



The Guiding Principles of Faith: Sincerity, Honesty and Good Will in Islam

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Introduction

In the name of Allah, the Gracious, the Merciful

In Islam, we must always practice our faith with sincerity (*al-ikhlas*), honesty (*al-sidq*), and goodwill (*al-nasihah*). Each of these virtues includes a vertical dimension (in relation to Allah) and a horizontal dimension (in relation to other people); they tell us how to behave with Allah and how to behave with others. Virtues in Islam such as these act as guiding principles in all of our affairs, from our mundane daily interactions to the conduct of nations and everything in between. They are meant to be in the front of our minds at all times, to be considered in all of our decisions. In this article, we will explicate the meaning of these virtues according to the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, with an aim to uncover their relevance for us in this life and in the Hereafter.

Sincerity

The first deed a Muslim must do to make good his or her Islam is to purify his or her intention (*al-niyah*) in worship and religious deeds. We should act sincerely for the sake of Allah and dedicate our deeds to no other, whether by way of idolatry (*al-shirk*), hypocrisy (*al-nifaq*), or ostentation (*al-riya'*).

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*Verily, deeds are only by intentions. Verily, every person will have only what they intended. Whoever emigrated to get something in the world or to marry a woman, then his emigration is for whatever he emigrated for.*¹

The early jurists and scholars such as Al-Shafi'i, Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, Abu Dawud, Al-Daraqutni, and Al-Tirmidhi agreed that this *hadith* encompasses one-third of Islam. Al-Bukhari chose to lead his collection of authentic traditions with it.² Al-Shafi'i also said that this *hadith* encompasses seventy topics of jurisprudence

¹ Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. (Bayrūt: Dār Ṭawq al-Najjāh, 2002), 1:6 #1.

² Ibn Ḥajar. *Fath al-Bārī*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 1959), 1:11.

(*al-fiqh*), by which he meant a great many topics, and Ibn Mahdi encouraged authors to include it at the beginning of any work to advise their students to continually correct and renew their intentions.³ Right intention, which is sincerity, is the foundation of everything else we do in Islam.

Every act of worship, charity, or any good deed will be judged by the intention behind it. Allah knows the true and secret inner-motives of all deeds that we do, and these motives will be made known on the Day of Resurrection.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*Verily, the people will be raised for judgment only according to their intentions.*⁴

We must actively cultivate the virtue of sincerity in our worship and deeds, as it is the first blessed step on the straight path towards eternal life in the Hereafter. Abu Sulayman, may Allah have mercy on him, said, “Blessed is he who takes a single step desiring nothing but Allah Almighty.”⁵

In truth, Allah has commanded us to make our worship sincere for his sake alone. Sincerity is the obligatory prerequisite for the acceptance of any righteous deed, not merely an encouraged virtue.

Allah said:

*It is We who sent down the Scripture to you [Prophet] with the Truth, so worship Allah with your total devotion: true devotion is due to Allah alone.*⁶

And Allah said:

[Yet] those who were given the Scripture became divided only after they were sent [such] clear evidence, though all they are ordered to

³ Yahyá ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī. *Sharḥ al-Nawawī ‘alá Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1972), 13:53 #1907.

⁴ Ibn Mājah. *Sunan Ibn Mājah*. (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī), 2:1414 #4229; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, (Bayrūt: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1969), 1:468 #2379.

⁵ Aḥmad ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Qudāmah. *Mukhtaṣar Minhāj al-Qāsidīn*. (Dimashq: Maktabat Dār al-Bayān, 1978), 1:365.

⁶ Sūrat al-Zumar 39:2-3; Abdel Haleem, M. A. *The Qur’an: English translation and parallel Arabic text*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 459.

*do is worship Allah alone, sincerely devoting their religion to Him as people of true faith, keep up the prayer, and pay the prescribed alms, for that is the true religion.*⁷

All of the prophets, peace and blessings be upon them, were sincere to Allah when they delivered the divine revelations to their peoples. They are the exemplars of the highest standards of inward and outward righteousness that we must strive to emulate.

Allah said:

*Remember Our servants Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all men of strength and vision. We caused them to be devoted to Us through their sincere remembrance of the Final Home: with Us they will be among the elect, the truly good.*⁸

And Allah said:

*Say, 'My Lord commands righteousness. Direct your worship straight to Him wherever you pray; call on Him; devote your religion entirely to Him. Just as He first created you, so you will come back [to life] again.'*⁹

And Allah said:

*Say, 'I have been commanded to serve Allah, dedicating my worship entirely to Him.'*¹⁰

And Allah said:

*So call upon Allah and dedicate your religion to Him alone, however hateful this may be to the disbelievers.*¹¹

And Allah said:

⁷ Sūrat al-Bayyinah 98:4-5; Abdel Haleem, 599.

⁸ Sūrat Ṣad 38:45-47; Abdel Haleem, 457.

⁹ Sūrat al-A'rāf 7:29; Abdel Haleem, 154.

¹⁰ Sūrat al-Zumar 39:11; Abdel Haleem, 461.

¹¹ Sūrat Ghāfir 40:14; Abdel Haleem, 469.

*He is the Living One and there is no God but Him, so call on Him, and dedicate your religion entirely to Him. Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds.*¹²

Hypocrisy, by contrast, is to perform acts of worship and good deeds for some ulterior or worldly motive. The vice of hypocrisy is one of the terrible sins of the heart that leads to Hellfire. The only way to repent from hypocrisy is to renew sincerity in the innermost depths of our hearts.

Allah said:

*The hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of Hell, and you will find no one to help them. Not so those who repent, mend their ways, hold fast to Allah, and devote their religion entirely to Him: these will be joined with the believers, and Allah will give the believers a mighty reward.*¹³

Acts of worship and good deeds done in idolatry or hypocrisy, to show off for people, or to gain some worldly advantage, will be worthless on the Day of Resurrection. These fruitless deeds will be scattered like dust, leaving nothing behind but sins to be judged and punished.

Allah said:

*And We shall turn to the deeds they have done and scatter them like dust.*¹⁴

Deeds might be good outwardly, but they will amount to nothing without corresponding inward righteousness. Aisha, may Allah be pleased with her, once said, “O Messenger of Allah, in the time of ignorance the son of Jud’an would maintain family ties and feed the poor. Will it benefit him?” The Prophet ﷺ said, “It will not benefit him. Verily, he never said even for one day: My Lord, forgive my sins on the Day of Judgment.”¹⁵

¹² Sūrat Ghāfir 40:65; Abdel Haleem, 475.

¹³ Sūrat al-Nisā’ 4:145-146; Abdel Haleem, 102.

