

Discourse 31: Dangers of the Tongue

عَنْ نَافِعٍ عَنْ ابْنِ عُمَرَ، قَالَ، قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ : رَحِمَ عَبْدًا تَكَلَّمَ فَعَنِمَ، أَوْ سَكَتَ فَسَلِمَ. إِنَّ اللِّسَانَ أَمْلَكُ شَيْءٍ لِلْإِنْسَانِ، أَلَا وَ إِنَّ كَلَامَ الْعَبْدِ كُلَّهُ عَلَيْهِ، إِلَّا ذَكَرُ اللّٰهِ تَعَالَى، أَوْ أَمْرٌ بِمَعْرُوفٍ، أَوْ نَهْيٌ عَنِ مُنْكَرٍ، أَوْ إِصْلَاحٌ بَيْنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ. فَقَالَ لَهُ مُعَاذُ بْنُ جَبَلٍ: يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ، أَنْوَاجُ مَا نَتَكَلَّمُ؟ فَقَالَ: وَ هَلْ يَكُوبُ النَّاسَ عَلَى مَنَاخِرِهِمْ فِي النَّارِ، إِلَّا حَصَائِدُ أَلْسِنَتِهِمْ، فَمَنْ أَرَادَ السَّلَامَةَ، فَلْيَحْفَظْ مَا جَرَى بِهِ لِسَانَهُ

It has been narrated from Nafi' from b. 'Umar that he said, the Messenger of Allah (S) said, “May (Allah) have mercy on that servant who gains benefit when he speaks, or one who is protected through maintaining silence. Surely the tongue is the thing which wields the most authority over a person. Be aware that everything that servant speaks is against him, except for the remembrance of Allah, the High, or the commanding of others to that which is right or preventing them from that which is evil, or setting the affair right between two believers.”

One of the companions named Ma'adh b. Jabal said, “O' Messenger of Allah! Will we be held accountable for that which we speak?” The Prophet replied, “Is there anything else except an active tongue of a person that will lead him into the hell fire? So then whoever seeks safety (from the fire), then let him protect that which comes out from his tongue.”¹

In this tradition, the Prophet (S) alluded to some issues regarding the tongue² and has stated that, “May Allah's mercy be upon that servant whom people can benefit from his speech and who observes silence in order to stay safe and protected.” In this part of the tradition, there are two important issues which we must mention:

1. More than anything else which is within the body of a person, it is the tongue which rules and controls

one. The peculiarities that exist and which are limited to that person who has a tongue can not be seen in any other body part nor in any other creation.

- a. The tongue is always at the disposal of the person. Sometimes the following similitude is given that, “For a person to speak is like drinking water.” Even still, if a person wants to drink water we see that there are some prerequisites which must be fulfilled and carried out, however in order to speak there are no prerequisites.
- b. The dangers of the tongue cannot be compared to the dangers of any other body part, and the major sins which can be committed by the tongue number about twenty or thirty!³
- c. The despicability of the sins of the tongue are not very detested in the sight of the people and when this occurs, then the danger and hazard of performing them also increase. If – may Allah (SwT) protect us – a person performs adultery then he has definitely done a very bad act in the sight of the people. However if he was to backbite another person – then as it is mentioned in the traditions, this is actually worse than adultery and even worse than drinking alcohol and its punishment is much more severe! Normally, in the beliefs of other people, the despicability of the act of backbiting is something minor, or it may not even be considered as something bad at all!

The Prophet (S) then continued his speech and said that, “Everything that a person says is against him, except for three types of speech” and this limit or threshold is a true and factual threshold and there is no room to say that this is a symbolic gesture on behalf of the Prophet (S). These three things include: the remembrance of Allah; Amr bil Ma'ruf and Nahl 'Anil Munkar; and making amends between two believers.

We must make sure that all of that which we speak in this world are limited to these three issues and if we fall out of this boundary, then we will definitely incur loss.

In relation to this tradition, there is an interesting interpretation which should spiritually move some people. We see that after this speech of the Prophet (S), Ma'ad b. Jabal said, “O Messenger of Allah! Is speaking also something that a person will have to be accountable for!?” The Prophet (S) replied, to him, “Is there anything else except for the remuneration of the tongue that a person will be thrown face first into the hell fire?”

Thus, it is clear that the sins for which a person will be thrown into the hell fire – face first – are not related to the sins performed by the chest, feet or hands – rather it is that which he has earned through his tongue.

It may be that such a punishment has been prescribed since when a person is thrown into the hell fire due to the sins he has committed, he will be thrown into the fire by that thing which led him to commit the sins. Since it is the tongue by which he committed sins, thus, he will be thrown into the hell fire face first. Thus, the first thing to be burnt by the fire is his tongue – and it is this same tongue that lit the fires

(of hatred and sin in the world) and it is this organ through which one (innocently) accused people and annoyed others.

Thus, every morning when we wake up from our sleep, we must ask Allah (SwT) to protect us from the evils of the tongue. In addition, when we are ready to go to bed to sleep at night, we must ask forgiveness from Allah (SwT) for the sins which we committed in the day and definitely the tongue of a person puts one into a great difficulty.⁴ !

1. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 74, pg. 187

2. The tongue is the most important instrument for communication between people and for the conveyance of information and data from one nation and generation to another. If this instrument of communication did not exist, then humanity would never have been able to reach the levels which they have arrived at today, nor would they have been able to progress to the great levels of knowledge, intelligence, material gains and spiritual greatness which they are currently in.

The tongue itself is an amazing part of the body of mankind which also carries a very heavy responsibility with it. In addition to helping and assisting a person in swallowing his food, it also plays an important role in the chewing of food. Continuously while one is eating morsels of food, the teeth are hammering down and pushing the food around the mouth and this act is so skillfully performed that the tongue is saved and protected from being crushed by the teeth, whereas we see that it is continuously alongside and flanking the teeth!

Sometime – very rarely – it can be seen that when chewing food, the tongue too gets bitten by the teeth and at this time we scream out in pain!

Thus if the tongue did not possess the dexterity that it has, one can just imagine what would have happened to it! In addition, after one has finished eating food, the tongue actually rubs and wipes the teeth clean of any remaining food which happens to be on them.

More important than all of this – it is through the tongue that we are able to speak and it is by way of the fast, yet controlled movement which is continuously happening that the tongue is able to carry out all of these tasks.

It is interesting to note that Allah (SwT) has placed something so easy to make use of at the disposal of mankind for the task of speaking and verbal communication and this instrument is within reach of everyone. In addition, this body part never feels tired or exhausted, nor does it ask for anything to continue its work with.

Even more amazing than all of this is the talent to speak which has been infused within a human being and has been granted to him to use. Thus, a person is able put together countless sentences in different forms to explain his wonderful and various points of knowledge. What is even more important than all of this is the ability to make up various words and this point can clearly be seen if we study the thousands of languages which exist in the world today. Truthfully:

أَلْعَظْمَةُ لِلَّهِ الْوَاحِدِ الْقَهَّارِ.

“The Greatness belongs to Allah (alone) the One, the All-Powerful.” (Tafsir-e-Namuna, vol. 28, pg. 17)

3. In the book, “Life under the Shadow of Ethical Morals” pp. 87–90, Ayatullah al-`U`ma Makarim Shirazi writes that, “The late Faiḍ Kashani, in his book Mahajjatul Baydha fi Tahdhibul Ahya, and Ghazali in his work, Ihyaul `Ulumud Din have presented a very detailed discussion under the topic of the “Sins of the Tongue.” Ghazali has mentioned twenty types of sins that can take place by this body part, in the following order:

1. Speaking on those issues which a person has no business involving himself in;
2. Speaking too much and idle talk;
3. Speaking on vain issues such as a description of a gathering in which alcohol, gambling and adultery take place;
4. Arguing and quarrelling (picking apart a discussion and arguing with others to find faults with them such as making others feel worthless or boasting about one's self);
5. Disputes, quarrelling and arguing;

6. Making up things while speaking;
7. Speaking bad things or using foul language;
8. Cursing others;
9. Ghina (forbidden singing) and reading poems which contain no truth;
10. Excessive joking;
11. Mocking and making fun of others;
12. Spreading secrets about others;
13. Making false promises;
14. Lying;
15. Backbiting;
16. Spreading talk from one person to another;
17. Hypocrisy in one's speech (two-tongued);
18. Excessively praising others;
19. Being negligent of the specifics of an issue and speaking what one knows with mistakes in his words, which can result in another person being side-lined in issues of life;
20. The common people asking difficult questions in relation to the theological beliefs which are outside the scope and necessity for a person to understand such issues;

It goes without saying that the problems and troubles of the tongue are not limited to these issues which Ghazali has mentioned and that which he has conveyed is just a portion of some of the important sins that the tongue can perform. For example, the below acts are also some of the troubles of the tongue that he failed to mention:

1. False accusations;
2. False testimony;
3. Self praise;
4. Spreading evil, corruption or unfounded information and lies – even if a person does so with the supposition that such things are true;
5. Speaking while in a taze of anger;
6. Being forceful through one's speech with repeated questions (such as that which Bani Isra'il used to do – and others);
7. Hurting others through one's speech;
8. Humiliating someone who has not done anything to warrant this treatment;
9. Denial of the favours of Allah (SwT) through one's speech;
10. Spreading wrong information or encouraging others to perform sins;

In addition, the sins of the tongue are not even limited to these and thus from this discussion, we can see the importance of the tongue.

4. In the words of Mawlawi:

این زبان چون سنگ و فم آهن و ش است آنچه بجهد از زبان، چون آتش است سنگ و آهن را مزن بر هم گزاف گه ز روی نقل و گه از روی لاف زانکه تاریخ است و از هر سو پنبه زار در میان پنبه چون باشد شرار ظالم آن قومی که چشمان دوختند وز سخن ها عالمی را سوختند عالمی را يك سخن ویران کند روبهان مرده را شیران کند

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