means used by Satan to deceive us about our own deeds, intentions, and spiritual states, by taking our righteousness of purpose and disfiguring it into an evil purpose to which we are blinded.

Devil in the Details

The battle to rid oneself from the influences of the *naḥs* ‘*ammaraḥ bi-su*’, one’s lowly desires, and the influence of Satan and his devils is a spiritual *jihad*, known as *mujahadah*. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The one who wages *jihad* is he who wages *jihad* against himself.”⁷ ‘Umar ibn Abdul Aziz رحمه الله said, “The best *jihad* is the *jihad* against desires.”⁸ And Sufyan al-Thawri رحمه الله said, “The most courageous of people are the strictest in controlling their desires.”⁹ The most important fight in this world is not against other people, but against our own desires and the devils who manipulate them.

Our most precious possession in this fight is our sincerity to Allah (*al-ikhlas*), the very essence of our faith. Hence, it is ultimately Satan’s primary target, the veritable king on the chess board. Ibn al-Qayyim asserts:

For among the most difficult things for the self at rest is to purify its deeds from Satan and the naḥs ammaraḥ for the sake of Allah. If even a single deed of it was accepted as it should be, He would be generous

⁷ Al-Tirmidhī. *Sunan al-Tirmidhī* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ġarb al-Islāmī, 1998) 3:217 #1621; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) according to Al-Tirmidhī in the comments.

⁸ Ibn Muḥliḥ al-Maqdisī. *Al-Ādāb al-Shar‘īyah wa Minaḥiḥ al-Mar‘īyah* (al-Riyāḍ: Dār ‘Ālam al-Kutub, n.d), 3:131.

⁹ Ibid.

*to him. But the nafs ammarah and Satan refuse to let even a single deed reach Allah.*¹⁰

He then quotes an aphorism from an unknown spiritual master “who had knowledge of Allah and of himself,” indicating that knowledge of the psychological self is itself an important branch of divine gnosis. The spiritual master said, “By Allah, had I known that just one action of mine had reached Allah, I would be more excited for death (and thus Paradise) than a long-absent person is excited to return to his family.”¹¹ This is not to say one should wish for death, but only to illustrate the importance of sincerity.

From here we will examine various virtues and inward good deeds to demonstrate how the *nafs ammarah bi-su'* and Satanic whisperings can corrupt our spiritual state, changing something righteous into something evil. Identifying these subtleties will help us uncover the enemy's stratagems in the *jihad* within, thereby giving us an edge over them. This knowledge allows us to engage in the internal spiritual conflict consciously and deliberately, to go on the offensive rather than merely playing defense, which greatly increases our chances of a decisive victory, with Allah's help.

1) Love for Allah vs. Love for other than Allah

This distinction is the most important of all because love for Allah is the essence of *Tawhid* (dynamic monotheism) and loving others besides or alongside Allah is the essence of *Shirk* (idolatry, or betraying the divine covenant). Love, in this context, is not simply a feeling, rather it is how we act based upon our ultimate concerns in life. To truly love something or someone is to take it or them as one's ultimate concern, to place it or them at the highest point on one's hierarchy of values and priorities. If we are not always critically examining and reexamining the

¹⁰ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah. *Al-Rūḥ fī al-Kalām 'alā Arwāḥ al-Amwāt wal-Aḥyā'* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 1975), 228.

¹¹ Ibid., 228.

manifestations of our love, Satan can quite easily trick us into believing our misplaced ‘love’ for something besides Allah is righteous and justified.

Love for Allah

Love for other people for the sake of Allah necessarily stems from love for Allah in the heart. When an individual’s heart is filled with love for the Divine, then it naturally follows that he or she will love whatever and whoever Allah loves. Allah loves to see His Names and Attributes reflected in this world. Thus, love for the sake of Allah is loving everything that reflects Divine qualities.

Love is part of the essence of Allah Himself, as expressed by His name *Al-Wadud*, the Loving. According to Al-Baydawi, the believers manifest their love for Allah by treating people as they would like to be treated:

*‘The Loving’ is a rhetorical form derived from ‘affection.’ It means He who loves goodness for all creatures and is benevolent to them in every circumstance... The portion given from Him to the servant is that he wants for the creation what he wants for himself and he is benevolent with him according to the best of his power and ability, and he loves the righteous among His servants.*¹²

We love people who stand for justice, because Allah is the Most Just. We love those who show mercy, because Allah is the Most Merciful. We love those who are kind, because we recognize that they are a vehicle for Allah’s Kindness. We love our families, because we know Allah loves for families to be together.

Even if we hate a person’s sinful deeds and acts of oppression, we should still love for them to turn back in repentance, because Allah loves repentance. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The best of faith is to love for the sake of Allah, to hate for the sake of Allah, and to work your tongue in the remembrance of Allah.” It was said, “How is that?” The Prophet ﷺ said, “That you love for people what you love for yourself, and you hate for them what you hate for yourself, and that you speak

¹² Al-Baydāwī. *Tuḥfat al-Abrār Sharḥ Maṣābīḥ al-Sunnah* (al-Kuwayt: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-al-Shu’ūn al-Islāmīyah, 2012) 2:48.

goodness or remain silent.”¹³ That is, to ‘hate for the sake of Allah’ is the inverse of love for the sake of Allah. If we love for people to be guided and righteous, we should hate for them to be misguided and sinful. That does not mean we hate them as if we wanted to harm them; one should hate sin itself, not sinners. Indeed, a classical tactic of Satan is to convince a person that their malicious actions and intentions are really self-righteous indignation for Allah’s sake.