¹⁴ Sūrat al-Furqān 25:23; Abdel Haleem, 363.

¹⁵ Muslim Ibn al-Ḥajjāj al-Qushayrī. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. ([Bayrūt]: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabīyah, 1955), 1:196 #214.

And the Prophet ﷺ said, “Verily, Allah does not accept any good deeds unless they are done sincerely and in pursuit of his countenance.”¹⁶

Provoking idolatry, hypocrisy, and ostentation are the main lines of attack that Satan uses against human beings. In fact, every person will fall into these sins unless they consciously renew the sincerity of their intentions.

Allah said:

Iblis [Satan] then said to Allah, ‘Because You have put me in the wrong, I will lure mankind on earth and put them in the wrong, all except Your devoted servants.’¹⁷

In other words, no one is safe from Satan unless their intentions are sincere. Al-Ghazali comments on this verse, “Hence, the servant is not freed from Satan except by sincerity.”¹⁸

Moreover, sincerity is the essential quality that guards our hearts and protects us from the delusions of malice or the treachery of evil spiritual forces.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

There are three traits by which the heart of a Muslim will not be deceived (or consumed by hatred): sincere deeds for Allah, offering goodwill to the leaders of the Muslims, and keeping to their community.’¹⁹

The phrase “by which the heart of a Muslim will not be deceived” means that his or her heart will not be penetrated by malice (*al-hiqd*) or treachery (*al-khiyanah*).²⁰ Thus, one is in danger of falling into such destructive vices and traps without the protection offered by the virtues of sincerity to Allah and goodwill to people. A

¹⁶ Aḥmad ibn Shu‘ayb al-Nasā’ī. *Sunan al-Nasā’ī*. (Ḥalab: Maktab al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Islāmīyah, 1986), 6:25 #3140; declared good (*jayyid*) by Ibn Ḥajar in *Fath al-Bārī* 6:28.

¹⁷ Sūrat al-Ḥijr 15:39-40; Abdel Haleem, 265.

¹⁸ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazzālī. *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ma‘rifah, 1980), 4:378.

¹⁹ Muḥammad ibn ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī. *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Ḡarb al-Islāmī, 1998), 4:331 #2658; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* 2:1145 #6766.

²⁰ ‘Alī ibn Sulṭān Muḥammad al-Qārī. *Mirqāt al-Mafātīḥ*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr, 2002), 1:306 #228.

sincere Muslim is not full of hatred and malice towards humanity; any expressions of ill will towards others is a warning sign of deficient faith.

Ultimately, the virtue of sincerity is the key to Paradise and salvation from the Hellfire. On one occasion, a man accused another Muslim of hypocrisy in the presence of the Prophet, and the Prophet ﷺ said, “Do you not agree that he says there is no God but Allah in pursuit thereby of the countenance of Allah?” The man said, “Of course.” The Prophet said, “Verily, a servant is not brought to the Day of Resurrection saying so but that Allah will forbid him from entering the Hellfire.”²¹

Yet it is not simply the outward words of faith that make the difference between eternal salvation and damnation; the difference is the purity of heart within the person who says them, for even hypocrites use righteous words. As Ibn Mu’adh, may Allah have mercy on him, said, “Sincerity distinguishes good deeds from sins just as milk is distinguished from filth and blood.”²²

Sincerity may even save a person from making serious errors in faith and creed, so long as those errors are *honest mistakes*. For example, a man from the previous nations once had himself cremated because he feared Allah would resurrect him to punish him for his sins.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*A man had indulged himself in sin, so when death approached he enjoined his sons, saying: When I die you should burn me, pulverize me, and scatter me to the winds over the sea. By Allah, if Allah is capable he will punish me in such a way as he has not punished anyone else. So they did that to him and when he stood before his Lord, Allah said to him: What compelled you to do what you did? The man said: Fear and awe of you, O Lord. Thus, Allah forgave him due to that.*²³

²¹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 9:18 #6938.

²² Abū Ḥayyān Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf. *al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr, 1992), 1:658, verse 2:139.

²³ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2110 #2756.

Even though it is, in reality, an act of unbelief to imagine Allah is incapable of resurrecting the dead, the sincerity in the man's righteous fear was far more important. Ibn al-Qayyim comments on this *hadith*, saying, "Despite this [error in creed], Allah forgave him and had mercy upon him due to his ignorance. He had acted according to the knowledge that reached him, and he did not renounce the power of Allah out of repeated stubbornness or denial."²⁴

Sincerity must be the overriding virtue and Allah forgives the honest mistakes of his servants, as every deed is judged first by its intention. Even so, the believers must also do their best due diligence to act right in every situation. Allah judges the whole of the human being, their inward states as well as their outward actions. The Prophet ﷺ said, "Verily, Allah does not look at your appearance or wealth, but rather he looks at your hearts and actions."²⁵

As a result, we must complement our sincerity with the good conduct that should necessarily follow it. Only by sincerity in worship and charitable deeds, fulfilling both the rights of Allah and the rights of people—especially the weakest and most vulnerable groups of people—will we be granted the support of Allah in our religion and our societies. The Prophet ﷺ said, "Verily, Allah only supports this nation due to their weak, their supplications, their prayers, and their sincerity."²⁶

If we are performing religious devotions by day and transgressing the rights of others by night, then our worship is not truly sincere. Sincere prayers must result in good deeds towards others, or at least a restraint on our evil impulses.

Allah said:

*Keep up the prayer: prayer restrains outrageous and unacceptable behavior. Remembering Allah is greater: Allah knows everything you are doing.*²⁷

²⁴ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah. *Madārij al-Sālikīn*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Arabī, 1996), 1:348.

²⁵ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:1986 #2564.

²⁶ Al-Nasā’ī, *Sunan al-Nasā’ī*, 6:45 #3178; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* 1:470 #2388.

²⁷ Sūrat al-‘Ankabūt 29:45; Abdel Haleem, 402.

