

## Taking Account of the Self (al-Muḥāsabah)

الْمَرْءُ أَحْسِبَ النَّاسُ أَنْ يُتْرَكُوا أَنْ يَقُولُوا ءَامَنَّا وَهُمْ لَا يُفْتَنُونَ. وَلَقَدْ فَتَنَّا الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ فَلَيَعْلَمَنَّ اللَّهُ  
الَّذِينَ صَدَقُوا وَلَيَعْلَمَنَّ الْكَاذِبِينَ

**"Alif, Lām, Meem. Do the people think that they will be left to say, 'We believe' and they will not be tried? But We have certainly tried those before them, and Allah will surely make evident those who are truthful, and He will surely make evident the liars."<sup>1</sup>**

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The duty of enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong is especially difficult when practiced on one's own self. Familiarity takes the edge off of criticism; and the Shayṭān is ever prepared to defend the erring soul with countless excuses, for this is his last stronghold and he will never abandon it willingly. When the Shayṭān loses hope of affecting a believer's deeds or speech, he seeks to invade the heart and strike at the root of righteousness – intention. By corrupting the intention, he will win the soul; by injecting it with *shirk*,<sup>2</sup> he will make it unacceptable to Allah *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā*, because in His sight, "Deeds are only according to intentions."<sup>3</sup> A sensitive believer who knows the weaknesses of the soul can be on guard against whisperings of the Shayṭān and not lose sight of "*aṣ-Ṣirāṭ al-Mustaqīm*."

‘Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb advised, "Call yourselves to account before you are called to account." Undoubtedly, Allah has given us the means by which to do this:

وَهَدَيْنَاهُ النَّجْدَيْنِ

**"And have shown him the two ways."<sup>4</sup>**

In other words, mankind has been given the tools with which to distinguish good from evil, and right from wrong: observation, perception, conscience, judgement and emotion, all in a delicate balance. But even so, as we are reminded by Imām Ibn al-Qayyim, such assessment is difficult unless one has the following:

1. The light of wisdom – the light by which Allah has enlightened the hearts of those who follow the teachings of the prophets
2. The ability to discern between blessings and trials in what Allah has provided, i.e., one's wealth, time, skills, opportunities, influence, etc. – That which is used in ways pleasing to Allah contains blessings and benefit, but that which is used otherwise will be evidence against the soul on the Day of Judgement.

<sup>1</sup>Sūrah al-‘Ankabūt, 29:1-3.

<sup>2</sup>Associating another with Allah, attributing His characteristics to others beside Him, invoking other than Him or obeying others instead of Him.

<sup>3</sup>Part of a ḥadīth narrated by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

<sup>4</sup>Sūrah al-Balad, 90:10.

3. Suspicion of the self, which leads to a more complete inspection – For indeed, none will harbor a negative thought about his own soul except one who knows it well, while one who thinks well of his soul is most ignorant of himself.<sup>5</sup>

Except for the most private forms of worship, most of our deeds are observed by others and judged by them. However, Allah *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā* is concerned with what is in the heart. "Allah does not look to your bodies or your faces, but He looks to your hearts and deeds."<sup>6</sup> The quantity of deeds is therefore less important than the quality (how and why). No matter what the impression of our fellow men, the true intention behind every word and action is known only by Allah, and it is He who judges from the position of absolute familiarity with every soul and every circumstance.

يَعْلَمُ خَائِنَةَ الْأَعْيُنِ وَمَا تُخْفِي الصُّدُورُ

***"He knows that which deceives the eyes and what the breasts conceal."***<sup>7</sup>

How easy it is to make excuses or justify oneself to others. However, one must constantly remember that Allah is aware of the entire truth; therefore, we ourselves must face the truth as well. Speaking directly to His servants in the Qur'ān, Allah says:

وَأَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ فَاحْذَرُوهُ

***"And know that Allah knows what is within yourselves, so beware of Him."***<sup>8</sup>

وَأَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ تَحُولُ بَيْنَ الْمَرْءِ وَقَلْبِهِ وَأَنَّهُ إِلَيْهِ تُحْشَرُونَ

