

Righteous Deeds

H A R U N Y A H Y A

"Righteous deeds" (amelunsalihan) are one of the key concepts of the Qur'an. In Arabic, the word "righteousness" comprises the meanings of good, beneficial and right. In Arabic, the verb "to amend"(islah) is also derived from the same root. Consequently, in English, every type of beneficial and good work or action done for the good of religion is expressed by the word "righteous deed." In terms of the Qur'an, on the other hand, each act and all behaviour designed to seek the favour of God is a "righteous deed".

The salvation of an individual is not attained only through faith; righteous deeds, the signs of sincere faith, also save the soul. Saying "I believe" yet failing to comply with the commandments of religion does not lead man to salvation. In the Qur'an God states the following about this issue:

Do men think that they will be left alone on saying, "We believe", and that they will not be tested? We tested those before them, and God will certainly know those who are true from those who are false. (Al-Ankabut, 2-3)

The way a believer does righteous deeds proves his mettle. His deeds indicate his perseverance, stability, determination and loyalty-in other words the depth of his faith.

In the Qur'an God informs us about the various kinds of righteous deeds. Communicating the message of Islam to people, striving for the prosperity and the benefit of the Muslims, trying to attain a better understanding of the Qur'an, solving every kind of personal and social problem of the Muslims; all these are important righteous deeds. The fundamental Islamic forms of worship, such as saying prayers to God, fasting, spending for the cause of God, and the pilgrimage to Mecca are also among the important righteous deeds:

Righteousness does not consist in whether you turn your faces towards the east or the west; what is righteous is to believe in God and the last day, and the angels, and the Book, and the messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practise regular charity; to fulfil the contracts which you have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and in times of war. Such as do so are people of truth. Such are the God-fearing. (Al-Baqara, 177)

Yet there is another point that deserves mention: what makes an act a righteous deed is not its result but the "intention" behind it. That is why for an act to be a righteous one, it should be done purely to seek the approval of God. This is what really distinguishes a "righteous deed" from "charity", a concept prevalent in the ignorant society. A righteous deed is done to seek the approval of God; on the other hand, the concept of charity in an ignorant society, is based on a spirit of social solidarity and a personal desire to make a reputation as a "charity lover".

The verses below explain why the deeds of believers are by no means similar to alms-giving.

They perform (their) vows, and they fear a Day whose evil flies far and wide. And they feed, for the love of God, the indigent, the orphan, and the captive, (Saying)"We feed you for the sake of God alone: no reward do we desire from you, nor thanks." "We only fear a day of distressful wrath from our Lord." (Al- Insan 7-10)

If any acts ostensibly complying with the definition of "righteous deeds" are not intended to seek the good pleasure of God, they cease to be "righteous deeds." This is simply because they are done to please other people. This is, in terms of the Qur'an, "associating partners with God", which is a great sin. In the following verse, God explains how an act of worship done to attain not the approval of God, but other people loses its value and becomes an ordinary act.

Woe to the worshippers, who are neglectful of their prayers; who only want to make a show of piety. (Al-Maun, 4-6)

Similarly, spending, which is a righteous deed in the presence of God, becomes an ordinary act if done to demonstrate one's generosity in order to impress people. God describes the difference between spending to gain His approval and to satisfy one's own desires:

O you who believe! Do not cancel out your charity by reminders of your generosity or by injury,- like those who spend their substance to be seen by others, believing neither in God nor in the last day. They are in parable like a hard, barren rock, on which there is little soil: on it falls heavy rain, which leaves it just a bare stone. They will be able to do nothing with anything they have earned. And God does not guide those who reject faith. Those who spend their substance, seeking to please God and to strengthen their souls, are like a garden, high and fertile: heavy rain falls on it, and makes it yield a double harvest, and if it does not receive heavy rain, light moisture suffices it. God sees well whatever you do. (Al-Baqara, 264-265)

We have prepared a shameful punishment for those who spend their wealth for the sake of ostentation but who have no faith in God and the last day: If any take the evil one for their intimate, what a dreadful intimate he is! And what burden would it be on them if they had faith in God and in the last day, and they spent out of what God has given them for sustenance? For God has full knowledge of them. (An-Nisa, 38-39)