Love for others besides Allah

Love for others besides or alongside Allah occurs when our love stems from a motivation that is separate from the Divine pursuit. Depending on the form, it may be a benign and permissible love but it can also potentially lead to spiritual ruin, if not physical harm. Forbidden love results when the object of love, whether it is a person, animal, place, or thing, is contrary to the individual’s love for Allah. This type of love can be entirely destructive to a person’s faith or it could merely represent a character flaw.

When love for anything other than Allah is elevated to the state of ‘*ibadah*, or worship, which is a love that elevates something to the ultimate concern in one’s life, then it has nullified one’s faith in Allah. Allah said, “Among people are those who take partners besides Allah. They love them as they should love Allah.”¹⁴ If this misplaced love is not at the level of worship, but is in opposition to a person’s love for Allah, then it is a symptom of imperfect faith.

This latter category generally involves spouses, children, wealth, cars, food, homes and properties, as Allah said:

*Beautified for people is the love of that which they desire, of women and children, heaped-up sums of gold and silver, fine branded horses, cattle, and tilled land. That is the enjoyment of the worldly life but Allah has with Him the best return.*¹⁵

¹³ Ibn Ḥanbal. *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 36:445 #22130; declared authentic due to external evidence (*ṣaḥīḥ li ghayrihi*) by Al-Arnā’ūt in the comments.

¹⁴ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:165.

¹⁵ Sūrat Ālī ‘Imrān, 3:14.

We naturally love our families, which is permissible and beneficial if it results in good deeds. Allah loves for family members to love each other. But if our love for our families causes us or them to neglect our relationship with Allah, or leads us or our families into sin, this type of love is forbidden. As Allah said, “O you who believe, let not your wealth and your children distract you from remembrance of Allah.”¹⁶ The type of love that distracts one from the remembrance of Allah is not authentic love because it disregards the spiritual well-being of oneself and those they think they ‘love.’

In sum, love can be experienced in three different ways:

1. Love for the sake of Allah: required by faith and wholly good;
2. Natural love: permissible and neither good nor bad in itself; and
3. Love for what displeases Allah: forbidden and inauthentic.

Key Distinctions

Love and hatred are powerful emotions within the human being that must be actively monitored in order to prevent their misplacement. ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab رضي الله تعالى عنه said, “Let not your love be infatuation and let not your hatred be destruction.” It was said, “How is this?” ‘Umar replied, “When you love someone, you become infatuated like a child. When you hate someone, you love destruction for your companion.”¹⁷ Our love for something should never let us neglect our relationship with Allah, and our hatred for something should never result in a desire to harm others.

The perfection of *tawhid* is to ensure that everything in a person’s life is organized according to their love for Allah. This means that the variation in degrees of love should be based on their variation in closeness to Allah. People, places, and things in this world that bring you closer to Allah or enable you to better connect with Allah should be more beloved to you than things that are neutral. People, places, and things that hinder our relationship with Allah, or have negative influences upon us, should be avoided and actively removed from our lives. If we are not

¹⁶ Sūrat al-Munāfiqūn 63:9.

¹⁷ Al-Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-Adab al-Mufrad*, 1:744 #1322; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the comments.

aware of our priorities in regards to love, Satan can easily send this fundamental human force in the wrong direction.

There are two parameters that determine how much love a person should have if it is to be truly for Allah's sake. The first is how much that object embodies the Qualities of Allah, and the second is how much it or they bring you closer to Allah ﷻ. The Prophet ﷺ is the highest possible in both categories and thus represents the strongest love we should have for anyone or anything in this world.

He is the exclusive means for us to connect with Allah ﷻ. Ibn al-Qayyim writes:

*And there is no path to this end except by the knowledge inherited from His slave, messenger, and beloved. The one who was sent with it, calling toward it, establishing it, and guiding toward it.*¹⁸

He is also the embodiment of everything Allah loves in a human. As Allah said:

*Say (O Muhammad), 'If you love Allah, then follow me. Allah will love you and forgive your sins, for Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.'*¹⁹

Conventional wisdom has always been 'money cannot buy happiness' and even people who are very worldly in their outlook understand that their lives should not be consumed by acquiring material things. For this reason, a more common issue in a person's love involves people rather than wealth. This means that friends and family are loved for their own sake, regardless of the consequences. Anything that keeps the friends or family happy and together is the most important to them, even if it involves committing sins. The way one thinks about their spouse or children evokes stronger emotions than if they think about Allah and His Messenger, and they may even be willing to displease Allah in order to please their friends and family. Such relationships are a trial (*fitnah*), as Allah said, "Know that your wealth and children are but a trial and that Allah has with Him a great reward."²⁰

¹⁸ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah. *Miftāḥ Dār al-Sa'ādah* (Jeddah: Dār 'Ālim Fawā'id), 1:126.

¹⁹ Sūrat Ālī 'Imrān 3:31.

²⁰ Sūrat al-Anfāl, 8:28.

So what are we to do with our strong love for our family and friends? Is it a sin? As described, this love can fall into one of three categories: good, permissible, or bad. If we do not prefer those we love to our relationship with Allah, then we have not sinned, but we have also not reached our full potential. The goal should be to have all of our love fall under the category of that which aids us on our journey to Allah ﷻ.

Now, a person might be hesitant to ‘detach’ from those whom they love in this world and treat them as a ‘means’ rather than an ‘end.’ It is entirely possible to harmonize our natural love for our family and friends with love for Allah. It is also important to understand that transforming love for others into love for Allah is not only the perfection of loving Allah, but is likewise the perfection of loving His creation. Modern psychology recognizes the problems of maladaptive attachments to people or things. This includes over-attaching to the point that it hurts the relationship, as a person becomes anxious-ambivalent.²¹ Not only that, but loving people for the sake of Allah will actually result in treating them better. If, instead of treating people as a means for our happiness, we treat them as a means to get closer to Allah, this sometimes might involve doing good to them even when they wrong us.