***"And know that Allah intervenes between a man and his heart and that to Him you will be gathered."***<sup>9</sup>

فَإِنَّهُ يَعْلَمُ السِّرَّ وَأَخْفَى

***"Indeed, He knows the secret and what is [even] more hidden."***<sup>10</sup>

فَلَا تَزْكُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَنِ اتَّقَى

***"So do not claim yourselves to be pure; He is most knowing of who fears Him."***<sup>11</sup>

وَأِنْ تَبَدُّوا مَا فِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَوْ تُخَفُّوهُ يَحَاسِبْكُمْ بِهِ اللَّهُ

***"Whether you show what is within yourselves or conceal it, Allah will bring you to account for it."***<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Words of Ibn al-Qayyim in *Madārij as-Sālikeen*.

<sup>6</sup>Muslim.

<sup>7</sup>Sūrah Ghāfir, 40:19.

<sup>8</sup>Sūrah al-Baqarah, 2:235.

<sup>9</sup>Sūrah al-Anfāl, 8:24.

<sup>10</sup>Sūrah Tā Hā, 20:7. More hidden than the secret are man's innermost thoughts and intentions.

<sup>11</sup>Sūrah an-Najm, 53:32.

<sup>12</sup>Sūrah al-Baqarah, 2:284.

These verses were alarming to the Prophet's companions. Because of their intense devotion and their consciousness of Allah, they often worried about certain thoughts and feelings that came to them, repeatedly asking the Prophet (ﷺ) about them until they were finally reassured, "Allah has overlooked for me in my community that which occurs to their minds as long as they neither speak of it nor act upon it."<sup>13</sup> The pious companions and their followers were the most critical of their own souls, always seeking to correct themselves in anticipation of the Judgement; and indeed, they were the best of the community. After the Prophet (ﷺ) had confided to Ḥudhayfah the names of some of the hypocrites, 'Umar asked him fearfully, "Am I among them?" Thus, when Allah wishes good for His servant, He makes him aware of his own faults.

Keeping the soul in line involves a continuous struggle against the Shayṭān:

إِنَّ الشَّيْطَانَ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ فَاتَّخِذُوهُ عَدُوًّا

***"Indeed, the Shayṭān is an enemy to you; so take him as an enemy."*<sup>14</sup>**

Through knowledge, one can protect himself from the Shayṭān's strategies, so every believer should be aware of the following facts:

1. Every soul has certain weaknesses, and Shayṭān is always looking for the opportunity to take advantage of them and exploit them to the utmost degree. Each individual soul is susceptible to certain kinds of temptations more than others; thus there is a need for one to recognize his own particular weaknesses and guard against them. In several verses the Qur'ān refers to disbelief (*kufr*) and hypocrisy (*nifāq*) as "disease in the heart." Lesser faults and weaknesses were also labeled by scholars as "diseases of the heart." These include tendencies toward anger, hate, envy, selfishness, conceit or injustice, as well as love of wealth, prestige, physical pleasures or excess – even in those things normally permissible. All of them are doors open to the Shayṭān.
2. Two conditions are required for Allah's acceptance of any deed:
  - a. Sincerity of intention, i.e., it must be done for Him alone to seek His pleasure or to prevent His anger – Even ordinary daily tasks become forms of worship when performed with this in mind. Honesty, precision and conscientiousness in every deed is required by Allah and rewarded by Him.
  - b. Correctness – It must be done according to His ordained religion, i.e., lawful according to the Qur'ān and the Sunnah of the Prophet (ﷺ).

It must be remembered that any action carried out according to erroneous traditions, unlawful innovations or personal preferences can be faulted in both categories. In reference to this, the Qur'ān states:

فَمَنْ كَانَ يَرْجُوا لِقَاءَ رَبِّهِ فَلْيَعْمَلْ عَمَلًا صَالِحًا وَلَا يُشْرِكْ بِعِبَادَةِ رَبِّهِ أَحَدًا

***"So whoever would hope for the meeting with his Lord – let him do righteous work and not associate in the worship of his Lord anyone."*<sup>15</sup>**

<sup>13</sup>Al-Bukhārī, Muslim, at-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd, an-Nasā'ī and Ibn Mājah.