Likewise, a man once came to the Prophet ﷺ and he said, “A person prays in the night, but he steals in the morning.” The Prophet said, “Verily, what you say [about the prayer] should stop him.”²⁸

Such transgressions against the rights of people—all while regular outward devotions to Allah are performed—reflect a lack of sincerity and a weakness of true faith. Muslims who fail to actualize sincerity in their deeds towards others will be, in reality, completely bankrupt on the Day of Resurrection. The Prophet ﷺ once said to his companions, “Do you know who is bankrupt?” They said, “The one without money or goods is bankrupt.” The Prophet said:

*Verily, the bankrupt of my nation are those who come on the Day of Resurrection with prayers, fasting, and charity, but also with insults, slander, consuming wealth, shedding blood, and beating others. The oppressed will each be given from his good deeds. If his good deeds run out before justice is fulfilled, then their sins will be cast upon him and he will be thrown into the Hellfire.*²⁹

Such people are truly bankrupt because their good deeds, even if they were done for the sake of Allah, were otherwise canceled out by their sins against others. As the Prophet ﷺ said:

*A person might fast and he gets nothing from his fast but hunger. A person might pray at night but he gets nothing from his prayer but sleeplessness.*³⁰

For this reason, the scholars said these two conditions are required for the acceptance of any good deed: sincerity and conformity to the prophetic way (*Sunnah*). Fudayl ibn ‘Iyad, may Allah have mercy on him, said, “Allah purifies good deeds and makes them correct. Indeed, if deeds are sincere and incorrect, they will not be accepted. If deeds are correct and insincere, they will not be accepted. Rather, they are only accepted if they are both sincere and correct. Sincere means

²⁸ Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Ahmad Ibn Ḥanbal*, (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 15:483 #9778; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Arnā’ūṭ et al in their commentary.

²⁹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:1997 #2581.

³⁰ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, 1:539 #1690; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* 1:656 #3488.

they are done for Allah alone and correct means they are done according to the *Sunnah*.” Then Fudayl recited the verse, “Anyone who fears to meet his Lord should do good deeds and give no one a share in the worship due to his Lord.”³¹

The heart and the mind should work together, with sincerity to Allah guiding the use of reason. Al-Junayd, may Allah have mercy on him, said, “Verily, Allah has servants who use their minds. When they reason, they act. When they act, they are sincere. Sincerity calls them to all of the gates of righteousness.”³² Reason is certainly important but, like other virtues, it is empty without sincerity.

The importance of inward and outward righteousness is perhaps most apparent when the need arises to defend the community in military action (*al-jihād*). Any military actions that Muslims undertake must fulfill the conditions of just war laid down by the Prophet, his companions, and the scholars, including having the right intention and restricting the use of force only to what is necessary for defense.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*Expeditions are of two kinds. As for one who seeks the countenance of Allah, obeys the leader, spends in charity from his precious possessions, shows leniency to his colleagues, and avoids corruption, then the entirety of his sleep and vigilance are rewarded. As for one who fights out of pride, showing off, and seeking a reputation, who disobeys the leader and commits corruption in the land, then he will return with nothing of importance.*³³

If Muslims fight out of zealotry, pride, anger, to gain spoils, or if they transgress the strict laws of war, then they will have no reward in the Hereafter for their efforts. A man once came to the Prophet ﷺ and said, “O Messenger of Allah, a man intends to fight for the sake of Allah and he is seeking worldly gains.” The Prophet said, “There is no reward for him.” The people found that very difficult and they said, “Return to the Messenger of Allah, for perhaps he did not

³¹ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah. *I‘lām Al-Muwaqqi‘in*. (Bayrut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyah, 1991), 2:124; Sūrat al-Kahf 18:110, Abdel Haleem, 305.

³² Al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, 4:379.

³³ Abū Dāwūd Sulaymān ibn al-Ash‘ath al-Sijistānī. *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*. (Ṣaydā, Lubnān: al-Maktabah al-Aṣrīyah, 1980), 3:13 #2515; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaghīr* 2:768 #4174.

understand you.” The man returned and he said, “O Messenger of Allah, a man intends to fight for the sake of Allah and he is seeking worldly gains.” The Prophet said, “There is no reward for him.” The man returned a third time and the Prophet said, “There is no reward for him.”³⁴

In this regard, it is not permissible for Muslims to have their intentions divided in the conduct of deeds that should only be done for the sake of Allah. Having a split intention in worship or charitable deeds is, in fact, a form of sharing partners (*al-ishrak*) with Allah.³⁵ The Prophet ﷺ said:

*Allah Almighty said: Verily, I have no need of any partners. Whoever performs a deed in which he associates another besides me, I will abandon him and his partner.*³⁶

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

When Allah gathers the people on the Day of Resurrection, a day of which there is no doubt, an announcement will be made: To those who shared with anyone in deeds done for Allah, then let him seek his reward from those besides Allah. Verily, Allah is free of any partners.

³⁷

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

*O people! Make your deeds sincere for Allah Almighty. Verily, Allah does not accept any deed unless it is done sincerely for him. Do not say: This is for the sake of Allah and this is for the sake of my relatives. Verily, it was done for your relatives and none of it was for Allah. And do not say: This is for the sake of Allah and for your sake. Verily, it was done for their sake and none of it was for Allah.*³⁸

³⁴ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, 13:277 #7900; declared fair due to external evidence (*ḥasan li ghayri*) by Al-Arnā'ūt et al in their commentary.

³⁵ Al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, 4:379.

³⁶ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2289 #2985.

³⁷ Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 5:165 #3154; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* 1:145 #482.

³⁸ 'Alī ibn 'Umar al-Dāraqutnī. *Sunan al-Dāraqutnī*. (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2004), 1:77 #133; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Silsilat al-Ṣaḥīḥah* (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1996), 6:624 #2764.

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

*Give glad tidings to this nation of honor, victory, and stability. Yet, whoever does a deed of the Hereafter for the sake of the world, then he will have no portion of it in the Hereafter.*³⁹

And Abū al-‘Aliyah, may Allah have mercy on him, said, “The companions of Muhammad ﷺ said to me: Do not do a good deed for anyone besides Allah, for Allah will leave you in the charge of the one for whom you did it.”⁴⁰ This prohibited split intention is only when it involves doing an act of worship for something else besides Allah. It is permissible, for example, to conduct worldly business during the Hajj pilgrimage season, as this kind of split intention does not involve dedicating an act of worship or a good deed to anyone else.

If a deed is done for the sake of a false God, that is the greater idolatry (*al-shirk al-akbar*) which removes a Muslim from the fold of Islam entirely. However, if a good deed is done to show off for people, what is known as ostentation, then this is the lesser idolatry (*al-shirk al-asghar*); a tremendous sin, to be sure, but one that does not expel Muslims from Islam altogether. In order for a believer to be purely sincere, he or she must avoid both the greater and lesser forms of idolatry. Sa’id ibn Jubayr, may Allah have mercy on him, said, “Sincerity is to not associate partners with Allah in one’s religion and to not display ostentation in good deeds to anyone.”⁴¹

In a way, the lesser idolatry of ostentation is even more dangerous than the greater idolatry, due to the fact that it can involve such a subtle defect in our intentions. The Prophet ﷺ once said to the companions, “Verily, my greater fear for you is the lesser idolatry.” They said, “What is the lesser idolatry, O Messenger of Allah?” The Prophet said:

It is ostentation (or “showing off”). Allah Almighty will say to them on the Day of Resurrection, when people are being recompensed for

³⁹ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, 35:147 #21223; declared strong (*qawī*) by Al-Arnā’ūṭ et al in their commentary.

