Actions and Intentions (part 1 of 2): Purity of Intention in the Religious Realm

Description: The role of intention in the acceptability of religion worship by God.

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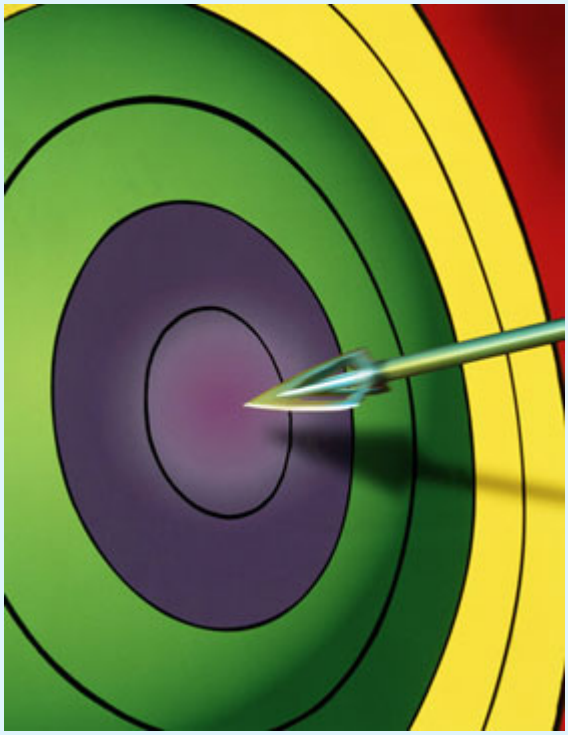
It is narrated on the authority of Umar ibn al-Khattab who said: I heard the Messenger of God say:



"All actions are judged by motives, and each person will be rewarded according to their intention. Thus, he whose migration was to God and His Messenger, his migration is to God and His Messenger; but he whose migration was for some worldly thing he might gain, or for a wife he might marry, his migration is to that for which he migrated." (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*)

Background

This hadeeth is indeed one of the greatest and most important of the sayings of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, as it sets one of the most important principles in the religion of Islam, specifically in regards to the acceptance one's religion and deeds by God, and generally to all other normal every day activity in which a person involves himself. This principle is that in order for any action to be accepted and thus rewarded by God, it must be done purely for his sake. This concept is often called "sincerity to God", but the most exact meaning would be "purity of intention".

At one of the stages of the life of the Prophet, God ordered all the Muslims to migrate from Mecca to the newborn Islamic state of Medina. In this hadeeth, the Prophet gave an example of two types of people in regards to this religious service of migration:

- The first example was that of the person who migrated to Medina purely for the sake of God, seeking His Pleasure and seeking to fulfill His command. The Prophet stated that the deed of this type of person will be accepted by God and he will be rewarded in the fullest.

- The second example was of a person who fulfilled this religious service outwardly, but his intention was not the pleasure of God nor fulfilling His Command, and so this type of person, although he may achieve what he was intending in this life, will not receive reward for it from God, and the deed is not one which is considered acceptable.

In Islam, there are two realms to a person's life, the religious and the mundane. Although there is a clear separation between the two in regards to religious jurisprudence, they are in fact inseparable, as Islam is a religion which legislates in matter family, society and politics as well as the belief and worship of God. Thus, although this saying of the Prophet appears to apply to the religious aspect of a persons' life, it actually applies to both.

Purity of Intention in the Religious Realm

As mentioned earlier, this hadeeth sets the first principle for one's deeds to be accepted by God, which is that they should be done purely for God. In regards to those deeds which have been commanded as a form of religious devotion, known as worship, one must do them for God Alone, for it is God who commanded the service or deed to be done and loves it. These deeds include the likes of prayer, (Salah), Fasting, the offering of the Compulsory Charity (Zakah), the performance of the Lesser or Grater Pilgrimage to Mecca (Umrah and Hajj), and all other service which have been ordained in the religion. Even though the deeds may appear outwardly, as in this hadeeth, to be one accepted, of pivotal importance is the intention which the person has when performing them.

A person who directs any of these or other religious service to other deities other than or alongside God will never be accepted, and one who commits this heresy is deemed as committing the greatest sin against God, polytheism: to associate others with God in those things which are specific to Him. Islam is a religion which believes and practices true and strict monotheism. This monotheism not only entails that that there is only One Sole God and Creator, but also that this God has the right that all worship and acts of deed be done solely for His sake and none else. This concept is once which God ordered all His Prophets to preach, as He says in the Quran:

> **"And they were not commanded except that they should worship God, keeping the religion pure for Him, and worship none but Him Alone, and establish the Prayer and offer the Compulsory Charity, and that is the upright religion." (Quran 98:5)**

Here we see that even though a person may seem to be performing acts of devotion and worship to God outwardly, if they associate any other being in this worship, whether they be angels, prophets, or righteous people, then this deed is not accepted by God. Moreover, they fall in to the great sin of polytheism.