Moreover, it is not fair to any individual that you turn them into an intrinsic goal in your life. This responsibility and pressure is not meant to be put on worldly relationships. For instance, if a person acts out in any way during the relationship, it can be devastating to both parties. Feeling as if you are the world to another person is a pressure and stress that is unfair to that individual. Even if these strong feelings are mutual, it will be painful for both individuals when the inevitable separation occurs. This life is temporary and everything will fade. Separation may occur due to death but also could be due to a fight or breakup. The pain and anguish that will result may become unbearable and may lead to long-term physical or psychological damage. This is why Ibn al-Qayyim comments:

²¹ Cassidy, J., & Berlin, L. J. (1994). The insecure/ambivalent pattern of attachment: Theory and research. *Child Development*, 65(4), 971-91.

*(True) happiness can only occur when a person makes his motivation connected to a purpose that will not break or cease. His strongest desire and aim should be to journey to the presence of the Living, Who never dies.*²²

Human beings were created for a higher purpose than to love each other in this manner. Rather, we were created to love Allah and to fulfill that love as a blessing and mercy to His creatures. By fulfilling our purpose, we benefit others around us even more than if we lived only for our family or loved ones.

If one finds themselves loving other than Allah, then one should first reflect on whether their love is sinful or neutral. If it cannot be harmonized with the love of Allah in any way, it should be abandoned. If it is a natural love that is compatible with the love of Allah, they should gradually make the attachment psychologically and spiritually healthier by bringing it in line with their relationship with Allah. In this way, the natural love of family and other things can be transformed into worship if our priorities are in order.

This can be done by reflecting on your relationship to your loved ones and determining that: 1) Your love is consistent with the Divine qualities and teachings; and 2) Your love is bringing you closer to Allah through gratitude for your loved ones. In other words, your love is guided by Islam and your loved ones are considered gifts from Allah to enrich your spirit. Let these conditions come the forefront of your mind and help you evaluate your love. Allow yourself to attach these conditions to the people and things you love. Let go of your ultimate hopes in the people and things of this world and instead turn to your Undying Creator for salvation, as Allah ﷻ said:

*Whoever rejects false idols and believes in Allah, then he has grasped the most trustworthy handhold that will never break. And Allah is Hearing and Knowing.*²³

²² Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Miftāḥ Dār al-Sa'ādah*, 125.

²³ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:256.

Indeed, anything we maladaptively attach ourselves to can become like idols. This verse speaks to the process of detachment and the subsequent reattachment to Allah. He is Living and never dies. He hears and answers all of your prayers. In the end, He will never let you down:

*And rely upon the Ever-Living who does not die, and exalt [Allah] with His praise.*²⁴

2) Reverence vs. Hypocrisy

Authentic Reverence

When a person stands in front of his or her Lord in prayer, they are meant to enter into a state of mindful submission or reverence (*al-khushu'*). Such a state is characterized by veneration, glorification, and awe of the Divine. The heart shatters in front of Allah as it is simultaneously filled with hope, humility, and fear; it bears witness to the blessings of Allah while at the same time admitting to its sins against Him. As the heart enters into this state, the body follows along in movement and recitation; therefore, an observer can see the reverence of the heart reflected on the physical limbs.

When a person is humble before Allah, the flames of lowly passion inside their chest are extinguished by the cooling waters that enter through reverence. The lusts of the dark side of the self are confronted with fear of and reverence for the Divine, so they eventually subside. Peace and tranquility descend upon the reverent heart and a person feels serene in front of their Lord, enjoying every moment in authentic worship. As Allah said about the Prophets, “They would call upon Us in hope and fear, and they were reverent before Us.”²⁵

²⁴ Sūrat al-Furqān 25:58.

²⁵ Sūrat al-Anbiyā' 21:90.

Hypocritical Reverence

Hypocritical reverence is the appearance of reverence on the physical body that has been deliberately displayed for someone other than Allah, to be seen and admired by people. It is a form of religious ostentation or ‘showing off.’ The Prophet ﷺ once said to his companions, “Shall I not tell you about my greater fear for you than the False Messiah?” They said, “Of course!” The Prophet said, “It is hidden idolatry, that a man stands for prayer and beautifies his prayer when he sees another man looking at him.”²⁶ The Prophet ﷺ feared this spiritual disease for his nation even more than the greatest of trials that will afflict humankind in all of history. He even likened it to a lesser form of idolatry. This internal enemy is a much greater threat to our spiritual life than anything outside of us.

A person in a dangerous state of hypocrisy expends active effort to achieve an appearance of submission to Allah, rather than allowing it to occur naturally from authentic worship. In this context, Allah ﷻ said, “Woe to those who pray, who are negligent of their prayer, who pray to be seen!”²⁷ The companions of the Prophet ﷺ used to ask Allah for protection from such hypocrisy in outward reverence and worship. Abu al-Darda’ رضي الله تعالى عنه said, “Seek refuge in Allah from the reverence of hypocrisy.” It was said, “What is the reverence of hypocrisy?” He said, “It is that you see the body in reverence while the heart is not reverent.”²⁸ That being the case, we are much more in need of seeking refuge in Allah from this evil trait than they were!

Key Distinctions

Ibn al-Qayyim describes authentic reverence as an inward spiritual state that is attained by reflecting on two matters: 1) Allah’s blessings upon the individual; and 2) the individual’s sins against Allah. He writes:

²⁶ Ibn Mājah. *Sunan Ibn Mājah*. (Bayrūt: Dār Ihya’ al-Turāth al-’Arabī, 1975), 2:1406 #4204; declared fair (*hasan*) according to Al-Albānī in the comments.

²⁷ Sūrat al-Mā’ūn 107:4-6.

²⁸ Al-Bayhaqī. *Shu’ab al-Īmān* (al-Riyād: Maktabat al-Rushd lil-Nashr wal-Tawzī’, 2003), 9:220 #6567.

