

## Practical Steps towards Moral Purification Part IV: To Avoid Hypocrisy<sup>1</sup>

AYATOLLAH NASIR MAKARIM SHIRAZI<sup>2</sup>  
*Islamic Seminary of Qom, Iran*

Translated by Seyyede Zahra Mirfendereski, Qom, Iran

“Hypocrisy” is the opposite of “sincerity” The Qur’an and Islamic traditions rebuke hypocrisy, introducing it as a grave nullifier of righteous deeds and a type of *shirk* (associating other gods with the One God). Hypocrisy ruins ethical virtues, spreads seeds of wickedness in people’s hearts, makes their deeds worthless, and prepares the ground for Satan to lead them astray.

Let us now explore the characteristics of hypocrites and the consequences of their actions, as portrayed in the holy Qur’an:

1. “O you who have faith! Do not render your charities void by reproaches and affronts, like those who spend their wealth to be seen by people and have no faith in Allah and the Last Day. Their parable is that of a rock covered with soil: a downpour strikes it, leaving it bare. They have no power over anything of what they have earned, and Allah does not guide the faithless lot.” (Qur’an 2: 264)

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<sup>1</sup> This article is the fourth part of the translation of this chapter; the previous parts were published in the previous issues of the journal.

<sup>2</sup> Grand Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi is one of the most prominent living Shi’ite scholars of jurisprudence in Qom.

2. "So whoever expects to encounter his Lord let him act righteously, and not associate anyone with the worship of his Lord." (Qur'an 18: 110)
3. "The hypocrites indeed seek to deceive Allah, but it is He who outwits them. When they stand up for prayer, they stand up lazily, showing off to the people and not remembering Allah except a little." (Qur'an 4: 142)
4. "And those who spend their wealth to be seen by people, and believe neither in Allah nor in the Last Day. As for him who has Satan for his companion – an evil companion is he!" (Qur'an 4: 38)
5. "Do not be like those who left their homes vainly and to show off to the people, and to bar [other people] from the way of Allah, and Allah comprehends what they do." (Qur'an 8: 47)
6. "Woe to them who pray, who are heedless of their prayers, those who show off, but deny aid." (Qur'an 107: 4-7)

**Commentary:**

In the first verse, reproaching and affronting have been mentioned as factors that both render the works of charity – and good deeds in general – void. The verse also implies that hypocrites do not believe in God or the Hereafter. It reads, "O you who have faith! Do not render your charities void by reproaches and affronts." Then it likens such people to those who spend their wealth so as to be seen by people and have no faith in God and the Hereafter! Afterwards, a very beautiful and deep parable is given for such people: "Their parable is that of a rock covered with soil: a downpour strikes it, leaving it bare." Indeed, these people "have no power over anything of what they have earned, and Allah does not guide the faithless lot."

In this verse, hypocrites are implicitly introduced both as the ones who do not believe in God and the Hereafter and as the faithless

whose deeds are worthless, having been planted in the infertile land of hypocrisy.

Another possible meaning for this verse is that hypocrites themselves are like slabs of rock, covered with a thin layer of soil, incapable of growing any seeds. Their hearts are like pieces of rock, their souls are impenetrable, their deeds are rootless, and their intentions are impure.

It is interesting that in the next verse of the same chapter, deeds of sincere people have been likened to a fertile garden, where good seeds and saplings are planted, heavy rain falls, the sun shines, breeze blows gently, and, as a result, its fruit and crops are multiplied.

The second verse addresses the holy Prophet (s) and orders him to introduce the pure *tawhid* (the belief in God's oneness) as the fundamental principle of Islam: "Say, 'I am just a human being like you. It has been revealed to me that your God is the One God.'" (Qur'an 18:110). Then, emphasizing the importance of purity and sincerity of the deeds, the verse continues: "So whoever expects to encounter his Lord, let him act righteously, and not associate anyone with the worship of his Lord" (Qur'an 18: 110).

Therefore, associating others with the worship of God ruins both the essence of *tawhid* and the belief in resurrection. In other words, it is the sincere deeds that are the keys to Paradise.

Regarding the occasion of revelation for this verse, it is reported that a man called Jundub b. Zuhayr went to the holy Prophet (s) and said, "I perform my deeds for the sake of God and my goal is His satisfaction, but when people become aware of them, I become happy." The Prophet (s) answered, "God is pure and accepts only that

which is pure. He does not accept that in which He is associated with others.” Then the above-mentioned verse was revealed (Wahidi 1990, 307).

According to another report, someone once said to the Prophet (s), “I like to struggle in the way of God. At the same time, I like people to know my position in it.” Then the above mentioned verse was revealed (Wahidi 1990, 307).

