

## Lesson Fifteen: Compensating for Our Sins

In just the same way that numerous bodily sicknesses can be cured, the spirit can be cured of its afflictions. Islam has pointed the way to the cure by summoning man to repentance and calling on him to return to piety, virtue, and true happiness; it promises him in return the favor and mercy of God.

The messengers of God, whose proud lives were never penetrated by any element of sin, would always invite sinners to seek God's forgiveness and encourage them to place their hopes in His mercy, for His kindness and compassion toward His believing servants are such that He would never abandon them in the dark pit of disobedience and sin. On the contrary, He invites all men to return to Him, and it is up to us to answer His call and thus act to attain our salvation.

God's acceptance of repentance indicates a particular worthiness in man to receive God's mercy, a worthiness which causes the gates of forgiveness to remain open before sinners. They have the opportunity to express contrition and shame before God over their dark past and to abandon and attempt to make up for the evil they have committed. If they do this, all their misfortune will be turned to good fortune, and all their darkness to light.

When the penitent thus prepare themselves to obey divine command and begin to purify their spirits, the black pages of sin are removed from the record of their deeds and only the golden pages of virtue and goodness remain. This is the meaning of God's words:

***“Then God will transform their evil works into good works, for He is Forgiving and Merciful.”***  
**(25:70).**

To despair of forgiveness and the cleansing of the soul, to have the constant awareness of sin and pollution, is a tormenting pain that is full of danger both for the person of the sinner and for the society in which he lives.

The message of repentance is an important factor in cleansing the soul and preparing man for the rest of his life. Where the promise implicit in repentance not to be given to sinners, were they not to have the

slightest hope of salvation, no sinner would ever begin to think of reforming himself halfway through his life; indeed, the record of his deeds would grow blacker day by day and he would engage freely in corruption and sin until the end of his life.

When a believer in God's unity commits a sin, it leaves a dark imprint on his heart, for while committing the sin he has forgotten that God Almighty is watching over him, with His infinite splendor and sublimity, and thus cut himself off from Him. But by remembering God anew, he returns to awareness of Him; in his belief that nothing can stand in the way of the favors that God decrees and that the door of His mercy is always open for His servants, He hastens to receive God's forgiveness.

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Any one who is concerned with his eternal welfare will immediately feel the burden of disobedience and pollution weighing heavily on him once he allows himself to be drawn by passion and ignorance toward the precipice of sin and rebellion against divine command. He will make haste immediately to seek God's forgiveness and implore God for His mercy and pardon. Imam al-Sajjad, upon whom be peace, thus addresses God in the prayer of Abu Hamza:

“O God, when I was drawn to sinning and disobeying you, I did not sin in denial of Your Lordship, nor did I act thus because I took Your commands lightly. I did not belittle Your punishment, nor did I disregard Your threat of requital. Sin presented itself before me, my concupiscent soul deluded me, and passion prevailed over me.”

But if a person immerses himself in all the varieties of sin without any awareness of the ugliness of what he is doing, firmly advancing on the path of corruption until the travails of death overtake him, this means that he is totally heedless of the consequences of his acts; any belated repentance on his part will not be accepted.

It is obvious that when a sinner comes to the threshold of death and the veils are removed from before him, in such a way that the hereafter become sensorily visible to him, he will regret his evil deeds. His state will be comparable to that of a condemned criminal who finally repents of his crime when he lays eyes on the gallows that await him. Such fruitless regret cannot be regarded as a virtue or cause for pride; it does not mark a spiritual reformation, and is not an acceptable form of repentance.

The Noble Qur'an clearly states:

***“The one who continues to sin until he witnesses death and then begins to experience regret, saying, ‘Now I repent’ the repentance of such a one will not be accepted.” (4: 18)***

Once someone said in the presence of the Commander of the Faithful, upon whom be peace, in an offhand and careless fashion,

“I seek the forgiveness of God.”

The Imam said to him:

“May your mother weep for you! Do you know what it is to seek the forgiveness of God? Seeking forgiveness of God is the station of those of high rank. It appears to be but a word, but it includes six aspects. The first is regret for what has been done; the second is firm resolve to abandon sinning in future; the third is restoring to others whatever rights of theirs you may have usurped, in such a way that when you meet your Creator they will have no claim in you; the fourth is that you perform whatever obligatory acts of worship you may have neglected; the fifth is that you cleanse with the tears of regret the illicit flesh that grew on your body while you were sinning; and the sixth is that just as you tasted the pleasure of sin and disobedience, you now taste the hardship and rigor of worship and obedience. Only when you have completed all of these six may you say, ‘I seek forgiveness of God.’” (*Nahj al-Balagha*, ed. Subhi Salih, p. 549)

The Qur’an says concerning the repentance of the usurers:

***“If you do not abandon usury, be aware that you are engaged in war against God and His Messenger. But if you truly regret your practice and repent of it, then the original sum shall be yours; no wrong shall be done to you, nor will you have wronged others. If one of your debtors is indigent, grant him a respite until he is able to pay; and if you forgive him his debt by way of charity, this will be better for you, if you are aware of your own true interest.” (2:279–280)***

The Qur’an pronounces the repentance of the usurer to be a true repentance only if he renounces the interest that is due him and simply reclaims the original sum; in such a case, neither will he have wronged anyone nor will he have been wronged himself.

