

Worship (al-'ibādah)

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ أَعْبُدُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

***"O mankind, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, that you may become righteous."*¹**

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Whether he recognizes it or not, man is totally indebted to his Creator for his continuing existence hour by hour, not to mention such blessings as his many possessions and abilities. Knowing that Allah alone is the Creator, the Sustainer, the Provider, the Controller, the source of all benefit and harm in whose hands is the Judgement and the final destination of men *requires* through common sense and reason that He alone be worshipped.

Worship is the right of the Lord upon His servants and of the Creator upon His Creation. But many misunderstand the concept of worship, assuming that it is merely the practice of certain rituals. Confined within this limited view, they remain deficient in many of the obligations which are in reality part of the comprehensive sphere of worship ordained by Allah.

Although the concept of worship has been gradually reduced in common usage to mean little more than the performance of certain religious rites and rituals, the original and true definition is comprehensive. It encompasses all actions and intentions motivated by a recognition of greatness – that combination of love and fear, producing efforts to please the worshipped one and to avoid his displeasure. An object of worship continually occupies the mind of the worshipper and consequently governs his behavior, both consciously and unconsciously.

It is not within the capability of man to worship Allah in the manner of the angels. The Creator of every being ordained for each one its own mode of worship compatible with its nature and within the limits of its ability. Accordingly, He revealed to man through His Messenger (ﷺ) many ways of worship suitable to his physical and psychological nature, to his individual talents, and in harmony with his particular role upon the earth. In combination they will occupy every moment of his conscious existence and enable him to fulfill the purpose of his creation, as Allah mentioned in the Qur'ān:

وَمَا خَلَقْتُ الْجِنَّ وَالْإِنْسَ إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُونِ

***"I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me."*²**

If worship was restricted to the religious rites which require a minimal portion of one's time, energy and wealth, the verse would not seem very rational. But in fact it refers to more than a few specific acts such as prayer, fasting and pilgrimage. Worship also consists of such duties as honesty and precision in one's work, fulfilling promises and

¹Sūrah al-Baqarah, 2:21.

²Sūrah adh-Dhāriyāt, 51:56.

contracts, opposing injustice, encouraging righteousness and preventing evil, teaching beneficial knowledge, guiding and counseling, preventing harm from any creature or bringing it benefit, kindness to parents, relatives, neighbors, orphans, servants and animals. It includes every deed that relieves pain or sadness, lightens an affliction, relieves a burden of debt or aids the needy and oppressed. Such acts are not merely encouraged in Islam; they are ordained as religious obligations.

All of them are forms of worship which are rewarded by Allah provided the intent is to obey and please Him. And with this conscious objective, even the ordinary tasks a believer does for himself and his family in the course of life become acts of worship in the comprehensive sense stated by the aforementioned verse.

The remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*) for which a believer is rewarded is not simply the repetition of certain phrases and formulas but in the attitude that says, "What would Allah like me to do at this moment?" and "What would He expect from me at this moment." The appropriate answer in one instance might be prayer. Or it could be something else – honesty, courage, patience, kindness, refusal, action, restraint, assistance, avoidance, advice, silence, gratitude or jihād. Choosing the right response and acting upon it (perhaps in an ingenious manner) is a skill latent in every human being but perfected only by the sincere believer in Allah, who by doing so worships Him well.

But the practice of good deeds is not an end in itself. The primary objective of a true worshipper is to submit to the will of Allah, show servitude to Him, obey His command and earn His approval. Worshipping Allah means deference to His directives and adhering to the way of life ordained by Him. That is what makes one's work outstanding and motivates him toward greater perfection.

A true believer lives to obtain the approval of his Lord, to become close to Him and earn His reward. He is one who earnestly and actively enters diverse fields of life, excelling in production, precision and skill in order to obtain the multiple reward of assisting others. Thus, the Muslim becomes a source of benefit, blessing and mercy within his society. He practices good work, promotes it and directs others to it. His charitable deeds are not limited to humanity alone but include creation in general. The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) stated, "For every living creature is a reward."³ And he said, "There is no Muslim who plants a sprout or a seed from which a person, animal or bird will eat but that it is registered for him as a charity."⁴

This comprehensive view is the correct basis for worship, and it molds the pattern of one's life. Within the vast range of possibilities one can find righteous deeds that are compatible with the needs of his society and with his own inclinations toward service. In this way the believer is bound throughout life to his Creator and longs for the meeting of the Hereafter, which in turn motivates him to strive constantly to improve his deeds, his character, his morals and his manners. But while self-improvement is among the fruits of worship and beneficial results of it, again, it cannot be the incentive for it.

³Al-Bukhārī.