According to other reports, the verse was revealed when someone asked a similar question about spending in charity or doing good to his relatives (Wahidi 1990, 307). These reports show that the above-mentioned verse was revealed after asking about various deeds performed with impure intentions. In all these instances, hypocrisy was introduced as a form of polytheism and a sign of disbelief in the Hereafter.

In another *hadith* from the Prophet (s), we read, “He who prays to show off, has associated others with God, he who fasts to show off has associated others with God, and he who gives alms to show off has associated others with God.” Then he recited, “So whoever expects to encounter his Lord ...” (Suyuti 1983, 4:256).

In the third verse, showing off is counted as an action carried out by hypocrites: “The hypocrites indeed seek to deceive God, but it is He who outwits them. When they stand up for prayer, they stand up lazily, showing off to the people and not remembering God except a little.” (Qur’an 4: 142)

It is notable that hypocrisy is a kind of disparity between one’s inner soul and outward appearance. Similarly, showing off is another kind of inconsistency between the heart and outward appearance, because

the external aspect of the deed is godly, but its reality is wicked, performed to be seen by people. Thus, showing off is an inseparable outcome of hypocrisy.

In the fourth verse, hypocritical deeds have been counted as disbelief in God and the Hereafter and being associated with Satan: “And those who spend their wealth to be seen by people, and believe neither in Allah nor in the Last Day. As for him who has Satan for his companion- an evil companion is he!” (Qur’an 4:38). So, hypocrites are friends of Satan and do not firmly believe in God and the Hereafter.

In the fifth verse, God warns Muslims about being like infidels, whose deeds are hypocritical for the sake of their carnal desires: “Do not be like those who left their homes vainly and to show off to the people, and to bar [other people] from the way of God, and God comprehends what they do” (Qur’an 8: 47). According to some commentaries, this verse refers to the Battle of Badr, in which the army of Quraysh had taken with them musical instruments, singers, and wine to show off. Even their idol-worshipping was hypocritical; their real aim was to gain the support of the idolaters. Other exegetes believe that since Badr was a market center where people would gather occasionally during the year, Abu Jahl intentionally brought instruments of debauchery with him to impress those who knew that place. At any rate, the Glorious Qur’an prohibits believers from doing such things and commands them to observe piety and sincerity in order to overcome all difficulties, reminding them of what happened to the impious hypocrites in the Battle of Badr.

The last verse also prohibits people from hypocrisy: “Woe to them who pray, who are heedless of their prayers, those who show off, but deny aid” (Qur’an 107: 4-7). In the Qur’an, the phrase “woe to” is used

twenty seven times, often for grave sins. Using this word for hypocrites, therefore, is an indication of the graveness of their sin.

The above-mentioned verses show us the wickedness of hypocrisy and its dangers for our spiritual growth and salvation. Let us now explore hypocrisy and its consequences in the Islamic tradition.

### **Hypocrisy in Islamic Traditions**

In Islamic traditions, great attention has been paid to the issue of hypocrisy as one of the greatest sins:

1. In a *hadith* from the holy Prophet (s), we read, “The most fearful things I fear for you are hypocrisy and the hidden desire” (Burujirdi 2007, 22:314). It seems that the hidden desire here is the hidden motivations for hypocrisy.
2. In another *hadith* from him (s), we read, “The lowest level of hypocrisy is polytheism” (Shahid Thani 1988, 156).
3. Also, the holy Prophet (s) is quoted as saying, “God does not accept the deeds in which there is an atom of hypocrisy” (Majlisi 1982, 69:304).
4. He (s) is also reported to have said, “The hypocrite will be called on the Last Day and will be told, ‘O you the vicious! O you the deceitful! O you the hypocrite! Your deeds got lost and your reward is vain! Go take your reward from whom you worked for’” (Majlisi 1982, 69:303).
5. A companion of the holy Prophet (s) says, “I saw the Prophet (s) crying, so I asked him (s), ‘why are you crying?’ He (s) answered, ‘I fear that my followers may become polytheists! Indeed, they will not worship idols, the sun, the moon, or rocks; but they will act hypocritically [and in this way they will become polytheists]’” (Ibn Abi al-Hadid 1983, 2:179).

6. He (s) is quoted in another *hadith* as saying, “An angel carries up a servant’s deed happily ... [but] God tells him, “Place it in hell! He has not performed this deed for my sake” (Kulayni 1986, 2:295).
7. In another *hadith* from him (s), we read, “God, the Glorified, says, ‘I am the richest partner. If one performs a deed, associating someone else with me, I will not accept it and it will belong to the one he has associated me with” (Majlisi 1982, 67:222).

These profound *hadiths*, all reported from the holy Prophet (s), indicate that the sin of hypocrisy is exceptionally grave. And this is because of the terrible impacts that hypocrisy has on the society and on the individuals’ spiritual and worldly lives.