The Qur’an then adds that it is better for the lender to give a respite to the borrower, enabling him to obtain the money needed for repaying the debt. If the lender forgives the debt, it will be still better, the reason for this being that it is usually dire need that forces people into debt. This act of renunciation will have the effect of softening the heart that had been made merciless and hard by the practice of usury, and in addition the resentment and hatred that had accumulated in the borrower will be changed into liking and approval. Love will thus have displaced enmity.

## **The Advantages Bestowed by Repentance**

To confess to one's sins, to repent and to seek God's forgiveness, not only does not reduce a person's value in the eyes of God; it increases his standing with Him. It cleanses his soul of the dark stains of sin and enables him, with God's help, to make up for his past errors and begin to acquire virtue, and to play the role for which he was created. Once an intelligent believer in God's unity became aware of the darkness of sin within his own being, he will begin seeking for a way to remedy matters. Where else he might turn for help if not to the source of all mercy and good?

The Qur'an says:

***“The virtuous are those who whenever they commit an improper act or transgress against themselves remember God, and repent and seek forgiveness from Him. None but God can forgive the sins of His creatures. The virtuous are those who do not persist in sin, for they are aware of the ugliness of disobedience.” (3:135).***

The Qur'an describes as follows the truly penitent who are enveloped in the grace and forgiveness of God:

***“God accepts the repentance of those who have sinned in ignorance and who realizing the ugliness of their deed swiftly turn toward Him in repentance” (3:16).***

The Qur'an similarly instructs those who are concerned for their salvation to come to their senses by turning to God in repentance and reforming their conduct.

***“O believers, turn toward God, all of you, in repentance, in hope of attaining success and salvation” (24:31).***

It is important that whenever man falls into the pit of sin, he should immediately feel polluted by his act of rebellion against God, and that he move to prevent his heart from being blackened by the repetition of sin and, in fact, receiving the stamp of perdition.

Perceiving the ugliness of his deeds, the sinner begins immediately to lament and to implore God for forgiveness. True repentance can take place only through turning to God, striving to advance continuously on the path of knowledge and faith, and compensating for past error.

God commands His servants to engage in sincere repentance and the definitive renunciation of sin in order to efface the effects of their sinning. Only thus can they truly purge themselves of their offenses, with a comprehensive repentance and contrition that laying firm hold of the heart cures it. Any seeking of forgiveness that falls short of this will be purely verbal.

This is God's command:

***“O believers, turn toward God in sincere repentance, and it may be that God will veil and efface your sins” (66:8).***

Traditions confirm for us that a sincere repentance is one that includes the firm resolve not to resume sinning.

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The Commander of the Faithful, upon whom be peace, regarded the avoidance of contamination by sin as an important factor in attaining nobility and dignity of character. For he said:

“Whoever claims nobility and dignity for his person will not abase it with vice and sin.” (*Ghurar al-Hikam*, p. 757)

Man who is constantly exposed in the life of this world to the danger of sin should then always be careful not to approach that forbidden zone. At the same time, the greater becomes his share of faith, the loftier and purer his deeds will become.

Now is the time to seek a remedy for sin and to make up for past misdeeds; we cannot wait, for the opportunity to repent may pass us by.

The Commander of the Faithful, upon whom be peace, warns us as follows:

“O servants of God, prepare yourselves now to work good. For your tongues suffer no impediment, your bodies are sound, and limbs are obedient. The field of action is open before all of you.” (*Nahj al-Balagha*, sermon 191)

Imam as-Sadiq, peace be upon him, similarly said:

“The life of man does not amount to more than an instant. What is past is now non-existent; you do not feel its pleasure or pain. As for what is yet to come, you do not know what it is.

“The true and precious capital of your life are those few instants you presently enjoy. Master, then, your soul, and strive to redeem yourself and attain salvation; be steadfast in enduring the rigor of worshipping God and obeying His commandments; and preserve your self from the pollution of sin and disobedience to God.” (*al-Kafi*, Vol. II, p. 454)

The Most Noble Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, said:

“O servants of God, you are like the sick, and the Creator of the world is like a physician. The interest and welfare of the sick lie in those things that the physician does in accordance with his knowledge, not in those things that the sick crave for. Surrender to God's commands in order to join the ranks of the saved.” (*Majmu'a-yi Wiram*, Vol. II, p. 117)

Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, said:

“Restrain your soul from what harms it before death overtakes you. Strive to keep your soul free in just the same way that you strive to earn your livelihood. For your soul is hostage to your deeds, and only your efforts can set it free.” (*Wasa'il*, Vol. IV, p.40)

The Commander of the Faithful, upon whom be peace, said,

“Tame your rebellious and transgressing soul by abandoning the habit of sin; compel it to obey God's commands; and impose on it the burden of compensating for its violations. Then adorn it with moral and spiritual virtues and keep it free from the pollution of sin.” (*Ghurar al-Hikam*, p. 407)

We must implore God to treat us not in accordance with His justice but in accordance with His kindness and mercy, for if He were to withhold from us His favor and forgiveness, we would never attain salvation and happiness.

Imam al-Sajjad, upon whom be peace, addressed God as follows:

“O God, if You wish, forgive us by virtue of Your kindness, and if You wish, punish us by virtue of Your justice. Then show us Your favor, envelop us in Your pardon, and keep us safe in Your refuge from all torment. You know well that We cannot endure Your justice or withstand the chastisement that we merit; none can attain salvation except through Your forgiveness and generosity.

“When we sinned against You, Satan rejoiced; now that we have severed our links with him and turned toward You, do not abandon us or drive us away.” (*Sahifa-yi Sajjadiya*, p. 123)

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