The reverent heart faces Allah with exaltation, glorification, veneration, dread, and penitence such that the heart is broken, a breaking that is mended by awe, shame, love, penitence, testifying to the blessings of Allah and one's own crimes against Him. Thus, the reverent heart will inevitably be followed by reverence on the limbs (in prayer and recitation).²⁹

The energy of a reverent heart is directed towards appreciation of the meanings of prayer and awareness of one's blessings and sins, as a way of inspiring the heart to do better and better and to grow even closer to Allah through worship and good deeds.

In contrast, hypocritical reverence is when the heart's energy is directed towards one's limbs only, in an effort to appear humble to others. Ibn al-Qayyim continues:

As for the reverence of hypocrisy, it is that one shows his limbs in feigning and pretense, while the heart is not reverent... It is a state of being in which is feigned tranquility of the limbs by pretense and ostentation, while his self within is immersed and saturated with lusts and desires. He is reverent outwardly while the serpent of the valley and the lion of the forest are stalking between his two sides, waiting for their prey.³⁰

Satan and his devils are like serpents and lions, lying in ambush for this very moment to attack their victims. This dynamic is at play not only in prayer, but in any kind of public good works that should be done for the sake of Allah alone. Satan attempts to whisper to his victims that their insincere outward show is either rationally justified or simply not a big deal. However, we have already seen that it is indeed a spiritual calamity that the companions feared more than anything else in this world, a major sin on the cusp of becoming a full-blown act of idolatry. One must remain vigilantly introspective and constantly examine one's heart to detect and reject the whispers of Satan in this regard.

²⁹ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Al-Rūh*, 232.

³⁰ Ibid., 232-233.

3) Inspiring Gratitude vs. Boasting

Inspiring Gratitude

Sharing news of good things and accomplishments in one's life is an appropriate way of inspiring gratitude, known as *tahaddath bi-ni'am Allah* (discussing the blessings of Allah). To do so is commanded by Allah ﷻ in the Qur'an, "As for the blessing of Allah, proclaim it."³¹ The purpose of mentioning the bounties of Allah to others, even in relatively small things, is to inspire thankfulness to Allah in them and in oneself. The Prophet ﷺ said:

*Whoever is not grateful for small things will not be grateful for large things. Whoever is not thankful to people is not thankful to Allah. Discussing the blessings of Allah is gratitude and ignoring them is ingratitude.*³²

Hence, we should not hide the blessings that Allah has given to us, but we should also present them to others with grace, humility, and gratitude. The purpose is not to build ourselves up by putting others down. As the Prophet ﷺ said, "Verily, Allah has revealed to me that you must be humble towards one another, so that no one oppresses another or boasts to another."³³

Boasting

Boasting involves promoting oneself by mentioning successes, accolades, and accomplishments, so as to earn the praise and respect of others or to humiliate them. The Prophet ﷺ said, "The worst of my nation are the garrulous, the braggarts, and the pompous. The best of my nation are those with the best

³¹ Sūrat al-Ḍuḥá 93:11.

³² Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal* (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1993), 30:392 #18450; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Targhīb wal-Tarhīb* (Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 2000), 1:573 #976.

³³ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* ([Bayrūt]: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabīyah, 1955), 4:2198 #2865.

character.”³⁴ Bragging about one’s deeds is characterized by bluster, swagger, and bravado that evoke pride and arrogance in oneself and jealousy and disgrace in others.

Key Distinctions

When a person shares their blessings in a humble way, they attribute them to Allah’s grace instead of their own personal ability. They truly believe it was from the Mercy of Allah alone, not something they deserved due to their own merit. The celebration is of Allah and His blessings and not of the self or ego, “By the grace of Allah and His Mercy, by that let them rejoice.”³⁵

Boasting about oneself, on the other hand, is a celebration of the ego and one’s personal identity and perceived power. It is quite possible that a person thanks Allah and mentions His favors outwardly, but does so in a way that still implicitly praises themselves or humiliates others. As Allah said, “Among people is one whose words please you in the life of this world and calls upon Allah to witness what is in his heart, yet he is a fierce adversary.”³⁶ Even if the outward words are correct, the true difference between boasting and gratitude lies in the state of the heart. Satan aims for us to mention blessings for the wrong reason. The question we should ask ourselves, then, is why are we mentioning these blessings in the first place? Are we praising Allah or praising ourselves?

4) Friendly Competition vs. Envy

Friendly competition

Competition is positive when a group of people strives together to achieve lofty goals (*‘uluw al-himmah*) and they also wish to see that same success in their competitors. It involves using the natural competitive drive of the human being as a

³⁴ Al-Bukhārī. *Kitāb al-Adab al-Mufrad*, 1:737 #1308; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the comments.

³⁵ Sūrat Yūnus 10:58.

³⁶ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:204.

cooperative and mutually beneficial tool, to overcome people's tendency to procrastinate or to be apathetic. Friendly competition encourages one to be dissatisfied with their current state and to exert effort towards greater and greater achievements: a healthy means of continuous self-improvement between two or more people. In this context, Allah ﷻ said, "For this (Paradise), let the competitors compete with each other."³⁷

Perhaps the best example of such a friendly competition was between Abu Bakr and 'Umar ibn al-Khattab رضي الله تعالى عنهما. As told by 'Umar:

*The Messenger of Allah ﷺ ordered us to give charity and at the time I possessed some wealth. I said to myself, 'Today I will outdo Abu Bakr, if ever there were a day to outdo him.' I went with half of my wealth to the Prophet ﷺ and he said, 'What have you left for your family?' I said, 'The same amount (half).' Then, Abu Bakr came with everything he had. The Prophet ﷺ said, 'O Abu Bakr, what have you left for your family?' Abu Bakr said, 'Allah and His messenger.' I said, 'By Allah, I will never do better than Abu Bakr.'*³⁸

It should be no surprise that two of the greatest companions of the Prophet ﷺ, the first two righteous Caliphs no less, were in a friendly competition with one another. Their competition was not based upon ill will nor a need to 'defeat' or humiliate each other; rather, they understood that they were helping push each other to achieve more. They probably would never have achieved so much good without their benign rivalry. As the Prophet ﷺ said, "Verily, the believers are like a structure, each part strengthening the other," and he interlaced his fingers to illustrate.³⁹

Seeing friendly competitors achieve their goals also helps to dispel self-limiting beliefs. Competitors provide inspiration and role models for our own personal

³⁷ Sūrat al-Muṭaffifīn 83:26.

