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Picking Faults is Prohibited

(Verse 11)

...وَلَا تَلْمِزُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ...

“Do not find faults in yourselves...”

One of the pillars of perfection of a person's soul and spirit is that he has the ability to examine his own spiritual state, through looking at his own defects and ethical weaknesses. He looks at his own inner self through self-recognition so that he is able to cut all of the roots of the destructive traits that are within his soul and spirit that have taken shape and materialized over time.

From the point of view of the scholars, the discussion of self-recognition is so important that they say, *“The person who wishes to remove the chains of impurity from himself and wishes to save himself from the negative effects that the spiritual defects cause, must not only think of these issues during certain times in his life, rather, he must ponder over these every day during his hectic schedule.*

Thus when he finds some quiet and peaceful time, he must sit down, take out a piece of paper and write down all of the actions that he has performed that day and without being biased, must review all of his deeds. If he finds something that was done which is not commendable, then he must resolve not to repeat that act.”

Amir al-Mu'minin `Ali ibn Abi Talib (peace be upon him) has said:

عَلَى الْعَاقِلِ أَنْ يُحْصِيَ مِنْ نَفْسِهِ مُسَاوِيَهَا فِي الدِّينِ وَالرَّأْيِ وَالْأَخْلَاقِ وَالْآدَابِ
فَيَجْمَعُ ذَلِكَ فِي صَدْرِهِ أَوْ فِي كِتَابٍ وَيَعْمَلُ فِي إِزَالَتِهَا.

“It is incumbent upon every person of intelligence that he carefully look over his weaknesses in regards to (following his) religion, his thoughts, etiquette and that of his interaction with other people and he should either record these in his heart or write them down and then he should strive to remove all of these (bad traits) from himself.”¹

However, there are a group of people who *incessantly try to pick faults in people* and due to the lack of insight of the (negative) traits within their own selves and being unaware of the (spiritual) status of others, are constantly looking to find faults in people and constantly strive to lift the curtains that cover the defects and shortcomings of others.

These are individuals who derive pleasure and enjoyment from finding and picking faults of others, since they feel some sort of inferiority and inadequacy within themselves. Thus, through picking the weak points of others and making these known to people and trying to take away their worth and status within the society, they feel that they can put their own inferiority at ease.

At this point in time, it is not our goal to discuss the reasons why people start picking faults in others – rather, that which is important for us to realize is that we must stop and think a little bit about the wickedness and immorality of such an act.

The effects of speaking bad and criticizing the actions of other people plays a role in the friendship and affinity between two people, such that this closeness is removed (from them). The friendship and trust is converted into animosity and sometimes hatred – whereas praising a person for his good deeds and flattering him for his righteous acts results in the roots of friendship being made even stronger.

In relation to people who always look at the weaknesses and faults of other people, Imam Muhammad ibn `Ali al-Baqir (peace be upon him) has said:

كَفَى بِالْمَرْءِ عَيْبًا أَنْ يُبْصِرَ مِنَ النَّاسِ مَا يَعْمَى عَنْهُ مِنْ نَفْسِهِ.

“Sufficient is a person’s own defect (in himself) that he tries to pick and look for faults in other people when he himself has those same faults in himself (and does not recognize them)!”²

If those who pick faults of others would spend the same energy that they use in looking at the bad in others and through which they reproach other people, on correcting themselves and looking at their own defects and trying to recognize their own souls, imagine what level of happiness they would be able to reach to! It is here that the value and worth of the hadith which has come to us from one of the leaders of our faith is made clear when it has been said:

مَنْ بَحَثَ عَنْ عُيُوبِ النَّاسِ فَلْيَبْدَأْ بِنَفْسِهِ

“The person who busies himself looking into the faults of others should start by looking into the faults of his own self (first).”³

The greatest defect of such people is that they can never live around people in a community since they will make known the inner secrets (of others) and thus, nobody would be safe from being in their company.