⁴⁰ Ibn al-Sarī. *Kitāb al-Zuhd*. (Kuwait: Dār al-Khulafā’ lil-Kitāb al-Islāmī, 1985), 2:435.

⁴¹ Abū Ḥayyān, *al-Bahr al-Muḥīt*, 1:658, verse 2:139.

*their deeds: Go to those for whom you made a show in the world and look, do you find any reward with them?*⁴²

In another narration, the Prophet ﷺ said to his companion, “O Abu Bakr, there is idolatry among you more hidden than the crawling of an ant.” Abu Bakr said, “Is there idolatry other than to make another Allah alongside Allah?” The Prophet said:

*By The One in Whose Hand is my soul, there is idolatry more hidden than the crawling of an ant. Shall I not tell you something to say to rid you of it, both minor and major? Say: O Allah, I seek refuge in you that I associate partners with you while I know, and I seek your forgiveness for what I do not know.*⁴³

This is a humbling supplication that we should repeat often, as in it we acknowledge the potential for subtle defects in our intentions.

To be clear, the trial of ostentation is even more dangerous than the great tribulations near the end of time. The Prophet ﷺ once came to the companions while they were discussing the False Messiah (*al-Masih al-Dajjal*). The Prophet said, “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.”⁴⁴

We ought to strive to help those around us who are enduring the suffering of trials, no doubt. But as far as our own souls are concerned, our more immediate worry should be the trials within our own hearts. Every day we must work to perform our daily prayers with reverence (*al-khushu'*) and to avoid praying and behaving with the manners of a hypocrite.

Allah said:

⁴² Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, 39:39 #23630; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaghīr* 1:323 #1555.

⁴³ Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī. *al-Adab al-Mufrad*. (al-Rīyāq: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif lil-Nashr wal-Tawzī', 1998), 1:377 #716; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in his commentary.

⁴⁴ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, 2:1406 #4204; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaghīr* 1:509 #2607.

*So woe to those who pray but are heedless of their prayer; those who are all show and forbid common kindnesses.*⁴⁵

And Allah said:

*The hypocrites try to deceive Allah, but it is He who causes them to be deceived. When they stand up to pray, they do so sluggishly, showing off in front of people, and remember Allah only a little.*⁴⁶

When we pray and fast, our concern should not be whether others view us as pious or not. Beautifying the prayer or displaying the discomfort of fasting for the sake of people is simply another act of lesser idolatry. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Whoever prays to be seen has associated partners with Allah. Whoever fasts to be seen has associated partners with Allah.”⁴⁷

Avoiding ostentation applies not only to acts of worship, but also to any act of religious devotion such as seeking Islamic knowledge. The Prophet ﷺ said:

*Whoever seeks knowledge that should be sought for the sake of Allah Almighty, but only to gain some worldly benefit, then he will never smell the fragrance of Paradise on the Day of Resurrection.*⁴⁸

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

*Whoever seeks knowledge in order to impress the scholars, or to argue with the foolish, or to attract the attention of people, then Allah will admit him into Hellfire.*⁴⁹

Indeed, one of the pitfalls of the students of sacred knowledge is to become embroiled in controversies and debates to the point that they forget why they are

⁴⁵ Sūrat al-Mā’ūn 107:4-7; Abdel Haleem, 603.

⁴⁶ Sūrat al-Nisā’ 4:142; Abdel Haleem, 142.

⁴⁷ Abū Bakr Aḥmad al-Bazzār. *al-Baḥr al-Zakhkhār al-Ma’rūf bi-Musnad al-Bazzār*. (al-Madīnah al-Munawwarah: Maktabat al-‘Ulūm wal-Ḥikam, 2009), 8:407 #3482; declared fair (ḥasan) by Ibn Kathīr in *Jāmi’ al-Masānīd wal-Sunan* (Bayrūt: Dār Khayr, 1998), 4:211-212 #5151.

⁴⁸ Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, 3:323 #3664; declared authentic (ṣaḥīḥ) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaghīr* 2:1060 #6159.

⁴⁹ Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 4:329 #2654; declared fair (ḥasan) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaghīr* 2:1091 #6383.

studying Islam in the first place. It is very easy for a student to become distracted by the pomp and show of scholarship and academia.

In the end, it takes a constant and relentless internal struggle against our caprice and base desires to achieve true sincerity and purity of heart, what scholars such as Ibn Rajab refer to as the greater *jihad* (*al-jihad al-akbar*) or *jihad* of the heart (*jihad al-qalb*).⁵⁰ Ma'ruf al-Karkhi, may Allah have mercy on him, would strike himself and say, “O my soul! Be sincere and purify yourself!”⁵¹

This is a spiritual struggle and a *jihad* that we cannot afford to lose, lest we lose our opportunity for salvation. Many hypocrites who were considered by people to be righteous Muslims in the world—either as brave warriors, scholars, or pious worshippers—will be exposed on the Day of Resurrection for the fraudulent motives of their diseased hearts.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

Verily, the first people to be judged on the Day of Resurrection will be a man who was martyred. He will be brought, the blessings of Allah will be made known, and he will acknowledge them. Allah will say: What did you do about them? The man will say: I fought in your cause until I was martyred. Allah will say: You have lied, for you fought only that it would be said you were brave, and thus it was said. Then, Allah will order him to be dragged upon his face until he is cast into Hellfire. Another man studied religious knowledge, taught others, and recited the Qur'ān. He will be brought, the blessings of Allah will be made known and he will acknowledge them. Allah will say: What did you do about them? The man will say: I learned religious knowledge, taught others, and I recited the Qur'ān for your sake. Allah will say: You have lied, for you studied only that it would be said you are a scholar and you recited the Qur'ān only that it would be said you are a reciter, and thus it was said. Then, Allah will order him to be dragged upon his face until he is cast into Hellfire. Another man was

⁵⁰ Ibn Rajab. *Jāmi' al-'Ulūm wal-Ḥikam*. (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 1:489 #19.

⁵¹ Ibn Qudāmah, *Mukhtaṣar Minhāj al-Qāṣidīn*, 1:365.

*given an abundance of blessings from Allah and every kind of wealth. He will be brought, the blessings of Allah will be made known and he will acknowledge them. Allah will say: What did you do about them? The man will say: I did not leave any good cause beloved to you but that I spent on it for your sake. Allah will say: You have lied, for you spent only that it would be said you are generous, and thus it was said. Then, Allah will order him to be dragged upon his face until he is cast into Hellfire.*⁵²

As sincerity towards Allah is the starting point in the fulfillment of all religious duties—inward and outward, for Allah and for fellow creatures—it cannot be forced upon anyone in any way. Sincerity must come organically from within the heart of a person, either by self-discovery or persuasion. Compulsion in religion has no place in Islam at all.