³⁸ Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 6:56 #3675; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) according to Al-Tirmidhī in the comments.

³⁹ Al-Bukhārī. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Bayrūt: Dār Tawq al-Najjāh, 2002), 1:103 #481.

success. For this reason, it is recommended to have admiration (*al-ghibtah*) for righteous Muslims from the past and present.

Envy

Jealousy or envy (*al-hasad*) is a negative feeling in the heart when one learns of another's success or blessing. It is a desire for the envied person to fail, to be harmed, or to otherwise be deprived of their success or their blessings. As Ibn Taymiyyah put it, "The reality is that envy is animosity and hatred when one sees the good state of the envied person."⁴⁰

Jealousy and envy are powerful types of malice that are directed against the personal identity of an individual, as opposed to hatred directed towards their sins in the abstract. In some sense, they can be viewed as the root of most sins against human beings. According to Ibn 'Uyaynah رحمه الله, "Envy was the first sin by which Allah Almighty was disobeyed in the heavens, as *Iblis* (Satan) envied Adam. It was the first sin by which Allah Almighty was disobeyed on the earth, as the son of Adam envied his brother and killed him."⁴¹

Key Distinctions

Friendly competition can be distinguished from envy by examining their respective effects on the heart and one's overall vision of success. Competition results in admiration, which is a wholesome feeling whereby one is pleased to see others achieve what one would also like to achieve. There is no real 'defeat' in such a competition, even if someone does better than another, because the purpose is for all competitors to do better than they would by themselves. It will always produce satisfaction regardless of who 'wins.' This vision of success is a win-win scenario, regardless of the actual outcome.

Envy, by contrast, is a destructive feeling that provokes a desire to hurt those who are envied. An envious person does not desire for his competitors what he desires for himself, which is self-improvement. Instead, the envious want to see their

⁴⁰ Ibn Taymīyah. *Amrāḍ al-Qulūb wa Shifā'uhā* (al-Qāhirah: al-Maṭba'ah al-Salafīyah wa Maktabatuhā, 1966), 14.

⁴¹ Al-Dīnawarī. *Al-Mujālasah wa Jawāhir al-'Ilm* (Bayrūt: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1998), 3:51 #659.

opponents harmed, humiliated, and defeated. Their vision of success involves the downfall of their competitors, an uncompromising zero-sum game with a clear winner and loser.

Envy will always produce anger, frustration, and an empty feeling, even if it results in defeat of the one envied. As stated by Al-Ahnaf ibn Qays, “There is no rest for the envious.”⁴² The envious can only achieve a pyrrhic victory at best, a win at such devastating spiritual cost that it could never bring lasting joy and peace. Satan is capable of cleverly shifting our metaphorical goalposts from mutual benefit with our competitors to zero-sum destruction—all the more reason for a Muslim to constantly reflect upon their vision for success during any competition.

The cure for envy is to force oneself to do the opposite of what envy encourages one to do. If one feels like they want to curse their competitor, they should pray for them instead. Al-Ghazali writes:

*As for beneficial deeds, it is to be a judge over envy. For everything that envy brings to court of sayings and deeds, he should oblige himself to do its opposite. If envy compels him to disparage the envied, then he should oblige his tongue to praise him and commend him. If envy compels him to be arrogant against him, then he should require himself to be humble before him and apologize to him... These are the cures for envy and they are very beneficial, although they are very bitter for the heart. Rather, the benefit is in bitter medicine.*⁴³

In fact, this is the secret to curing all the diseases of the heart. A person should compel themselves to do the opposite of whatever their negative feelings are encouraging, until the disease is beaten back through repetition and formation of new habits.

⁴² Al-Bayhaqī, *Shu'ab al-Īmān*, 9:27 #6210.

⁴³ Al-Ghazzālī, *Ihyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1980), 3:199.

5) Authentic Leadership vs. Love for Authority

Authentic Leadership

Love for authentic leadership (not necessarily authority!) is a positive quality indicating a person's desire to mobilize resources and people towards a vision of the good, or to serve as a proper role model for present and future generations. As Allah said about the companions, "You are the best nation to come forth for people. You enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil and have faith in Allah."⁴⁴ All of the righteous companions رضي الله تعالى عنهم are role models and 'leaders' in Islam, even if they never held authority in an official capacity like the Caliphs or governors. What made them the best generation is that they were focused on maximizing good and minimizing evil and inspiring others to believe in Allah. They are spiritual models to follow. Such authentic leaders are worthy of our admiration.

We should aspire to be moral exemplars for our families and children first, and for the rest of the Muslim community, as Allah ﷻ said through the words of the believers, "Our Lord, grant us comfort from our wives and children and make us a leader for the righteous."⁴⁵ Love of authentic leadership puts us on a difficult but traversable path of personal transformation that compels us to increase our knowledge and virtues. The two key qualities of authentic leadership are perseverance (*al-sabr*) and certainty in faith (*al-yaqin*), "We made leaders among them, guiding by Our commands, when they were patient and certain of Our signs."⁴⁶ A leader needs to ensure that their vision of the good, and their intentions and methods, are approved by Allah and then to persevere in bringing the good to fruition.

