

The Wise Counsel of Luqman

وَإِذْ قَالَ لُقْمَانُ لِابْنِهِ وَهُوَ يَعِظُهُ يَا بُنَيَّ لَا تُشْرِكْ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّ الشِّرْكَ لَظُلْمٌ عَظِيمٌ

when Luqman said to his son while he admonished him: O my son! do not associate aught with Allah; most surely polytheism is a grievous iniquity (Luqman, 31/13)

Human life is governed by a system of personal responsibility. Duties begin from the earliest stages of life and continue till its end; at no moment can an individual claim freedom or separation from some form of obligation. As long as ability exists, it has an associated responsibility attached to it, and only when death finally catches up with a person, it brings to a close the roster of his duties also.

Generally, the sense of responsibility is based on intellectual principles, and the reasons for abiding by the laws of religion also go back to these same principles. This is because, in societal affairs as well as personal life, religious laws and directives conform to the general perception of the intellect. As an individual's understanding and awareness deepens, his desire and readiness to discharge his responsibilities will increase and intensify, because awareness of one's responsibilities and obligations is an essential prerequisite for the felicity of mankind.

The effect of conduct and actions is far greater than that of conversation and speech; the personal qualities of a teacher and the manner of his behaviour have a great and fundamental impact on his students. Practical training by example has a crucial effect on the minds of those being nurtured, and influences their character to an extent that cannot be compared to mere literal and verbal exhortation.

When an individual wants to become a mentor and oversee the spiritual and moral training of others, even if uses the most advanced techniques of teaching, he still needs to have exemplary personal qualities so that he can create a suitable environment for nurturing excellence. He must be able to transfer the wealth of God-wariness (*taqwa*) into the confines of minds and thoughts so that he can bring about an internal revolution in his charges, the most important of which is to foster the virtues of sincerity (*ikhlas*) and safeguarding their minds from corruption.

One who seeks success in nurturing, must himself display impeccable virtue and moral conduct, so that his words and advice have the desired effect; otherwise, if he is lax in performing his own duties, it is obvious that his efforts at nurturing others will be in vain. This is especially the case when his actions and manners are closely observed by the students who then find his words inconsistent with his acts.

When a mentor's inner self is devoid of *taqwa* of the all-Creator and he himself does not lead a virtuous life, people will evaluate and judge him and find his conduct wanting, and consequently common trust in him will be shaken and weakened. People will not then be prepared to accept him as a guide and role model in order to achieve moral excellence.

In the verses under discussion, through a series of his recommendations and sagacious counsel, we are introduced to the wisdom of Luqman, who had access to the ultimate source of knowledge and information. His radiant face was familiar and famous amongst his people; and the best utterances and insights of the day could not match even excerpts of his statements.

This learned sage turns his attention to the moral training of his son with particular care and creativeness. He addresses his son by giving him beneficial advice, and by explaining to him the correct course and the nature of his duties. He shows him how to lead a noble life, through which the maxims of spiritual and moral values can best be experienced.

In the beginning, in order to motivate his son, to energise the intuitive truths latent in him and to guide him towards his ultimate goal, he clearly sets out for him his duties towards his Creator and reminds him of God's unity. This is to illuminate his mind and insight so that he becomes able to prevent himself from deviating from the path of monotheism (*tawhid*) and straying into polytheism (*shirk*). Therefore, he counsels him in the following words:

وَإِذْ قَالَ لُقْمَانُ لِابْنِهِ وَهُوَ يَعِظُهُ يَا بُنَيَّ لَا تُشْرِكْ بِاللَّهِ إِنَّ الشِّرْكَ لَظُلْمٌ عَظِيمٌ {0}
وَوَصَّيْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ بِوَالِدَيْهِ حَمَلَتْهُ أُمُّهُ وَهْنًا عَلَىٰ وَهْنٍ وَفِصَالُهُ فِي عَامَيْنِ أَنِ اشْكُرْ
لِي وَلِوَالِدَيْكَ إِلَيَّ الْمَصِيرُ

And when Luqman said to his son while he admonished him: O my son! Do not associate aught with Allah; most surely polytheism is a grievous iniquity. And We have enjoined upon man concerning his parents - His mother bears him in weakness upon weakness, and his weaning is in two years - Give thanks unto Me and unto your parents. Unto Me is the journeying. (Luqman, 31/13-14)

In the first verse, mention is made of how Luqman draws his son's attention to this exalted truth so that he would not digress into the swamp of error, but rather discover that behind the apparent world and the intricate complexity of creation, there exists a single unique Power who has originated the system of the

universe and who controls and regulates it according to an elaborate scheme and an all-knowing intention and purpose. Therefore, only such a sublime existence deserves to be worshipped. In this regard, he must fulfil his duty towards this Eternal, Needless Being and continually express his thanks and gratitude to Him.