Allah said:

*There is no compulsion in religion: true guidance has become distinct from error, so whoever rejects false gods and believes in Allah has grasped the firmest handhold, one that will never break. Allah is All-Hearing and All-Knowing.*⁵³

And Allah said:

*Say, 'Now the truth has come from your Lord: let those who wish to believe in it do so, and let those who wish to reject it do so.'*⁵⁴

And Allah said:

*So [Prophet] warn them: your only task is to give warning, you are not there to control them.*⁵⁵

Sa'id ibn Zayd commented on this verse, saying, "You are not an authority over them to coerce them into faith."⁵⁶ In other words, the Prophet ﷺ was not given a

⁵² Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 3:1513 #1905.

⁵³ Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:256; Abdel Haleem, 43.

⁵⁴ Sūrat al-Kahf 18:29; Abdel Haleem, 298.

⁵⁵ Sūrat al-Ghāshiyah 88:21-22; Abdel Haleem, 593.

⁵⁶ Al-Tabarī, *Jāmi' al-Bayān 'an Ta'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, (al-Rabāt: Dār Hajr lil-Tibā'ah wal-Nashr, 2001), 24:341.

mandate to force people to embrace Islam. In several verses, Allah reminds the believers time and again that the only duty of the prophets was to deliver the message.

Allah said:

*Whoever obeys the Messenger obeys Allah. If some pay no heed, We have not sent you to be their keeper.*⁵⁷

And Allah said:

*If you say this is a lie, [be warned that] other communities before you said the same. The messenger's only duty is to give clear warning.*⁵⁸

And Allah said:

*Are the messengers obliged to do anything other than deliver [their message] clearly?*⁵⁹

And Allah said:

*Say, 'Obey Allah; obey the Messenger. If you turn away, [know that] he is responsible for the duty placed upon him, and you are responsible for the duty placed upon you. If you obey him, you will be rightly guided, but the Messenger's duty is only to deliver the message clearly.'*⁶⁰

And Allah said:

*Obey Allah, obey the Messenger, and always be on your guard: if you pay no heed, bear in mind that the sole duty of Our Messenger is to deliver the message clearly.*⁶¹

And Allah said:

⁵⁷ Sūrat al-Nisā' 4:80; Abdel Haleem, 92.

⁵⁸ Sūrat al-'Ankabūt 29:18; Abdel Haleem, 399.

⁵⁹ Sūrat al-Naḥl 16:35; Abdel Haleem, 272.

⁶⁰ Sūrat al-Nūr 24:54; Abdel Haleem, 358.

⁶¹ Sūrat al-Mā'idah 5:92; Abdel Haleem, 124.

They said, ‘Our Lord knows that we have been sent to you. Our duty is only to deliver the message to you.’⁶²

If Allah wanted to compel everyone to follow one religion, he could have created people without free will or he could have mandated his prophets to force people into compliance. Allah did neither of those things because His will is to test the sincerity of people’s faith in this world.

Allah said:

Had your Lord willed, all the people on earth would have believed. So can you [Prophet] compel people to believe?⁶³

And Allah said:

We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to Allah and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about.⁶⁴

Religious difference is natural and inevitable; Allah allows it as it is his will to test the sincerity of people. Rather than provoking conflict from such differences, Allah tells us to “race to do good,” as if to compete in charitable works. Even when the Prophet ﷺ had to fight others to defend his community and their right to practice Islam, he never compelled anyone to enter Islam—not once, not ever. The prophetic method of spreading Islam is by persuasion, not by persecution.

Ibn al-Qayyim writes:

[The Prophet] never forced the religion upon anyone, but rather he only fought those who waged war against him and fought him first. As for those who made peace with him or conducted a truce, then he never fought them and he never compelled them to enter his religion,

⁶² Sūrat Yā Sīn 36:16-17; Abdel Haleem, 442.

⁶³ Sūrat Yūnus 10:99; Abdel Haleem, 221.

⁶⁴ Sūrat al-Mā'idah 5:48; Abdel Haleem, 117.

*as his Lord the Almighty had commanded him: There is no compulsion in religion, for right guidance is distinct from error.*⁶⁵

In sum, Allah wants people's hearts; he does not want servants forced into hypocritical and empty worship. As Al-Susi, may Allah have mercy on him, said, "Allah only desires sincerity in the deeds of his creatures."⁶⁶

Honesty

Related to sincerity is the virtue of honesty and truthfulness. Like sincerity, honesty has implications both in relation to Allah and in relation to our behavior towards others.

Allah said:

*You who believe, be mindful of Allah: stand with those who are true.*⁶⁷

All of the prophets, peace and blessings be upon them, were truthful and honest people whom Allah praised for their honesty.

Allah said:

*Mention too, in the Qur'an, the story of Abraham. He was a man of truth, a prophet.*⁶⁸

And Allah said:

*Mention too, in the Qur'an, the story of Ishmael. He was true to his promise, a messenger and a prophet.*⁶⁹

And Allah said:

*Mention too, in the Qur'an, the story of Idris. He was a man of truth, a prophet.*⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah. *Hidāyat al-Hayārā*. (Dimashq: Dār al-Qalam, 1996), 1:237.

⁶⁶ Al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn*, 4:379.

⁶⁷ Sūrat al-Tawbah 9:119; Abdel Haleem, 207.

⁶⁸ Sūrat Maryam 19:41; Abdel Haleem, 309.

⁶⁹ Sūrat Maryam 19:54; Abdel Haleem, 310.

⁷⁰ Sūrat Maryam 19:56; Abdel Haleem, 310.

Honesty is, first and foremost, with respect to Allah, and it is synonymous with sincerity as we have mentioned. Whoever achieves pure honesty with Allah will be admitted to Paradise.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*No one testifies that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah—honestly from the heart (sidq min qalbih)—but that Allah will forbid him from entering Hellfire.*⁷¹

Like sincerity, however, honesty with Allah must correlate with honesty towards others. ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab, may Allah be pleased with him, said, “The best deeds are to fulfill the obligations of Allah, to be mindful of the prohibitions of Allah, and to have an honest intention before Allah Almighty.”⁷² In this saying, Umar mentions obligations and prohibitions, which includes duties towards other people, alongside an honest intention with Allah. Both sets of duties—to Allah and to people—are not mutually exclusive; they must be done sincerely altogether. As Abu Bakr al-Warraq said, “Preserve honesty in what is between you and Allah Almighty, and kindness in what is between you and the creation.”⁷³

Telling the truth or telling lies are habits that are learned and, if necessary, must be unlearned. We should practice telling the truth so often that it becomes our second nature, that we always tell the truth without any effort, for this is the mark of a pure heart that will be admitted into Paradise.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*You must be truthful. Verily, truthfulness leads to righteousness and righteousness leads to Paradise. A man continues to be truthful and encourages honesty until he is recorded with Allah as truthful. And beware of falsehood. Verily, falsehood leads to wickedness and wickedness leads to the Hellfire. A man continues tell lies and encourages falsehood until he is recorded with Allah as a liar.*⁷⁴

⁷¹ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:37 #128.