⁴⁴ Sūrat Ālī ‘Imrān 3:110.

⁴⁵ Sūrat al-Furqān 25:74.

⁴⁶ Sūrat al-Sajdah 32:34.

Love for Authority

Love for authority is rooted in the desire for power, domination of others, and self-veneration. A person who craves the power of authority does not really believe in any collective vision of the good. Rather, they utilize authority to fulfill their own personal aims, and their subjects, or people under their authority, are simply expendable pawns for them to get what they want. In this regard, the Prophet ﷺ said, “Verily, you will earnestly desire a position of authority but you will regret it on the Day of Resurrection.”⁴⁷ The righteous companions رضي الله تعالى عنهم, who were both authentic leaders and authorities, were *appointed* to their positions by others above them, many times against their will. They did not desire authority, but it came to them nonetheless because they were recognized as moral leaders.

With great power comes great responsibility, as they say. Authorities are held to a higher standard of judgment in the Hereafter, because their actions are so far-reaching. Their mistakes are magnified by the measure of all those who are affected by their deeds; a single bad decision can harm thousands of people. The Prophet ﷺ discouraged us from desiring such responsibility, saying, “Whoever accepts an appointment as a judge is as if he has been slaughtered without a knife.”⁴⁸ Put differently, people who desire authority are generally not capable of wielding it responsibly and therefore they will be ‘slaughtered’ in the Hereafter, so to speak, by their failure to lead righteously and effectively in the world.

Key Distinctions

Authentic leadership involves a love of seeing virtue, good, and benefit actualized in the world and among people. It is characterized by humility and an unwillingness to take positions of authority unless asked or compelled to do so. It can be detected in the heart by feeling joy in the benefit of others and sensing fear when charged with responsibility for the public’s trust.

⁴⁷ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 9:63 #7148.

⁴⁸ Abū Dāwūd. *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (Ṣaydā, Lubnān: al-Maktabah al-Aṣrīyah, 1980), 3:298 #3571; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in the comments.

An authentic leader wants others to look at him or her not as someone ‘better’ than them but rather as someone whose outward behavior can be emulated. They want their positive influence to permeate into the world against the promptings of their lower self. As said by the great Imam al-Shafi’i رحمه الله, “There is no knowledge in my heart but that I wish everyone would know it and attribute none of it to me.”⁴⁹ Al-Shafi’i was a leader precisely because he did not want to be a leader. He was humble enough to eschew fame but pious enough to earnestly seek knowledge for the sake of Allah. Yet his accumulation of knowledge and worthiness of leadership could not be hidden from his contemporaries. As a result, he became a leading figure in the Muslim community from his time until today.

On the contrary, love for authority involves a desire to accumulate wealth, status, praise, and other worldly interests in order to satisfy the desires of the self or ego. It is characterized by arrogance and a love for power and domination. It can be detected in the heart by feeling joy when presented with responsibility for the public’s trust and indifference to the effect of one’s leadership decisions on other people. Satan can, with little effort, muddle the difference in one’s heart between love for leadership and love for authority. It is remarkably difficult not to abuse the privileges of authority when placed in leadership positions. Again, one must vigilantly examine their intentions and their feelings in response to opportunities for authority. Does the potential for authority excite you or scare you?

6) Reliance upon Allah vs. Laziness

Reliance upon Allah

Relying upon or trusting in Allah (*al-tawakkul*) is an action of the heart that manifests the essence of true faith. It is a spiritual state in which a person acknowledges his fear and vulnerability in trying to reach a goal, finding comfort in Allah’s Mercy and Power. In order to be considered proper reliance upon Allah, this state of the heart must be accompanied by utilizing the worldly and spiritual

⁴⁹ Ibn Abī Ḥātim. *Ādāb al-Shāfi’ī wa Manāqibuh* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 2002), 1:247.

means to obtain that goal. The Prophet ﷺ said, “If you were to rely upon Allah with reliance due to Him, then He would provide for you just as He provides for the birds. They go out in the morning with empty stomachs and return full.”⁵⁰ Like the birds searching for food, a person should trust that Allah will provide for them as long as they pray for it and work for it. Even if what they are eventually given is not as they expected, they have faith that it was ultimately for the best.

Accordingly, true reliance is submission to Allah in both aspects of His Will, the universal will (what we call ‘nature’) and the commanding will (what we call ‘divine law’ or religious teachings). We believe that the natural laws governing the world are a reflection of Allah’s supreme Will and therefore pursuing the series of predictable causes and effects is part of submitting to Allah. Pursuing causes and effects, however, must be in line with the divine law; one may not earn their provision by criminal or sinful means. These two aspects of the divine Will reflect the dual nature of the integrated physical and spiritual world that we inhabit. True reliance, then, involves the holistic surrender to both physical and spiritual laws in order to obtain one’s goals. This results in feelings of relief and serenity in the knowledge that Allah promises to provide the best outcome for the believers, in this life and in the Hereafter, regardless of what actually happens in this world.

Laziness

Laziness (*al-kasal*) is the failure to act upon spiritual and worldly causes in tandem. It is a character flaw that the Prophet ﷺ would supplicate for protection from, “O Allah, I seek refuge in you from disability and laziness.”⁵¹ Many people are tricked by Satan into believing they are demonstrating reliance upon Allah by not taking worldly means. This is nothing short of delusional. As described, reliance requires pursuing natural causes to achieve one’s goals. A person must eat and drink in the real world in order to obtain the benefits of food and water. One cannot simply think that he will be satiated by exclusively appealing to spiritual means. ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab رضي الله تعالى عنه said, “Let not one of you refrain from

⁵⁰ Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 4:151 #2344; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by al-Tirmidhī in his commentary.

