

INDICATORS OF PIETY, PART I¹

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ABSTRACT: What are the indicators of piety? And how can we guarantee that we are heading in the right direction in our spiritual journey? This series elucidates the merits and consequences of piety as seen in the Qur'an, hadith, and the lives of the Ahlul Bayt, and introduces indicators by which one can examine one's own piety or, if needed, others' piety. Piety, or taqwa, is one of the highest qualities a person can achieve; the pious believe in the hidden as well the revelations of Prophet Muhammad and the prophets before him, establish prayer, and give alms. Those who have it are to be grateful, and those who do not must endeavour to attain it as it pleases God, earns His support, and results in the acceptance of one's deeds.

One quality we need is to be able to evaluate ourselves and others bearing in mind to avoid being judgemental. Many times in our social lives we need to assess people, for example, when we want to choose a friend, spouse, teacher, or we want to employ someone or work for someone. People are very complicated and sophisticated. You could know someone for many years but still be unsure about him or her; or you might have a

¹ This paper is the first part of a series of seven lessons by the author in London, at the Islamic Centre of England in July 2011. This course was an attempt to explore the essence of faith, religiosity, and moral values on which they are based.

false opinion about someone, such as deciding in your mind that he or she is not a good person, and then suddenly after many years witness his or her beautiful qualities. This may happen with respect to one's self as well. We tend to develop good or bad ideas about ourselves although in both cases we may be wrong.

It is very difficult to be able to have a sound and accurate understanding of others, including your family members or friends. It takes a lot of effort and it actually needs some kind of insight. Just listening to someone or being related to him or her is not sufficient to have a sound understanding because of the many different levels of personality. Moreover, sometimes people manage to hide some aspects of their personality, and insight and patience is needed to understand their true character. Sometimes you need to wait for some situation to emerge so that those hidden things may emerge. When one is tested we may see his or her true colours since people are like a pool of water. Some pools are clean from the surface to the bottom and some are clean only on the surface: if you manage to stir the water the dirt will surface and it would be only then that you realise what was hidden at the bottom. A person's true colours appear when faced with a serious challenge such as a tragic event, a difficult task, a fight, or a disagreement. As Imam Ali said:

فِي تَغَلُّبِ الْأَحْوَالِ عِلْمُ جَوَاهِرِ الرِّجَالِ

Through change of circumstances the [true] essence of people is known.²

² *Nahj al-Balaghah*, Wise Saying 217.

One way to know a people is to travel with them since unexpected events occur that not everyone is prepared for, and thus they behave more naturally instead of artificially. For example, during the hajj pilgrimage, often situations arise where things get out of control, even if you have the best hajj leaders. The entire experience is a good opportunity to better see people's real qualities, such as their patience, fairness, selfishness, or greediness.

In one anecdote, there was a man who always prayed in the first row for the congregational prayer in the mosque. One day, he entered the mosque late, when the prayer had already begun. He felt ashamed, thinking of what the people would think about him. Then he was suddenly awakened, and told himself, "My God! Maybe all these years I went early to be in the first row to show off." So sometimes after many years we may realize that there was a subtle impure intention we had thought was pure. Regarding intentions, both Sunni and Shi'a sources quote Prophet Muhammad as saying:

ديب الشرك في أمتي كديب الخملة السوداء على الصخرة الصماء في الليلة الظلماء

The creeping of *al-shirk* [associating someone or something to God which here refers to having no pure intention; *al-shirk al-khafiyy*] in my nation is more inconspicuous than the creeping of black ant on black rock in the pitch-darkness of the night.³

On the other hand, you might sometimes doubt your intention although after many years you realize that your intention was good. For example, in

³ *Muntakhab al-Anwar al-Mudi'ah*, p. 16.

one anecdote, there was a person who always provided a family with financial help. One day, he went to visit them and for a specific reason they got angry with him, shouting at him, telling him that he never did any good to them. He left the house humiliated and disrespected in the presence of others. However, his friend saw him happy when he returned from the house, and asked him why. He told his friend what had happened, and after the humiliation, he said, "I did not feel any regret and this means that I had not supported them to receive praise. I did it all for the sake of God.

In any case, it is up to God to judge people, but in our social lives we need to be able to evaluate people while simultaneously examining ourselves. How can we decide whether someone is virtuous? What are the indicators of piety? How can we ensure that we are on the right track in our spiritual journey?