⁷² Ibn Rajab, *Jāmi’ al-‘Ulūm wal-Ḥikam*, 2:336 #38.

⁷³ Al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, 4:387.

⁷⁴ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2103 #2607.

Dishonesty in words, by contrast, was one of the sins that the Prophet detested most. Aisha, may Allah be pleased with her, said, “There was no behavior more hateful to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ than dishonesty. A man would tell a lie when speaking in the presence of the Prophet and he would not be satisfied until he knew that he had repented.”⁷⁵ The Prophet made sure everyone who lied in public had repented, as the sin of false witness is indeed tremendous.

Thus, we ought to strive towards comprehensive honesty in all aspects of our lives—inwardly and outwardly. According to Al-Ghazali, the virtue of honesty includes truthfulness in one’s words, deeds, and intentions.⁷⁶ The crux of the matter is that our outward actions must coincide with our inward state; the good words we say and the good deeds we do should be authentic expressions of the goodness in our hearts and in our character.

Mutarraf, may Allah have mercy on him, said, “Verily, when the inward state of the servant matches his public behavior, Allah says: This is my true servant.”⁷⁷ And Abu Ya’qub al-Nahrajuri, may Allah have mercy on him, said, “Honesty is to be consistent with the truth in private and public. The reality of honesty is to speak the truth in matters of grave importance.”⁷⁸

The heart and tongue are intimately connected; honest words come forth from a pure heart. It was once said to the Prophet “Which of the people is best?” The Prophet ﷺ said, “Everyone who is pure of heart and truthful in speech.” They said, “Truthful in speech we know, but what is a pure heart?” The Prophet said, “It is a heart that fears Allah and is clean. There is no sin in it and neither aggression, malice, or envy.”⁷⁹

In a variant of this tradition, the companions said, “And who shows a sign [of a pure heart]?” The Prophet said, “A believer with good character.”⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, 3:416 #1973; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Tirmidhī in his commentary.

⁷⁶ Al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, 4:387-388.

⁷⁷ Ibn al-Sarī, *Kitāb al-Zuhd*, 1:300 #530.

⁷⁸ Shams al-Dīn Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Dhahabī. *Siyar A’lām al-Nubalā’*. (al-Qāhirah: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2006), 11:465.

⁷⁹ Ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, 2:1409 #4216; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Targhīb* (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif, 2000), 3:99 #2889.

⁸⁰ Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Bayhaqī. *Shu‘ab al-Īmān*. (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Rushd lil-Nashr wal-Tawzī’, 2003), 6:449 #4462.

As with sincerity, an honest heart is one that is not deluded and misled by hatred and malice; it is the container of righteous character from which good deeds and goodwill emerge. To purify the heart, then, is to develop a habit of telling the truth and being honest with all those around us, to our family, our friends, our colleagues, and our neighbors.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*The faith of a servant is not upright until his heart is upright, and his heart is not upright until his tongue is upright. A man will not enter Paradise if his neighbor is not secure from his evil.*⁸¹

When we are honest with Allah and with others, we will find that all of our affairs will come together and any problems we have will work themselves out. ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab wrote to Abu Musa, may Allah be pleased with them both, saying, “Whoever purifies his intention, then Allah will take care of his affairs between people. And whoever embellishes for people what Allah knows is not in his heart, then Allah Almighty will disgrace him.”⁸² On the contrary, dishonesty in heart and mind produces the uneasiness of cognitive dissonance, which can lead rather quickly to public exposure and humiliation.

How can we assess our level of honesty? Al-Tha‘labi narrates a wise proverb, “A man does not reach the peak of righteousness (*al-taqwa*) until it is such that, were he to place what is in his heart on a plate and go around the market with it, he would not be ashamed of anything on it.”⁸³ If you carry nothing in your heart that would shame you if made public, then you have achieved the summit of spiritual excellence. Most of us—not least this author!—are nowhere near such a pure state.

The vice of hypocrisy, like idolatry, is divided into two levels: greater and lesser hypocrisy. The greater hypocrisy (*al-nifaq al-akbar*) is one who pretends to have faith while concealing unbelief in his heart. Such an act is merely a form of

⁸¹ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, 20:343 #13048; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Targhīb* 2:680 #2554.

⁸² Abū Nu‘aym Ahmad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Iṣbahānī. *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā’ wa Ṭabaqāt al-Aṣfiyā’*. (Miṣr: Maṭba‘at al-Sa’ādah, 1974), 1:50.

⁸³ Al-Tha‘labī. *Al-Kashf wal-Bayān ‘an Tafṣīr al-Qur’ān*. (Bayrut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 2002), 1:144.

unbelief. On the other hand, the lesser hypocrisy (*al-nifāq al-asghar*) is to have any amount of dishonesty in our deeds.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*There are four signs that make someone a pure hypocrite and whoever has them has a characteristic of hypocrisy until he abandons it: when he speaks he lies, when he makes a covenant he is treacherous, when he makes a promise he breaks it, and when he argues he is wicked.*⁸⁴

It is possible for us to have elements of faith and hypocrisy in our hearts at the same time, as hypocrisy exists along a spectrum, as a matter of degree, rather than a discrete category. Again, it takes a constant struggle to maintain the virtue of honesty in everything that we do. As Sufyan al-Thawri, may Allah have mercy on him, said:

*You must be honest in all things. Beware of lying and treachery and sitting with those who commit them, for it will all be a burden of sin. Beware, my brother, of ostentation in words and deeds, as it is a form of idolatry. Beware of vanity, for good deeds within which is vanity will not be exalted.*⁸⁵

Perhaps the most important social aspect of honesty is to be faithful to all of our contracts (*al-‘uqūd*), promises (*al-wu‘ūd*), covenants (*al-‘uhūd*), and trusts (*al-amanah*).

Allah said:

*You who believe, fulfil your obligations.*⁸⁶

The word “obligations” in this verse refers to all types of covenants, those between Allah and those between people.