⁵¹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2088 #2722.

working for his provision, supplicating to Allah to provide while knowing that the sky does not rain gold and silver.”⁵²

People often use this distorted perspective of reliance as a justification for not putting in the necessary worldly effort to reach their goals. Students will not strive for excellence in studying, thinking that as long as they are performing their prayers, Allah will make a miracle occur on their behalf. People searching for jobs do not want to exert the energy of being proactive, networking, and enhancing their resume, content with the notion that “if it is meant for me, it will happen.” Hoping for a miracle without putting in the effort is like asking to get paid without doing the work. This is merely laziness and apathy dressed up in the guise of piety.

Key Distinctions

Reliance upon Allah produces a positive state of hope and contentment as a person surrenders to the reality that Allah has guaranteed a reward, in this life and in the next, for those who work. It is to act upon both spiritual and worldly causes, to pray and to act. For instance, a Muslim student should pray that Allah will provide them with knowledge and then go out into the world seeking teachers and books in an Islamically lawful manner. The prayer will be answered even if one cannot perceive the response. The Prophet ﷺ said, “There is no Muslim who supplicates to Allah without sin or cutting family ties in it but that Allah will give him one of three answers: He will hasten fulfillment of his supplication, He will store it for him in the Hereafter, or He will divert an evil from him similar to it.”⁵³ Faith and conviction that the supplication has already been answered by Allah in the best way, regardless of the worldly outcome, brings about peace of mind.

Laziness produces delusions without any action or progress towards the end-goal. A person might pray only and not work, or pray but work in the unlawful, or work only without praying. In these cases, they have neglected one of the means, spiritual or physical, of achieving the best outcome. As a result, they will not be

⁵² Al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, 2:62.

⁵³ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, 17:213 #11133; declared very good (*jayyid*) by Al-Arnā’ūt in the comments.

able to achieve the peace of mind of knowing that their supplications have been answered and their work has been rewarded.

7) Advising vs. Condemning

Advising

Sincerity in advising others with good will (*al-nasihah*) is an essential teaching of Islam. The Prophet ﷺ said, “The religion is sincere good will.” It was said, “To whom?” The Prophet ﷺ said, “To Allah, His book, His messenger, the leaders of the Muslims, and their common people.”⁵⁴ As it pertains to advising common people, Ibn Daqiq summarizes sincerity as “to exhort them with beautiful preaching, to abandon malice and envy against them, to love for them what one loves for himself of goodness, and to hate for them what one hates for himself of the reprehensible.”⁵⁵

Sincere advice is that which is intended to benefit the receiver of the advice. The purpose is to guide someone to a better way, towards benefit or away from harm, while preserving their reputation as much as possible.

Condemning

Condemnation (*al-ta'yir*) is to announce someone's faults publicly with the intention of hurting their reputation or harming them in some way under the cover of giving ‘advice.’ According to Ibn Rajab, “Among the outward forms of condemnation is to expose an evil and divulge it under the pretext of giving advice, alleging that one is only compelled to do so because of those flaws, either general or specific. Inwardly, his purpose is to condemn and harm.”⁵⁶

Unlike sincere advice, condemnation is motivated by hatred, malice, and bad intentions. It is done publicly and not privately, not because it is a last resort to stop

⁵⁴ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:74 #55.

⁵⁵ Ibn Daqīq. *Sharḥ al-Arbaʿīn al-Nawawīyah* (Bayrūt: Muʾassasat al-Rayyān, 2003), 1:52.

⁵⁶ Ibn Rajab. *Farq bayna al-Naṣīḥah wal-Taʿyīr* (ʿAmmān: Dār ʿAmmār, 1988), 22.

evil, but rather to shame the one being condemned in the eyes of the community. Ibn Rajab continues:

An example of that is when a human being wants to cast blame upon a man, belittle him, and expose his faults such that people desert him, either because he loves to harm him, or he has enmity for him, or he fears his rivalry in wealth and leadership, or for any other blameworthy reason... So he has combined an outward display of advice with ugly, forbidden matters.⁵⁷

It is possible that one's advice be entirely proper outwardly and in an appropriate setting, but it is ultimately sinful because one's intention is to deliberately hurt the receiver, not to benefit them.

Key Distinctions

The difference between sincere advice and condemnation is whether or not the advice-giver would be pleased to be treated this way in the same situation. Sincere advisors imagine themselves in the shoes of those they give advice to and they ask themselves these questions, "Would I be pleased if he advised me this way? Will this advice help them? Or will it push them further into harm?" For this reason, sincere advice is generally given in private so that the recipient can save face. Privacy also indicates that the advice is sincerely aimed at bringing about benefit, not for an ulterior motive such as scoring 'points' against an individual in public.

8) Esteem vs. Pride

Esteem

Having esteem for people (*al-mahabab*) means to have respect and admiration for them, a positive form of pride. Like friendly competition, this type of esteem and admiration is rooted in benevolent intentions towards others, confidence in them, and a desire to be like them without depriving them of their blessings. Zaynab, the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 23-24.

wife of Abdullah ibn Mas'ud, said, "The Prophet ﷺ was endowed with esteem."

⁵⁸ She and other women held the Prophet ﷺ in such high regard that they were too shy to knock on his door. In this way, one can be 'proud' of the achievements of one's leaders, family, and friends without necessarily looking down on others or puffing up their own egos.

Self-esteem is to have respect for oneself (*'izzat al-nafs*). It is to hold an image of the self that is healthy and balanced, neither arrogantly proud nor humiliatingly meek. One should have enough respect for oneself not to commit sins that degrade one's sense of honor and worth. This is why acts of sin are described as oppression against one's self. A common phrase in the Qur'an is "We did not wrong them, but rather they have been wronging themselves."⁵⁹

When a person sees a loved one in a state of harm, they strive to do whatever is in their capacity to counteract it. Similarly, a person's self-love should result in striving to avert harm to one's soul through sins and transgression.