The faithful are always concerned about themselves; those who feel content with their position need to worry even more. According to Imam Baqir, one night the Prophet was told by Aishah why he put too much pressure on himself while God has forgiven all his sins.⁴ The Prophet replied, "O Aishah! Shouldn't I be thankful?" The Prophet believed that no matter how much he worshipped and served God and tried to guide people, he still did more to show his appreciation of divine blessings upon him. Imam Baqir said that the Prophet used to stand on his toes [praying

⁴ This refers to the verse 48:1. Of course, 'sin' here does not mean legal or fiqhi sin. For further discussion, please refer to Qur'anic exegesis, such as *Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an*, vol. 18, pp. 255 & 256.

and reciting the Qur'an] and then God revealed, “*Ta Ha! We did not send down to you the Qur'an that you should be miserable (20:1&2).*”⁵

It is only when you feel that you are in great need of God's favour and forgiveness that you can improve. In *Dua Abu Hamzah*, Imam Sajjad says to God:

إذا رايت مولاي ذنوبي فرغت و اذا رايت عفوكم طمعت

My master! When I look at my sins I become terrified
but when I look at Your forgiveness I become hopeful.⁶

Thus, looking at one's own misconduct and shortcomings may cause hopelessness; however, thinking about God's mercy and generosity generates hope. Elsewhere in the same dua, Imam Sajjad says:

يا رب ان لنا بك رجاء عظيما

Oh God! We have great hope in you.⁷

If there is one thing in this world that is guaranteed, it is that we have a very kind, merciful, and generous Lord, and this should give us much hope. We should not deceive ourselves by developing an exaggerated view

⁵ *Al-Kafi*, vol. 2, p. 95. The original text in Arabic is as follows:

عَنْ أَبِي جَعْفَرٍ قَالَ كَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ص عِنْدَ عَائِشَةَ لَيْلَتَهَا فَقَالَتْ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ لِمَ تَشْعُبُ نَفْسَكَ وَ قَدْ
عَفَرَ اللَّهُ لَكَ مَا تَقَدَّمَ مِنْ ذَنْبِكَ وَ مَا تَأَخَّرَ فَقَالَ يَا عَائِشَةُ أَلَا أَكُونُ عَبْدًا شَكُورًا قَالَ وَ كَانَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ
ص يَقُومُ عَلَى أَطْرَافِ أَصَابِعِ رِجْلَيْهِ فَأَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ سُبْحَانَهُ وَ تَعَالَى طَهُ مَا أَنْزَلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْقُرْآنَ لِتَشْفَى.

⁶ *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 95, p. 83.

⁷ *Ibid.* p. 85.

of ourselves. Imam Sadiq says, “When self-admiration (*‘ujb*) enters a person, he is destroyed.”⁸

We have to examine ourselves carefully. If we really find signs of piety or at least some of them in ourselves we should thank God and endeavour to protect them; if we don’t find them, we should try to change ourselves and attain them before it is too late.

Taqwa: Sometimes *taqwa* is translated as Godwary or God-fearing which is fine, but here we will translate it as piety. It can be argued that according to the Qur’an, piety is the highest or at least one of the highest qualities a person can achieve. At the same time, it can be argued that no quality below *taqwa* is sufficient. If a person’s faith does not reach the level of *taqwa* struggle is needed. *Taqwa* is the bottom line; it is the only quality that shelters a person against the pains and sufferings faced in the hereafter.

The significance of *taqwa* and the merits of the pious (*muttaqin*) are described in many verses, for example:

Alif, Lam, Mim. This is the Book, there is no doubt in it, a guidance to the Godwary [pious], who believe in the Unseen, and maintain the prayer, and spend out of what We have provided them with; and who believe in what has been sent down to you and what was sent down before you, and are certain of the Hereafter. Those follow their Lord’s guidance, and it is they who are the felicitous. (2:1-5)

⁸ *Al-Kafi*, vol. 2, p. 313.