In the second verse, the words of Luqman are cut off, and his silence here raises a question: why did Luqman stop talking at this point? After explaining to his son his responsibilities towards his Lord, it was necessary next to outline his duties towards his parents so that he could properly discharge his responsibilities to his mother and father.

It seems that the reason why Luqman became silent at this juncture and did not elaborate upon the duties of a child towards its father and mother is contained in the subtle point that in this case, it was Luqman himself who was the father. If he brought up the subject of filial obligations, which included politeness, respect and gratitude to the father, it would be as if he was requesting his son to display this behaviour to him personally. It would be tantamount to asking his son to repay him for all his efforts and guidance throughout his childhood and later years, to obey his directives and to never forget his favours.

The speech of a distinguished and wise man like Luqman, who had gathered within his personality so many diverse virtues, cannot be interpreted in this manner, and in truth, it would be an injustice to his station to do so. Secondly, by himself reminding his son of his filial responsibility Luqman is in fact pointing out to his son's his obligation and indebtedness to himself, an act which does not befit a man who has attained such a high spiritual station.

By considering this subtle and significant matter of courtesy, we can understand the reason why Luqman stops speaking at this point, and through his meaningful silence, appreciate his exemplary moral qualities. As Luqman falls silent and refrains from mentioning the filial responsibilities of a child, Divine revelation takes over and instructs mankind about the rights of parents.

Naturally, Luqman's son is also obliged to toil his utmost to fulfil his duty towards his father and mother in obedience to the command of God. Once more, Luqman begins to speak and continues to counsel his son, this time advising him about his duties toward his fellow members of society:

يَا بُنَيَّ أَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ وَأْمُرْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَانْهَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَأَصْبِرْ عَلَىٰ مَا أَصَابَكَ إِنَّ
ذَلِكَ مِنْ عَزْمِ الْأُمُورِ {0} وَلَا تُصَعِّرْ خَدَّكَ لِلنَّاسِ وَلَا تَمْشِ فِي الْأَرْضِ مَرْحًا إِنَّ
اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ كُلَّ مُخْتَالٍ فَخُورٍ

O my son! Keep up prayer and enjoin the good and forbid the evil, and bear patiently that which befalls you; indeed these acts require courage; and do not turn your face away from people in contempt, nor go about in the land exulting overmuch; surely God does not love any self-

conceited boaster. (Luqman, 31/17-18)

In this part of his speech Luqman advises his son about the fundamental external traits which he should adopt so that he may preserve himself from corrupting his soul; in the same way, from amongst the many inner moral vices, he singles out one. He admonishes his son, who is about to enter and participate in society, to beware of behaving with conceit, which would be an outward manifestation of the negative aspects of his personality, and it would have far-reaching consequences. If arrogance becomes part of an individual's character it will affect every aspect of his personal and social interactions, inevitably resulting in his downfall and disgrace in the society.

In addition, arrogance always results in an adverse reaction from the people and opens the door to general dislike towards the conceited individual. This backlash makes societal life difficult for everyone and thus, it was necessary that Luqman's son took his father's advice seriously and avoided that which, in his father's wise judgement, was against the moral code of society life, and which make it difficult to form sound relationships with his fellow citizens. He must realize that selfishness and egotism only lead to loss, and is never the desirable course; moreover, God detests arrogant behaviour, Finally, selfishness is a factor which stunts man's spiritual progress and becomes an obstacle in his journey to the proximity of God.

Thereafter, Luqman counsels his son to inculcate in himself righteous traits, and purify his soul from that which would corrupt it, as this was the only way to ultimate felicity and salvation. He urges him to always adopt moderation in his conduct, saying:

وَأَقْصِدْ فِي مَشْيِكَ وَاعْضُضْ مِنْ صَوْتِكَ إِنَّ أَنْكَرَ الْأَصْوَاتِ لَصَوْتُ الْحَمِيرِ

And pursue the middle course in your going about and lower your voice; surely the most hateful of voices is braying of the asses. (Luqman, 31/19)

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