<sup>14</sup>Sūrah Fāṭir, 35:6.

<sup>15</sup>Sūrah al-Kahf, 18:110.

3. *Shirk*<sup>16</sup> destroys any good deeds a person may have done, no matter how great or numerous. And this also is affirmed clearly:

لَئِنْ أَشْرَكَتَ لَيَحْبَطَنَّ عَمَلُكَ

***"If you should associate [anything] with Allah, your work would surely become worthless."***<sup>17</sup>

A lesser form of *shirk* is showing one's deeds to others or speaking about them in order to gain respect or some other worldly benefit. This kind of "showing off" is called hidden *shirk* because it is not usually evident to others. In fact, the Prophet (ﷺ) described it as "*more hidden than the creeping of ants*."<sup>18</sup> Only the sincere believer recognizes hidden *shirk* and feels pain and sadness if he should succumb to it from time to time; but others practice it continually, without even being aware of it. They are the ones who have forgotten Allah to such an extent that the opinions of people become all-important.

Showing off, when done consciously and purposely, nullifies the deed and can lead to punishment. The Prophet (ﷺ) has stated that the first to be condemned on the Day of Judgement will be a martyr, a *qāri'* (a reciter of the Qur'ān), and a giver of charity. When each of them comes before his Lord declaring that his great work was done for Him, he will be told, "You have lied." Allah will say to the martyr, "You fought to be called brave, and it was said." And He will say to the reciter, "You learned and taught to be called a scholar, and you recited to be called a *qāri'*;" and it was said." And to the charitable one, "You spent to be called generous, and it was said." Then it will be commanded that each be dragged on his face and thrown into the Fire.<sup>19</sup> Thus, when a person seeks a worldly result, preferring it to the reward of Allah, he can no longer expect that reward in the Hereafter.

In another ḥadīth it is related: "If someone makes himself heard, Allah will make heard [that which he concealed]; and if someone shows off, Allah will expose him."<sup>20</sup> This indicates that those who make their deeds known with the intention of being recognized in this world will be exposed by Allah on the Day of Judgement when they are most in need of His acceptance.

The following are some examples of deliberate hidden *shirk*:

- Lengthening the prayer, or perhaps, only the period of prostration in the presence of others
- Purposely displaying the effects of fasting or other deeds on the body
- Wearing certain clothing known to be that of ascetics or scholars, or taking care to be seen with them
- Speaking unnecessarily about good deeds done previously, seeking admiration
- Lowering the voice to imply fear of Allah or other affected mannerisms
- Showing off knowledge or skill in conversation or using the remembrance of Allah repeatedly to give an impression of piety, or giving advice and warnings in order to be

<sup>16</sup>Directing worship in the form of good works to other than Allah.

<sup>17</sup>Sūrah az-Zumar, 39:65.

<sup>18</sup>Aḥmad and al-Ḥākim – ṣaḥeeḥ.

<sup>19</sup>Abridged from a ḥadīth narrated by Muslim, at-Tirmidhī and an-Nasā'ī.

<sup>20</sup>Al-Bukhārī, Muslim and others.

considered a wise and caring benefactor – This is most prevalent among some scholars and religious leaders who feel compelled to live up to the expectations of their followers.

Undoubtedly, there are those who reason that if a deed is done initially with the intention of reward in the Hereafter, then what harm is there in looking for a worldly benefit in it as well? But Allah has disclosed in a ḥadīth *qudsī*, "*I am the most self-sufficient of partners, needing no partnership; so if one does a deed for Me and for another [simultaneously], then I am disassociated from it, and it is [only] for the [other] partner.*"<sup>21</sup>

There are, as well, some non-deliberate mistakes which may lessen one's reward without canceling it completely. These include the following:

- Mentioning one's good works after their completion
- Taking pride inwardly in one's deeds or even in one's sincerity
- Performing righteous works because of pleasure found in them (other than the pleasure of serving Allah)
- Showing that which reveals much worship on the body or in the voice (other than speech)
- Being unhappy if one's charity or help is not appreciated by the recipient – Appreciation and reward should be expected only from Allah.
- Finding acts of worship easier to perform if others are aware of them and experiencing pleasure in others' observance of these acts

Those most faithful to Allah are in constant fear of hidden *shirk*, and they continually exert efforts to conceal their righteous deeds, unless, for some reason, there is more benefit in disclosing them.