Those who benefit from the Qur'an are the pious. Although the Qur'an offers its guidance to all mankind, there are people who ignore or oppose it, and there are people who theoretically accept it without putting its guidelines into practice. To believe in the Qur'an and act upon it is not a matter of mere recitation, memorisation, or distribution of it as Prophet Muhammad said, "There are many reciters of the Qur'an who are cursed by the Qur'an."⁹

Who are the pious that can actually benefit from the Qur'an? The above verses enumerate some of their characteristics. The pious are those who believe in a) what was revealed to Prophet Muhammad and the previous messengers of God, b) the hidden, that is, God, the angels, and in the hereafter, and c) they establish prayer and give alms.

Thus, taqwa is a virtue that is attained when you have certain qualities and actions. It also becomes clear that taqwa is higher than faith (*iman*), prayer (*salat*) and alms (*zakat*). These three result in taqwa.

According to the Qur'an, taqwa is the only thing that can save us in the hereafter:

Relate to them truly the account of Adam's two sons. When the two of them offered an offering, it was accepted from one of them and not accepted from the other. [One of them] said, 'Surely I will kill you.' [The other one] said, 'God accepts only from the Godwary [pious]. (5:27)

⁹ *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 89, p. 184.

Thus, God only accepts the deeds from the pious, and if the deeds are not accepted, it results in not having provision for his eternal journey:

... And whatever good you do, God knows it. And take provision, for indeed the best provision is Godwariness. So be wary of Me, O you who possess intellects! (2:197)

The Qur'an also indicates that God loves the pious, and certainly God's love for them is the greatest capital they can have:

... God indeed loves the Godwary (3:76; 9:4; 9:7)

Who does not want to be loved by God? Some trouble themselves to gain people's love. What about yearning for God's love? Interestingly God's love for the pious earns the people's love for them:

Indeed those who have faith and do righteous deeds — the All-beneficent will endear them [to His creation]. (19:96)

God only accepts deeds from the pious: actions are not accepted without piety. It depends on the intention, as God knows what is in the heart and how much efforts a person made. A person may give one pound in charity and it is accepted, while someone else's charity of a million pounds can be rejected due to the wrong intention.

In the time of Imam Sadiq, there was a man who was respected for his spirituality and piety. One day, the Imam witnessed a man stealing two fruits from a shop and two breads from a bakery, and then gave them to an ill person he visited. After a while, when the Imam asked him why he did that, the respected man, thinking he was clever, replied "Have not you

read in the Qur'an that if you bring one good action God rewards you ten times, and if you bring one bad action God will punish you for one? So I have 36 actions without spending a penny” The Imam replied, “Have not you read in the Quran that God only accepts from pious people? How can you steal money and spend it in charity? You must have pure money and pure intentions, and then you may give it for the sake of God.”¹⁰

The Qur'an also tells us that God is with the pious:

... *God is with the Godwary.* (2:194; 9:36; 9:123)

To be with the pious means that God supports them: “*God is the guardian of the Godwary* (45:19).” Describing the position of the pious in the hereafter, the Qur'an says:

But to those who were Godwary it will be said, 'What is it that your Lord has sent down?' They will say, 'Good.' For those who do good in this world there will be a good [reward], and the abode of the Hereafter is better, and the abode of the Godwary is surely excellent: the Gardens of Eden, which they will enter, with streams running in them. There they will have whatever they wish, and thus does God reward the Godwary — those whom the angels take away while they are pure. They say [to them], 'Peace be to you! Enter paradise because of what you used to do.' (16:30-32)¹¹

¹⁰ *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 47, p. 238.

¹¹ See also the verses: 19:85; 44:51; 51:15; 52:17; 54:54; 77:41.

The Qur'an also informs us of the success of the pious:

Moses said to his people, 'Turn to God for help and be patient. The earth indeed belongs to God, and He gives its inheritance to whomever He wishes of His servants, and the outcome will be in favour of the Godway.'
(7:128)¹²

To please God, to have one's deeds accepted, to gain His support and guardianship, and to attain a good end, we need taqwa. Without it, any blessings such as knowledge, reputation, money, position, family, and children will add to our responsibility, and one or more of these might even work against us. For example, Imam Sadiq is quoted as saying:

يغفر للجاهل سبعون ذنبا قبل ان يغفر للعالم ذنب واحد

Seventy sins of the person who has no knowledge will be forgiven before one sin of a scholar (*'alim*) is forgiven.¹³

¹² See also 11:49; 28:83.

¹³ *Al-Kafi*, vol. 1, p. 47.