

Intentions and Actions

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 5 March 2021

بِاللَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمٰوٰتِ وَمَا فِي الْاَرْضِ ۗ وَاِنْ تُبْدُوْا مَا فِيْ اَنْفُسِكُمْ اَوْ تَخْفُوْهُ يُحٰسِبْكُمْ بِهٖ ۗ اللهُ ۗ فَيَغْفِرُ لِمَنْ يَّشَآءُ وَيُعَذِّبُ مَنْ يَّشَآءُ ۗ وَاللهُ عَلٰى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيْرٌ ﴿٢٨٤﴾

“To Allah belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth. And whether you manifest what is in your minds or hide it, Allah will call you to account according to it. So He forgives whom He pleases and punishes whom He pleases. And Allah is Powerful over all things.” (The Quran, 2:284)

Regarding the opening words of this verse, one may say that various nations and religions think that they control this world and the hereafter. Those nations who make progress in the life of this material world fall into the trap of thinking that they are the special ones who have been chosen to own the world. Those people who follow various religions believe that they own the hereafter. The good of the hereafter is only accessible through them, they believe. But we are told here that all of this good belongs to God, permanently and absolutely. It is no one else’s automatic right. It is only by following the principles which God has established for the attainment of material and spiritual progress that any nation or any religious community is granted the bounties of this world and the hereafter. It is not a right due to anyone because of their race, or where they were born, or their religion. This is one of the meanings of the words: “To Allah belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth.”

As to “manifesting” or “hiding” what is in your minds, “manifesting” refers to a person’s openly-known deeds and “hiding” refers to his deeds which are not known to other people. In an earlier verse the Quran uses the same words as follows:

اِنْ تُبْدُوْا الصَّدَقٰتِ فَنِعِمَّا هِيَ ؕ وَاِنْ تَخْفُوْهَا وَتُوْتُوْهَا الْفُقَرٰآءَ فَهِيَ خَيْرٌ لَّكُمْ ؕ وَيُكَفِّرُ عَنْكُمْ مِّنْ سَيِّئٰتِكُمْ ؕ وَاللهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُوْنَ خَبِيْرٌ ﴿٢٤١﴾

“If you **manifest** charity, how excellent it is! And if you **hide it** and give it to the poor, it is good for you. And it will do away with some of your evil deeds; and Allah is Aware of what you do.” (2:271).

When charity is given openly for some national cause, or a cause of the community, it encourages those who see it and they are motivated to join in and give. People need to see an example of a good deed being done by other people like themselves in order to be inspired to do it themselves as well. It says here that charity given openly is “excellent”. But sometimes it is not appropriate to give it openly, such as to help an individual who may feel belittled or embarrassed if he is given something in the full view of others. So it is best to do it without knowledge of others. It says here that hiding what you are giving in charity is “good for you”. When a person gives openly in public view, it is always possible that a feeling of impressing other people and making a display of moral superiority over them may arise in his heart. But this possibility is eliminated when giving secretly. In that sense, it is good for the soul.

This verse tells us that God will judge a person by what is in his mind, his intention in doing the deed. There is a repeated hadith: يُبْعَثُ النَّاسُ عَلَى نِيَّاتِهِمْ or in similar words, meaning that on the Day of Judgment people will be raised up according to their intentions. An apparently good deed, i.e., a manifested action, done with a bad intention, such as making a show, will be judged according to the intention. On the opposite side, a deed may appear **to people** as if it is something bad. A prophet or a *mujaddid* does certain things which people condemn as bad and they make those as their reason for rejecting him. For example, the marriages of the Holy Prophet and his fighting wars are the basis of most of the hostile criticism directed against him in our modern times. Yet these were done under God’s command with noble intentions. There are examples of certain writings of the Founder of the Ahmadiyya Movement, for instance, when he criticised certain actions of Jesus which are attributed to him in the Gospels, his Muslim opponents expressed outrage and alleged that he was speaking ill of a prophet. But he replied that he was finding fault with actions of Jesus which are wrongly attributed to him in the Gospels and which he never committed. He said: My **intention** is to show the detractors of Islam that whatever false charges they

make against the Holy Prophet Muhammad can also be levelled against their own holy men on the basis of their own scriptures. This was just like the Holy Prophet Muhammad had to fight battles which became necessary for retaliation.

Just as with openly known actions, similarly with secret or hidden actions. A person does acts of goodness privately and quietly. People don't know this and don't have a good word to say about him. But God judges him by his intention. Another person carries out conspiracies and intrigues against others secretly. People don't know this and regard him as a good person, but God will call him to account.

This verse teaches us that the good or bad of an action is not determined by whether the action is done publicly or done without showing it to people. This was one of the matters on which the Jews and the Christians went to opposite extremes. The Jews came to believe that only outward actions have any value. Religious duties should be carried out with much ceremony to assure others that we are sticking to the religion. Jesus condemned this behaviour and instructed his followers to do all these acts secretly, privately, so that no one but God can know that they have performed them. He said about prayer: "But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place" (Matthew 6:6). About fasting he told his followers to fast in a way: "so that you do not appear to people to be fasting" (6:18). About charity he said: "But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret" (6:3-4). His followers of later times took this to the extreme of believing that no religious act needs to be performed openly and following with any set rules or structure.

Let us look at the implications of these two opposite attitudes. If a person believes that what is most important is to carry out religious duties mechanically, by bodily actions, and that the involvement of his heart and soul is only a secondary and unimportant matter, then all that he is gaining by his devotions is that people can see him being devout and religious. So gradually that becomes his aim, to look good before others, and even if that doesn't become the aim at least the person is fully

satisfied by just the bodily performance that he has completed his duty. On the opposite side, if people believe only in the importance of performing religious duties privately, without being seen by anyone, how can they teach these duties to others and be examples to them? Also, they gradually lose the motivation to do them. The rules and structures, such as saying prayers at certain times in a certain manner, or fasting between specified times in a set month of the year, enable us to overcome carelessness and laziness and putting things off to another time and never getting around to doing them.

What the Quran teaches is that we must maintain both the outward form and the inner spirit. We must perform the outward, manifest actions as well as the private acts unknown to anyone else that we are doing them. It is wrong to think, as the Jews came to hold, that a good deed can only be one which is visible and apparent to all, and it is wrong to think, as the later Christians came to hold, that a good deed can only be one which is kept secret and hidden from others. Both kinds can be good if the intention is good and sincere. Our good deeds should be like a floating iceberg in the sea. Some of it is above the water level and visible, while most of it is under water and not visible.

Then there is the statement here: “So He forgives whom He pleases and punishes whom He pleases.” This means that no human being can claim to know that certain people will be forgiven by God and certain other people will be punished. We can only know and teach the *ways* which lead to forgiveness and those which lead to punishment. Even regarding the Holy Prophet himself the Quran says: “You (O Prophet) have no concern in the matter whether He turns to them (mercifully) or punishes them; surely they are wrongdoers. And to Allah belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth. He forgives whom He pleases and punishes whom He pleases. And Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.” (3:128–129) The two middle sentences here are the same as in the verse of ch. 2 that we have been discussing. The meaning of “whom He pleases” is not that God is like a king or dictator Who doesn’t follow any rules, but purely out of his whim or mood of the day He arbitrarily decides whether to forgive someone or to punish him. The meaning is that only God has the full knowledge for deciding who deserves forgiveness and who deserves punishment.

On the basis of His perfect knowledge, God may forgive someone who we think should be punished and He may punish someone who we think should be forgiven.

بَارِكْ اللهُ لَنَا وَكُمُ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعْنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-

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