As believers, we ought to be trustworthy enough to fulfill our word when we give it. The sign of a true believer is to emulate the honesty of Prophet Muhammad,

⁸⁴ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:78 #58.

⁸⁵ Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā’*, 7:82.

⁸⁶ Sūrat al-Mā’idah 5:1; Abdel Haleem, 107.

who himself was known by his people even before Islam as “the Trustworthy” (*al-Amin*).

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*The Muslim is the one from whose tongue and hand the people are safe, and the believer is the one people trust with their lives and wealth.*⁸⁷

Similarly, an inability or unwillingness to follow up on our trusts is a sign of weak faith or, worse, no true faith at all. The faith of a Muslim believer is only as good as his or her word and promise. The Prophet ﷺ said, “There is no faith for one who cannot be trusted. There is no religion for one who cannot uphold a covenant.”⁸⁸

Citizenship is a modern form of public trust. As Muslims, we should be productive citizens of whatever country in which we live. The Prophet ﷺ instructed his companion Fudayk, saying, “O Fudayk, establish prayer, avoid sins, and live in the land with your people wherever you wish.”⁸⁹

As long as we can practice our religion and avoid sins, we may live anywhere in the world. Yet wherever we are, we must leave its land and its people better than how we found it. We should contribute to the collective betterment of humanity, to both Muslims and non-Muslims, as honest and trustworthy neighbors.

The honesty of citizens is, in reality, what protects society from the tyranny of oppressive governments. Honesty in this context is a form of bravery, to speak the truth in the face of danger. When those in power commit great wrongs, we are called to speak out against it with honesty, courage, and compassion.

The Prophet ﷺ said, “Let not fear of the people prevent one of you from saying the truth if he knows it.”⁹⁰ Honesty in such a case is also *jihad* in the way of Allah. Indeed, it is among the best and greatest deeds of *jihad*. A man asked Prophet,

⁸⁷ Al-Nasā'ī, *Sunan al-Nasā'ī*, 8:104 #4995; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Albānī in *Ṣaḥīḥ Sunan al-Nasā'ī* (al-Riyāḍ: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 1998), 3:342 #5010.

⁸⁸ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, 19:376 #12383; declared fair (*ḥasan*) by Al-Arnā'ūṭ et al in their commentary.

⁸⁹ Muḥammad ibn Ḥibbān. *Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān*. (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1988), 11:202 #4861; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Ibn 'Abd al-Barr in *al-Istidhkār* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 2000), 7:277.

⁹⁰ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, 17:490 #11402; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Arnā'ūṭ et al in their commentary.

“What is the best *jihad*?” The Prophet ﷺ said, “A word of truth in front of a tyrannical ruler.”⁹¹

As Muslims, we should expect others to be honest and forthright with us when something we do is wrong. ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-Aziz, may Allah have mercy on him, would say, “May Allah have mercy on a man who shows me my faults.”⁹² The truth is often a bitter, but necessary, medicine. No citizen should be prevented from appropriately expressing their honest feelings about our collective social problems. Their honesty just might be, in fact, our remedy.

Goodwill

Sincerity and honesty are related to another essential virtue in Islam: goodwill. We should have good intentions towards everyone and everything, to Allah and to all of his creatures. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Religion is goodwill.” It was said, “To whom?” The Prophet said, “To Allah, his book, his messenger, the leaders of the Muslims and their common people.”⁹³

Put differently, the essence of Islam itself is goodwill in all things.

Abu Dawud considered this *hadith* to be one of four around which jurisprudence (*al-fiqh*) revolved. Several other scholars considered it of great importance, some referring to it as one-fourth of Islam.⁹⁴ The word “goodwill” has a very wide meaning, but it can be concisely defined as a good intention towards another. Ibn Daqiq writes, “Goodwill is a comprehensive word meaning completely good intent for one counseled to obtain prosperity... There is no word in Arabic more comprehensive for goodness in this life and in the Hereafter than it.”⁹⁵

Cultivating goodwill in our hearts towards all creatures is among the best acts of worship. The Prophet ﷺ said, “Allah Almighty said: The most beloved act with

⁹¹ Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, 31:126 #18830; declared authentic (*ṣaḥīḥ*) by Al-Arnā’ūṭ et al in their commentary.

⁹² Muḥammad ibn Ibrāhīm al-Kalābādhī. *Baḥr al-Fawā’id al-Mashhūr bi-Ma’ānī al-Akhbār*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīyah, 1999), 1:129.

⁹³ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:74 #55.

⁹⁴ Ibn Rajab, *Jāmi’ al-‘Ulūm wal-Ḥikam*, 1:215-216 #7.

⁹⁵ Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī ibn Daqīq. *Sharḥ al-Arba’īn al-Nawawīyah*. (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Rayyān, 2003), 1:50 #7.

which my servant worships me is goodwill for my sake.”⁹⁶ And Ibn al-Mubarak, may Allah have mercy on him, was asked, “Which deed is best?” He said, “Goodwill for the sake of Allah.”⁹⁷

Goodwill in these traditions, as in others, is with respect to Allah and people in general. Goodwill with respect to Allah is to have sincerity (*al-ikhlas*) in all of one’s affairs, as previously discussed.⁹⁸ That is, to worship Allah free from any idolatry, ostentation, compulsion, or other ulterior motives. Goodwill with respect to people is to offer sound and helpful advice, but its essence, according to Ibn Daqiq, is “to love for them what one loves for himself of goodness and to dislike for them what one dislikes for himself of offenses.”⁹⁹ This is none other than *the golden rule*, to treat others the way we want to be treated.

The Prophet ﷺ said:

*None of you has faith until he loves for his brother or his neighbor what he loves for himself.*¹⁰⁰

And the Prophet ﷺ said:

*Whoever would love to be saved from Hellfire and admitted into Paradise, then let him meet his end with faith in Allah and the Last Day, and let him treat people the way he would love to be treated.*¹⁰¹

As in other religions, the golden rule, i.e., treat others the way you want to be treated, is an all-embracing principle of good conduct in Islam. Al-Nawawi comments on this *hadith*, saying, “This is among the comprehensive sayings of the Prophet ﷺ, his marvelous wisdom, and an important rule. It deserves to be given close attention: that the human being must not treat people except in a way he would love to be treated by them.”¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Ibn Hanbal, *Musnad Ahmad*, 36:529 #22191; declared fair (*hasan*) by Al-Suyūṭī in *al-Tanwīr Sharḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaghīr* (al-Riyāḍ: Muḥammad Ishāq Muḥammad Ibrāhīm, 2011), 8:10 #6021.