At this point, some reassurance may be necessary; for there are things which one might imagine to be *shirk* but are not:

- Accepting thanks or praise for some good which one has done – The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "That is an immediate sign of good tidings for the believer."<sup>22</sup> It is merely a preview of what awaits him in the Hereafter, but on the condition that it subsequently does not go to his head. There is no harm in fame gained by a person who does not seek it, but he must take care that it does not corrupt his soul.
- Accepting payment for a job done initially seeking reward from Allah – Such is the case of one who chooses a certain vocation for which there is a need in the community while he could just as well earn his living in some other way.
- Wearing good clothes – This is not blameworthy unless it is done in conceit, for the purpose of showing off or involves extravagance and waste. As stated in a ḥadīth: "When Allah blesses His servant with a blessing, He likes to see it upon him."<sup>23</sup>
- Setting a good example for others (as a means of teaching)

One should remember the following two points as well:

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<sup>21</sup>Muslim and Ibn Mājah. A ḥadīth *qudsī* is a revelation from Allah reported in the words of the Prophet (ﷺ).

<sup>22</sup>Muslim.

<sup>23</sup>Aṭ-Ṭabarānī – ṣaḥeeḥ.

- Concealing one's sin is a duty. A Muslim should not speak of sins he has committed; rather, he should repent privately and correct his behavior. Then Allah will conceal that sin for him on the Day of Judgement and forgive him.

- Increasing the amount of worship when one is among a group of worshippers is not considered to be showing off. Because the normal wish of a believer is to worship Allah, being with a group helps him to overcome certain obstacles (such as his own forgetfulness or laziness) and to realize his original aim.

In an effort to re-institute the true worship of Allah, scholars have recommended treatments for "diseases of the heart." The foremost of these is the remembrance of Allah.

- Remember the greatness of Allah and then the insignificance of the world and its impermanent state. Remember that the ultimate source of all benefit and harm to yourself and all beings is Allah. If you fear blame, fear the blame of Allah; and if you seek praise, hope for the praise of Allah. Remember that Allah looks into your heart. Imagine your state if you should die while committing a sin, either openly or secretly – just imagine the humiliation of exposure before all creation on the Day of Judgement. Remember the certainty of death and the shortness of life. Remember the punishment of the grave and that of the Hellfire. Hope for the blessings of Paradise and the pleasure of Allah.

- Once you are aware of your mistake, turn to Allah in earnest repentance, asking forgiveness and correcting yourself thereafter. Always be on guard and ask Allah to help you to avoid falling into such errors in the future. The Prophet (ﷺ) taught his companions this supplication.

اللَّهُمَّ إِنَّا نَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنْ أَنْ نُشْرِكَ بِكَ شَيْئًا نَعْلَمُهُ وَنَسْتَغْفِرُكَ لِمَا لَا نَعْلَمُهُ

*"O Allah, we seek refuge in You from associating with You anything we know of, and we ask Your forgiveness for that which we do not know."*<sup>24</sup>

- Make a conscious effort to do more righteous deeds secretly without mentioning them until it becomes a habit.

- Take as friends and companions those you consider to be sincere, righteous and God-fearing. Encourage them to point out your faults and help you to overcome them. Accept advice without anger and try to follow that which is conducive to improvement.

- Finally, do not let the Shayṭān prevent your good works by suggesting that you are showing off. If you find something of that within yourself, continue your work but correct your intention, seeking acceptance from Allah alone. For in Allah's acceptance is salvation and success...

رَبَّنَا لَا تُزِغْ قُلُوبَنَا بَعْدَ إِذْ هَدَيْتَنَا وَهَبْ لَنَا مِنْ لَدُنْكَ رَحْمَةً إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْوَهَّابُ

***"Our Lord, let not our hearts deviate after You have guided us and grant us from Yourself mercy. Indeed, You are the Bestower."***<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Aḥmad.

<sup>25</sup> Sūrah Aali 'Imrān, 3:8.