In brief, what turns an act into a righteous deed is the intention behind it. If the intention is a righteous one, then the deed also becomes righteous, even if the desired result is not attained. For instance, with the intention of seeking the approval of God, a believer may work hard towards a desired end, yet his efforts may not fructify. However, this is not important; he shall still have his reward from God. Every believer should acknowledge that there is a reason why God does not always let the individual reach his goal: **"It is possible that you dislike a thing which is good for you, and that you love a thing which is bad for you. But God knows, and you do not know."** (Al-Baqara, 216) Only God knows if the desired end will have beneficial consequences for man.

Hence, the result of each deed always rests with God. Each task should be done solely to please Him.

As stated above, intention is the essence of a righteous deed. This is due to the fact that God is free of all needs. Consequently, He actually does not need any of the acts that His servants perform. God states the following in one of His verses:

O you men! It is you that have need of God: but God is the One free of all wants, worthy of all praise. If He so pleased, He could destroy you and replace you with a new creation. Nor is that (at all) difficult for God. (Fatir, 15-17)

He can do anything He wills when He wills it. He does not need the deeds and efforts of believers to make His religion prevail:

Do not the Believers know, that, had God (so) willed, He could have guided all mankind (to the right)? (Ar-Rad,31)

In brief, if a man does righteous deeds, it accrues to his personal benefit. Right action is surely the way to attain an eternal salvation. As the Qur'an, puts it:

If any strive (with might and main), they do so for their own souls: for God is free of all needs from all creation. (Al-Ankabut, 6)

One who says prayers, fasts, spends in the cause of God, or supports Islam, becomes himself the beneficiary. It is he himself who needs to do good works; surely he shall have forgiveness and a great reward in return.

For the same reason, in the presence of God, a righteous deed is acceptable only when it is the expression of a good intention:

It is not their meat nor their blood, (i.e. of camels which have been sacrificed) that reaches God: it is your piety that reaches Him: He has thus made them subject to you, so that you may glorify God for His Guidance to you and proclaim the good news to all who do right. (Al-Hajj, 37)

Therefore, while performing a righteous deed, it is of vital importance to keep oneself occupied with the remembrance of God. To this end, a believer should pray to God for the acceptance of his services. The prayer of the Prophet Abraham and Ismail sets a good example for all believers.

Remember Abraham and Isma'il raised the foundations of the House (with this prayer): "Our Lord! Accept (this service) from us: For You are the All-Hearing, the All-knowing. Our Lord! make of us Muslims, bowing to Your (Will), and of our progeny a people Muslim, bowing to Your (will); and show us our place for the celebration of (due) rites; and turn to us (in Mercy); for You are the Oft-Returning, Most Merciful. (Al-Baqara, 127-128)

The address of God to David and his people also stresses the significance of prayer, and of giving thanks to God during the performance of a righteous deed:

They worked for him as he desired (making) arches, image, basins as large as reservoirs, and cooking cauldrons fixed (in their places) : "Work, sons of David, with thanks ! But few of my servants are truly grateful !" (Saba, 13)

This is surely the type of service that strengthens one's faith in God: One's statement of "I believe" is reinforced with this service and mount to God:

"To Him mount up (all) words of purity: It is He Who exalts each deed of righteousness." (Fatir, 10)

A devoted believer who performs righteous deeds all throughout his life will surely attain the gardens of heaven and will be rewarded most generously by God in the hereafter:

As for those who believe and do good works no burden do We place on any soul, but that which it can bear,- they will be companions of the Garden, therein to dwell (for ever). And We shall remove from their hearts any lurking sense of injury; beneath them will be rivers flowing; and they shall say: "Praise be to God, who has guided us to this (felicity): never could we have found the right path, had it not been for the guidance of God: indeed it was the truth, that the messengers of our Lord brought to us." And they shall hear the cry: "Behold! the garden before you! You have been made its inheritors, for your deeds of righteousness." (Al-Araf, 42-43)