When a sin is committed, one should have confidence that Allah will help them repent. The Prophet ﷺ said, "None of you should say, 'My soul is wicked.' Rather, one should say, 'My soul is at fault.'"⁶⁰ Faults are temporary problems that can be fixed, as we all make mistakes, so we should not attach pessimistic, self-defeating metaphysical labels like 'wicked' and 'evil' to ourselves.

Pride

Pride (*al-kibr*) is the misguided belief that one is so important that they have the right to reject the truth and to humiliate others, or that they deserve special treatment. The Prophet ﷺ said, "No one who has the weight of a seed of pride in his heart will enter Paradise." It was said, "But a man loves to have beautiful clothes and shoes." The Prophet ﷺ said, "Verily, Allah is Beautiful and He loves beauty. Pride means rejecting the truth and looking down on people."⁶¹

⁵⁸ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 2:694 #1000.

⁵⁹ Sūrat al-Furqān 25:74.

⁶⁰ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:41 #6179.

⁶¹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:93 #91.

People infected with pride do not hold themselves accountable to the same standards of justice that they apply to everyone else, as Ibn al-Qayyim writes:

As for pride, it is among the effects of vanity and transgression from a heart that is filled with ignorance and oppression. Servitude to Allah has departed from it and disgrace has descended upon it. It looks at people disdainfully, it walks among people arrogantly, and it deals with them by seeking preference over them, not by altruism or fairness... It does not acknowledge the rights of anyone over it, yet acknowledges its rights over people. It does not acknowledge their favors to him, yet it acknowledges its own favors. Allah does not increase it except in alienation from people, except in scorn and hatred.⁶²

Rather than forming a healthy and balanced self-image, pride distorts one's perception of the self from occupying the middle ground between arrogance and self-abasement.

Key Distinctions

The difference between esteem, or self-respect, and pride can sometimes be difficult to identify by outward cues alone. Satan can very subtly transform what might be a positive and natural pride into negative pride in the form of arrogance, haughtiness, and conceit. The distinction lies in the way self-respect and pride relate to the nature of the human 'self' or soul and its place in the world. Pride is built upon worldly trivialities like wealth, status, and lineage. Unlike a proud person, a person with self-respect cannot truly be humiliated or impoverished because they are confident in their self-image. Their self-respect, or honor, can never be taken away by people.

It was said to Al-Hasan ibn 'Ali رضي الله تعالى عنه, "Indeed, people imagine there is pride in you." Al-Hasan said, "It is not pride. Rather, it is self-respect, for this is

⁶² Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyah, *Al-Rūh*, 236.

respect with no humiliation in it and richness with no poverty in it.” Al-Razi added:

Some of the knowledgeable said in actualization of this meaning that self-respect is not pride. It is not lawful for a believer to humiliate himself. For self-respect is the human being’s recognition of the reality of the self and its nobility above transient categories of the world, in the same way pride is the human being’s ignorance of the self and its claiming to be above its proper place. Self-respect resembles pride in form, but is different in reality. Just as humility and humiliation resemble each other, but humility is praiseworthy and humiliation is blameworthy. Pride is blameworthy and self-respect is praiseworthy.⁶³

In other words, pride is the result of ignorance of one’s place and purpose in the universe. A proud person thinks too highly of themselves, to the point of disdaining other people and belittling their rights. But a person with authentic self-respect is respectful of the human soul in general, one’s own self, as well as the rights of others.

Conclusion

Conceptually distinguishing between these virtues and their corrupted counterparts is crucial for our spiritual and moral development. Ibn al-Qayyim notes that “the entire religion consists of the ability to distinguish.”⁶⁴ This is why the Qur’an refers to itself as *Al-Furqan* (The Distinguisher). The guidance within its pages, and the example of the Prophet ﷺ in his *Sunnah*, help us distinguish the light from the darkness, not only in the world but within our own selves.

Misguidance, error, and straying away from the straight path are the result of obfuscating, convoluting, and confusing the nature of two things that are separate in reality. They represent a failure to appropriately discern matters as they are, so as to produce an inaccurate mental representation of those phenomena. The gravest

⁶³ Al-Rāzī. *Al-Taḥfīr al-Kabīr* (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1999), 30:549, verse 63:8.

⁶⁴ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah, *Al-Rūḥ*, 260.

of these errors is to place Allah alongside the creation, to blur the line between creature and Creator; such is the essence of idolatry. Similarly, the human Self has a tendency to blur the lines between virtue and vice, to rationalize and justify states of mind that are, in truth, serious character flaws.

There will always be forces inside of us that will attempt to muddy the waters between what is right and wrong, rather than identifying them as separate. These forces represent the dark side within us, of the human Self, forces we need to be aware of at all times. But the dark side can only be conquered by the light, the source of which is Allah Almighty. As Ibn al-Qayyim said:

*Al-Furqan (the ability to distinguish) honors the one with this knowledge. It is a light that Allah casts into the heart, by which the Truth is distinguished from falsehood and the reality of matters is assessed, their good and their evil, their benefit and their harm. Whoever lacks the ability to distinguish will fall into the idolatry of the devils. Allah is the One in Whom to seek refuge, and upon Him we rely.*⁶⁵

The gift of this divine light, which is attained through *duaa*, prayer, mindfulness, study, and purity of heart, is our best hope for salvation in this life and in the life to come. It is the only light by which we can discern our states of being as they really are, to give us a fighting chance to conquer the *nafs ammara bi-su'* and the devils who exploit it.

Success comes from Allah, and Allah knows best.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 266.