⁹⁷ Ibn Abī Dunyā. *Kitāb al-Amr bil-Ma’rūf*. (al-Madīnah: Maktabat al-Ghurabā’ al-Atharīyah, 1997), 1:107 #71.

⁹⁸ Al-Ṣan’ānī, *al-Tanwīr Sharḥ al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaghīr*, 8:10 #6021.

⁹⁹ Ibn Daqīq, *Sharḥ al-Arba’īn al-Nawawīyah*, 1:52 #7.

¹⁰⁰ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:67 #45.

¹⁰¹ Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 3:1472 #1844.

¹⁰² Al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ al-Nawawī ‘alā Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 12:233.

Adherence to the golden rule is not simply something to be encouraged in Islam. As these traditions suggest, this principle is integral to faith in Islam and salvation in the Hereafter. Consequently, it was included in the pledge that the companions gave to the Prophet himself. Jarir ibn Abdullah, may Allah be pleased with him, said, “I pledged allegiance to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ to establish prayer, to give charity, and to have goodwill towards every Muslim.”¹⁰³

Al-Ghazali explains that the companions considered the golden rule to be embedded in their pledge to Allah, the Prophet, and Islam:

*They understood it is part of goodwill (al-nush) that one should not be pleased for his brother to have except what pleases himself. They did not believe it was [merely] virtuous and an increase in [spiritual] ranks. Rather, they believed it was a condition of Islam within their pledge to him.*¹⁰⁴

Al-Subki notes that the principle of good conduct in traditions like these is inclusive of non-Muslims, even if the text refers only to Muslims. Traditions that contain the words “Muslim” or “brother” are often meant to convey a situation Muslims would normally find themselves in—interacting with other Muslims—and are not meant to be restricted only to Muslims because “the generality of it is established by other evidence.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, we should apply the golden rule with everyone, both Muslims and non-Muslims, friends and enemies. In this respect, Al-Nawawi referred to humanity as a “universal brotherhood” (*‘umum al-ikhwah*) deserving of altruistic “religious love” (*al-mahabbat al-diniyyah*).¹⁰⁶

The universality of goodwill in Islam is demonstrated in the stories of the prophets, peace and blessings be upon them. They approached their peoples in a spirit of brotherhood and goodwill, even though at the time they were idolaters and unbelievers.

¹⁰³ Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 1:21 #57.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Ghazzālī, *Iḥyā’ ‘Ulūm al-Dīn*, 2:76.

¹⁰⁵ Yahyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī. *Al-Majmū’ Sharḥ al-Muhadhab*. ([Bayrūt]: Dār al-Fikr), 12:117.

¹⁰⁶ Yahyā ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī, *Kitāb al-Arba’īn al-Nawawīyah wa Sharḥuh*. ([Cairo]: Dār Ḥarā’ lil-Kitāb, 1987), 38.

The Prophet Noah صلى الله عليه وسلم said:

*I am delivering my Lord's messages to you and giving you sincere advice. I know things from Allah that you do not.*¹⁰⁷

And the Prophet Hud صلى الله عليه وسلم said:

*I am delivering my Lord's messages to you. I am your sincere and honest adviser.*¹⁰⁸

And the Prophet Salih صلى الله عليه وسلم said:

*My people, I delivered my Lord's messages to you and gave you sincere advice, but you did not like those who gave sincere advice.*¹⁰⁹

On the basis of goodwill, and the golden rule it implies, scholars derive the equality (*al-musawah*) of believers and, to be more precise, the virtue of giving preference (*al-tafdil*) to others.¹¹⁰ Since the principle of goodwill extends to all of humanity, there is precedent in Islam for agreement with non-Muslims on a common understanding of human rights and political reconciliation. There is still much work to be done to achieve and restore justice, human rights, and political reconciliation among the nations of the world. Nevertheless, we should approach people in general with a spirit of goodwill similar to the prophets.

Bad will or malevolence (*al-ghish*) is yet another characteristic of hypocrisy that we must avoid. Ali ibn Abi Talib, may Allah be pleased with him, said, “Verily, the believers are people with goodwill between themselves, even if they reside far away from each other. The hypocrites are people with malevolence between themselves.”¹¹¹

People with such malevolence often approach others with “two faces” (*wajhayn*), saying one thing while concealing another in their heart. They may even intentionally give bad advice, like a swindler or a con man. This vice is a type of dishonesty only exhibited by the worst of humanity.

¹⁰⁷ Sūrat al-Aʿrāf 7:62; Abdel Haleem, 159.

¹⁰⁸ Sūrat al-Aʿrāf 7:68; Abdel Haleem, 68.

¹⁰⁹ Sūrat al-Aʿrāf 7:79; Abdel Haleem, 161.

¹¹⁰ Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-Bārī*, 1:58.

¹¹¹ ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥasan ibn ‘Asākir. *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr, 1995), 23:465.

The Prophet ﷺ said, “Verily, among the worst of people is one with two faces, he who comes with one face to these and another to those.”¹¹² And Bilal ibn Sa’d, may Allah have mercy on him, said, “Do not be one with two faces and two tongues, making a show for people to praise you while your heart is wicked.”¹¹³

The greatest Muslims never behaved with such a malevolent spirit. Neither did they achieve anything from ostentatious displays of piety. Rather, they were great because of their sincerity, honesty, and goodwill. As Fudayl ibn ‘Iyad, may Allah have mercy on him, said, “Those who achieved [greatness] never did so, in our view, with an abundance of fasts, nor prayers. Indeed, they only achieved it, in our view, with the spirit of generosity, purity of heart, and sincerity to the community.”

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Conclusion

Sincerity, honesty, and goodwill are essential virtues in Islamic teachings. They must guide our behavior at every level: with Allah, with people, and within our own selves. Our most important goal is to facilitate and encourage sincerity to Allah, by persuasion and good example; faith displayed out of compulsion or in a state of hypocrisy has no value. Honest citizens contribute to the health of our societies by performing their duties and courageously speaking the truth on social problems; honesty is always valuable, even if it is mistaken. Goodwill embodies the ethics of reciprocity and equal treatment, setting a precedent for political reconciliation among the nations of the world; on this basis, we can pursue an understanding of human rights and dignity across religions and cultures. But most importantly, these virtues are obligations that we must fulfill—inwardly and outwardly—if we are to be granted salvation and admittance into Paradise.

Success comes from Allah, and Allah knows best.

¹¹² Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 9:71 #7179.

¹¹³ Ibn Abī Dunyā, *al-Ikhlāṣ wal-Nīyah*. (Dimashq: Dār al-Bashā’ir, 1992), 1:55 #28.

¹¹⁴ Abū Nu‘aym, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā’*, 8:103.

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