Another aspect of this purity of intention is that a person should never seek any worldly gains through religious service and acts of worship, even if that worldly gain be something permissible. In the hadeeth mentioned above, the second person did not perform this religious obligation of migration for other deities besides or alongside God, nor did he intend something intrinsically evil. Rather his intention was something deemed permissible in the religion. Still, however, the act was not accepted by God, and the person may or may not have received what he intended from this worldly life. Thus, if a person seeks any permissible worldly gain though an action, the reward of the deed diminishes.

If a person desires something deemed as impermissible by Islam from religious service and worship, this is considered as a sin. Islam is a religion which encourages humbleness and selflessness, reprimanding those who seek praise of others and status in this worldly life. Thus, if one seeks the praise of others through religious service and worship, not only is it not accepted by God, but the person is deemed liable for punishment in the afterlife. The Prophet mentioned the first people to be sentenced to the Hellfire in the afterlife, and from them is the following:

"A person learned [religious] knowledge and taught it [to others], as well as reciting the Quran. He will be brought [to the presence of God], and God will mention to him all the favors he granted him, and he recognized them. God will ask him, 'What did you do with them?'

He will answer, 'I learned [religious] knowledge and taught it [to others], and I recited the Quran purely for Your sake.'

God will say, 'You have lied! Rather you learned [religious] knowledge to be called a scholar, and you recited the Quran to be called a recitor, and it was said of you!' Then it was commanded [to punish] him. So he was dragged on his face and he was thrown into the Fire." (*an-Nasa'i*)

Actions and Intentions (part 2 of 2): Purity of Intention in the Religious Realm

Description: Everyday actions become acts of worship which are rewarded by God if the proper intention is kept.

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Purity of Intention in the Mundane Realm

Since the wording of the *hadeeth* discussed in Part One is general, it is understood that a person may even be rewarded for their everyday normal activity which they

perform, as long as their intention is correct and that act is not prohibited by the religion. The religion of Islam has encouraged and sometimes even placed the obligation upon humans of specific manners and mores in regards to life outside worship. It has legislated various methods in performing every day activities, from sleeping to eating. If a person performs the various activities in conformity to its legislation, they will be rewarded for it.

This aspect of intention allows one's entire life to become an act of worship, as long as the objective of that life is the pleasure of God, Whose pleasure is achieved by doing good and refraining from evil. A person can turn everyday activities into acts of worship by purifying his or her intention and sincerely seeking God's pleasure through these activities. God's Messenger, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said:

"Helping a person or his belongings onto his mount is an act of charity. A good word is charity. Every step taken on the way to performing prayers is charity. Removing an obstacle from the road is charity." (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

Earning a living can be rewarded as well. The Companions saw a man and were astonished by his hard work and industry. They lamented: "If he were only doing this much work for the sake of God..."

God's Messenger replied:

"If he is working to support his small children, then it is for the sake of God. If he is working to support his elderly parents, then it is for the sake of God. If he is working to occupy himself and keep his desires in check, then it is for the sake of God. If, on the other hand, he is doing so to show off and earn fame, then he is working for the sake of Satan." (*al-Mundhiri*, *as-Suyuti*)

One may gain reward even for the most natural acts, if of course they are accompanied by the proper intention: God's Messenger said:

"When one of you sleeps with his wife, it is an act of charity." (*Saheeh Muslim*)

The same can be said for eating, sleeping, and working as well as traits of good character, such as truthfulness, honesty, generosity, courage, and humbleness. These can become worship through sincere intention and deliberate obedience to God.

In order for these otherwise mundane actions to be deserving of divine reward, the following conditions must be met:

A. The action must be lawful in and of itself. If the action is something prohibited, its perpetrator deserves punishment. God's Messenger said:

"God is pure and good, and He accepts only what is pure and good." (*Saheeh Muslim*)

B. The dictates of Islamic Law must be completely observed. Deception, oppression, and iniquity must be avoided. God's Messenger said:

"He who deceives us is not one of us." (*Saheeh Muslim*)

C. The activity should not keep the person from performing his or her religious obligations. God says:

> **"O you who believe, do not let your wealth and children distract you from the remembrance of God..." (Quran 63:9)**

From this discussion, we can see the greatness of this *hadeeth* and how important it is in forming the concept of the acceptability of deeds and reward from God. We also see from this *hadeeth* that the concept of worship and service in Islam is not limited to performing certain legislated ritual acts, but rather encompasses the whole life of the Muslim, making him a true slave to God.

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