⁴Al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

Worship must be done sincerely for Allah alone. In addition, it must be done precisely according to the method ordained and within the limits set by Him.⁵ There is a consensus of scholars based upon the texts of the Qur'ān and Sunnah, that an act of worship is not acceptable to Allah and will not be rewarded by Him unless these two conditions are met.

A Muslim's worship is of two levels, obligatory and voluntary. It is never permissible to neglect obligatory acts of worship, and any who do so are deserving of punishment in the Hereafter. The Prophet (ﷺ) confirmed⁶ that the best and most beloved deeds to Allah are the religious obligations ordained by Him, so they must always be given priority. Fulfillment of these obligations earns the greatest reward, and they can never be replaced by any quantity of other righteous deeds or voluntary worship. After their completion, however, one may go on to draw nearer to Allah and obtain further rewards through the supplementary worship of his choice.

Imām Ibn al-Qayyim was asked what kind of worship is best and most pleasing to Allah. He replied that there are four prevalent opinions regarding preference:

1. The best worship is the most difficult – Some presume that the most excellent types of worship are those which are most demanding and difficult for the person since they are the farthest away from his own desire and inclination, and that this is the essence of worship. They contend that the amount of reward is in proportion to the difficulty, based on a narration which has no basis in the Sunnah: "The best deeds are the most arduous."⁷ These people strive to subjugate their souls, saying, "It is the only way to make the soul upright since its nature is to be lazy, seek ease and become attached to the world. It must therefore be disciplined by fears and hardships."

2. The best worship is disengagement from the world – Others assert that the best kind of worship is self-sufficiency and indifference to the world, getting by on the least provision and being unconcerned about worldly pleasures. These are of two types:

... The common people, who see it as an end in itself, working determinedly at it and calling others to practice it, claiming that it is preferable to scholarship and other acts of worship. In fact, they see it as the object of all worship.

... The educated, who consider it a means of devoting oneself to Allah and making Him the only concern, of clearing the heart of everything but love for Him, turning back to Him, relying on Him and seeking His approval. They see the best deeds as attendance of assemblies for the mention of Allah, constantly remembering Him in the heart and with the tongue, being conscious of His perfect observation and awareness, and avoiding all that distracts the heart from that.

3. The best worship is that which benefits others – The advocates of this view declare that any form of worship that benefits another is superior to that which benefits the worshipper alone. They consider helping the poor, working for the interests of other

⁵This means the correct way prescribed by the Islamic Sharī'ah and not as formulated by people according to their own preferences.

⁶In a *ḥadīth qudsi* narrated by al-Bukhārī.

⁷However, in an authentic *ḥadīth* narrated by Aḥmad, the Prophet (ﷺ) is reported to have said, "*Indeed, Allah likes that His concessions be utilized.*"

people and fulfilling their needs, assisting them through their wealth, influence or other means is better than solitary worship, so they exert their efforts toward that.

They contend that while the benefit of private individual worship is limited to the worshipper alone, assisting someone for the acceptance of Allah benefits both the worshipper and his recipient. And that, they say, is why the scholar is considered superior to one who spends his time in prayer, fasting and remembrance of Allah.⁸ They cite such statements of the Prophet (ﷺ) as: "That Allah guides one man through you is better for you than having red camels."⁹ "Whoever invites to right guidance will have reward equal to the rewards of all those who follow it without it decreasing anything of their rewards."¹⁰ "Indeed, Allah and His angels, even the ant in its hole and the fish in the sea, bless those who teach good to the people."¹¹

They argue that when a private worshipper dies his deeds are ended, but the deeds of one who has benefited others do not end, for he will continue to reap their reward after his death for as long as the benefit remains. They further argue that the prophets were sent in order to guide and benefit people in this life and the next, not to withdraw from society and become ascetics. Hence, their example should be followed.¹²

4. The best worship is the priority of the moment – Still others maintain that the best worship is to please the Lord continuously by doing whatever is most essential at a particular time. For example, the best worship at the time of prayer is prayer; and at the time of jihād it is jihād, provided the duty is performed seeking the approval of Allah while exerting effort to do it in the best possible way. So the priority of the moment might be serving a guest or fulfilling the right of the spouse, parents or children. Before dawn it could be prayer, supplication and seeking Allah's forgiveness. During the day it could be guiding or teaching someone, assisting or aiding someone, comforting or encouraging someone, visiting a patient, accompanying a funeral and so on. Such matters should not be postponed and take precedent over one's usual voluntary prayers, fasts or recitation of the Qur'ān.

He went on to say: "Worshippers of the fourth category are total worshippers, whereas those of the other three are limited worshippers. Whenever one of them is prevented from the type of worship to which he has become attached, he considers it a deficiency because he worships Allah in only one way.