It is because of this reason that Amir al-Mu'minin `Ali ibn Abi Talib (peace be upon him) has forbidden us from associating ourselves with such people and has said that:

إِيَّاكَ وَ مَعَاشِرَةَ مُتَتَبِعِي عِيُوبِ النَّاسِ! فَإِنَّهُ لَمْ يَسَلَمْ مُصَاحِبُهُمْ مِنْهُمْ.

“I warn you about keeping relations with people who look for faults in others, since surely there is not a single person who will be safe from such people.”⁴

Pointing Out One's Defects with Sincerity is Not the Same as Fault Finding

A point of interest which a great majority of people are uninformed about is that picking faults of others and insulting them in the presence of other people is one thing, whereas guiding them and pointing out the proper way to do things and showing them their errors is another thing.

Picking the faults of others is one of the negative ethical traits, whereas guiding people and informing them of their own shortcomings by advising and giving them good council is one of the religious and humanistic responsibilities.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon every spiritually conscious person to save his fellow human beings from a terrible end and that dark day (when everyone will have to answer for their actions).

Informing people of the shortcomings in their own lives is so important and valuable that Imam Ja`far ibn Muhammad as-Sadiq (peace be upon him) classified this as the greatest gift that a person can give to another and has said:

رَحِمَ اللَّهُ امْرَأً أَهْدَى إِلَيَّ عِيُوبِي

“May Allah's mercy be upon that person who offers a gift to me by pointing out my own mistakes and shortcomings.”⁵

In addition, Amir al-Mu'minin `Ali ibn Abi Talib (peace be upon him) has said:

لِيَكُنْ آثَرُ النَّاسِ عِنْدَكَ مَنْ أَهْدَى إِلَيْكَ عَيْبَكَ

“Let the best person in your estimation be that person who points out to you your faults and shortcomings and presents them to you as a gift.”⁶

Principally, the first step that a person can take to cure his physical and spiritual sicknesses and to remove the societal evils is that one becomes precisely aware of the sources of these diseases and their various types. As long as this is not carried out, then whatever sort of cure or remedy that is applied will be of no benefit or use.

The person who is scared of straight talk finds the truth being brought out into the open as being something bitter to accept. He finds it hard to acknowledge and accept any sort of open dialogue about the problems in the society. Such a person wants the spiritual and societal shortcomings of a community to be swept under the rug and kept quiet and desires that people should not speak about such things.

These people are never content that the writers and speakers of the community bring up the problems of the people and anytime these things are brought up, then those who do not like this done try to destroy and refute what has been written or said. Therefore, we must say to such a person: “May you be destroyed! Not bringing up these issues (the problems of a community) is an error in itself!”

It is not only in the instance of this negative ethical trait (speaking bad and picking the faults of others) and the natural human disposition (of guiding people and showing them their short comings and faults) that are confused with one another.

Rather, it is possible that in many of the other natural human dispositions and ethical principles, a series of other detested spiritual and ethical traits can also be confused with one another. However with careful research, we are able to discern the limits of each of these from one another and keep them separated.

Stirring Up a Person's Emotions

In bringing up this ethical principle, the Qur'an has appealed to the emotions of humanity and thus when it wants to instruct its' adherents that they should not pick the faults of others it says:

...وَلَا تَلْمِزُوا أَنْفُسَكُمْ...

“Do not find faults in yourselves.”

The aim of expressing it in this form (that we must not find faults in ourselves) is to stir up the sentiment of the person – since spiritual fraternity and religious brotherhood bring about such a bond of friendship and love amongst the believers that they are like one organ and one collective body. Thus, if a person picks faults with one Muslim, it is equivalent to picking faults with the entire Muslim body.

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1. Ghurur al-Hikm, Page 559.
 2. al-Kafi, Volume 2, Page 459.
 3. Ghurur al-Hikm, Page 659.
 4. Ghurur al-Hikm, Page 148.
 5. Tuhaf al-`Uqul, Page 366.
 6. Ghurur al-Hikm, Page 558.

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