The total worshipper has no reason to restrict himself to a particular kind of worship or prefer it over others. His aim is to pursue the acceptance of Allah wherever it might be and he worships accordingly. So when you see scholars convened you find him with them, and when you see people in prayer you find him with them, and when you see those engaged in jihād you find him with them, and when you see social workers you find him with them, and when you see assemblies of devotees you find him with them. He is not

⁸There is a ḥadīth which states: "*The merit of a scholar over a ritual worshipper is like that of a full moon over other planets.*" (Narrated by Abū Nu'aym in *Al-Hilyah - ṣaḥeeḥ*.)

⁹Al-Bukhārī. Red camels were considered a particularly precious and valuable property at that time.

¹⁰Aḥmad and Muslim.

¹¹At-Tirmidhī – ṣaḥeeḥ.

¹²And this is why Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ) did not approve of those who wished to devote themselves to worship in seclusion rather than mixing with the people.

subject to limits or restrictions; yet he does not follow personal preferences when choosing his method of worship, but seeks the preferences of his Lord, even though he might find other kinds of worship easier."¹³

We are aware that the *kalimah* (word) of *tawḥeed*, "*Lā ilāha ill-Allah*" came to correct human belief and worship – not only that of the ancient polytheists, but of all men up until the end of time. It states that there is no divinity except Allah – none is similar to Him, none creates and sustains except Him, and none has the right to govern creation but Him. It necessarily overflows into all aspects of faith and all aspects of life.¹⁴

إِنَّ الْحُكْمَ إِلَّا لِلَّهِ أَمَرَ أَلَّا تَعْبُدُوا إِلَّا إِيَّاهُ ذَلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيِّمُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

"Legislation is only for Allah. He has commanded that you worship not except Him. That is the correct religion, but most of the people do not know."¹⁵

The concept of *tawḥeed* encompasses all actions and intentions that are motivated by a recognition of the Lord's superiority and greatness – that combination of love and fear which produces efforts to please Him and to avoid His displeasure. Thus, worship can be defined as obedience – a fact that is evident in the Qur'ān, where Allah instructs repeatedly:

أَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَالرَّسُولَ

"Obey Allah and the Messenger."¹⁶

An object of worship is something which continually occupies the mind of the worshipper and consequently governs his behavior, both consciously and unconsciously. When applying this definition, it becomes clear that the object of one's worship can indeed be something other than his Creator, in spite of lip-service to "*lā ilāha ill-Allah*." The loss of *tawḥeed* has become evident today in the acceptance of foreign philosophies and lifestyles, political oppression, innovations in religion, and countless forms of disobedience. Allah *ta'ālā* has warned:

وَإِنْ تُطِيعُوا أَكْثَرَ مَنْ فِي الْأَرْضِ يُضِلُّوكَ عَنْ سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ

"And if you obey most of those upon the earth, they will mislead you from the way of Allah."¹⁷

وَإِنَّ كَثِيرًا لَّيُضِلُّونَ بِأَهْوَاءِهِمْ بِغَيْرِ عِلْمٍ

"And indeed do many lead [others] astray through their [own] inclinations without knowledge."¹⁸

¹³Tahdheeb Madārij as-Sālikeen, pp. 70-72.

¹⁴Shirk, in contrast, is the opposite of *tawḥeed*. Refer to Footnote 11.

¹⁵Sūrah Yūsuf, 12:40.

¹⁶Sūrahs 3:32, 3:132, 4:59, 8:1, 8:20, 8:46, 24:54, 47:33, 58:13 and 64:12. Other verses carry a similar meaning.

¹⁷Sūrah al-An'ām, 6:116.

¹⁸Sūrah al-An'ām, 6:119.

وَلَا تُطِيعْ مَنْ أَغْفَلْنَا قَلْبَهُ عَن ذِكْرِنَا وَاتَّبَعَ هَوَاهُ وَكَانَ أَمْرُهُ فُرُطًا

"And do not obey one whose heart We have made heedless of Our remembrance and who follows his desire and whose affair is ever [in] neglect."¹⁹

What distinguishes a Muslim believer from others is that he has shifted from the worship of himself and his own inclinations, from the worship of other human beings, objects and ideologies to the worship of his Creator and Sustainer; from obedience to his own preferences to the obedience of Allah. Believers are aware of their ultimate destination, knowing that they were created for an eternal life and that this world is but a temporary residence. Nevertheless, it provides all of their provisions for the journey to Allah, and the life of this world will indeed yield its harvest to those who plant. In the balance of natural laws established by Allah, nothing of value is obtained without effort. The more valuable it is, the more effort is required. So obviously, the everlasting life of the Hereafter and eternal approval of Allah will not be attained without sincere exertion.

وَالَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِينَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَمَعَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

And those who strive for Us - We will surely guide them to Our ways. And indeed, Allah is with the doers of good."²⁰

¹⁹Sūrah al-Kahf, 18:28.

²⁰ Sūrah al-ʿAnkabūt, 29:69.