Among the wise sayings of the Imams (a), one can find many *hadiths* regarding hypocrisy, such as:

1. Imam Sadiq (a) has quoted from the holy Prophet (s) that “a time will come when, out of greed for this world, the people’s hearts are tainted while their appearances are nice. They do not want what is with their Lord, their religiosity is hypocritical, and there is no fear [of God] in them. So, God will afflict them all with a punishment that causes them to implore Him like a sinking person, but He will not answer them” (Kulayni 1986, 2:296).
2. In another *hadith* from Imam Sadiq (a) we read, “Any kind of hypocrisy is polytheism. Indeed, whoever performs a deed for the sake of the people, his reward is with the people; and whoever performs a deed for the sake of God, his reward is with God” (Kulayni 1986, 2:293).
3. Imam Ali (a) is quoted as saying, “The appearance of a hypocrite is nice, but his inner soul is infected” (Tamimi Amadi 1987, 311). He (a) is also reported to have said, “How shameful is it for a person to have an infected inner soul, with a nice appearance” (Tamimi Amadi 1987, 458).

### **Why Is Hypocrisy Forbidden?**

These shocking traditions may look strange in the eyes of simple-minded people, who wonder why hypocrisy is portrayed as such a grave sin with such terrible consequences. They think, as long as a deed is good, the intention of a person who performs it does not matter. Building a hospital, a mosque, a road, or a bridge for the benefit of people is a good deed, regardless of the intention of their builders. So it is better to let people do whatever good deeds they want to do, without being concerned about their intentions.

This attitude is undoubtedly wrong. First of all, deeds have two kinds of effects: their effect on oneself and their effect on others. Hypocrites ruin their hearts by their deeds, lose their devotion to their Lord, and fall into the abyss of polytheism. Forgetting the power God, they consider the people as the providers of dignity and respect. Such hypocrisy, which is a kind of idolatry, leads to numerous immoralities and vices.

Moreover, because the hypocrites only care about the appearance of their deeds, even if they do something for the benefit of other people, their work will lack genuineness, causing sometimes greater problems for the society and the people. In other words, if hypocritical and superficial acts pervade a society, everything in that society will become inauthentic. Culture, economy, politics, health care, armed forces, and so on will become vain and inefficient. It is obvious that such a society will not survive.

### **Characteristics of the Hypocrites**

After studying *hadiths* such as the above-mentioned that contain dire threats against hypocrites, many people go to the other extreme and



get obsessed with struggling to avoid hypocrisy. Of course, it is very good to be cautious about hypocrisy, because of the furtive nature of its spread. Sometimes one performs a deed for years and then realizes that it had been hypocritical. It is said that after having prayed at a mosque for several years, a faithful man started making up for his prayers, because he realized that he had not had a sincere intention. The way he realized this was that one day he was late for the prayer and could not stand in the first row where he always used to stand. This made him embarrassed because the people who always saw him in the first row now saw him in the last line. Thus, he realized that his intention had been partly to be seen by the people in the front row, and had not been completely for the sake of God.

However, going to the extremes is always wrong. One should discover hypocrisy through its indications and avoid it, but should also avoid falling into the trap of obsession. Our scholars of ethics have carefully discussed this issue. Fayd Kashani, for instance, raises the question in his *al-Mahajjat al-Bayda'* about how a scholar or a preacher can assess the degree of his sincerity. He then answers,

There are some indications for this. For instance, if there appeared a preacher who is better, more knowledgeable, and more popular than him, he would become happy and would not envy him. Of course, there is no problem if he just wishes to be like, or better than, that preacher. Another indication is that if important personalities attended his speech, he would not change his words [to attract their attention] and would not treat the people differently. Another indication is that he would not become happy if his audience escorted him in the streets. (Fayd Kashani 1997, 6:200)

The best criteria for recognizing hypocritical deeds are those mentioned in Islamic traditions, some of which are mentioned below:

1. In a *hadith* from the holy Prophet (s), we read, “The hypocrite has four signs: when someone sees him, he tries to perform good deeds for the sake of God, but when he is alone, he is sluggish; in all his works, he has a passion for people’s praise; and he tries to make his appearance look good” (Harrani 1983, 22).
2. In a *hadith* from Imam Ali (a) we read, “Hypocrites have four characteristics: they become sluggish [in performing good deeds] when they are alone, but become lively when they are amongst the people; and they prolong their deeds when they are admired, but shorten them when they are not” (Ibn Abi al-Hadid 1983, 2:180). A similar saying has been attributed to Luqman al-Hakim (Majlisi 1982, 69:296).

In brief, trying to make a deed look better in people’s eyes opens the door for hypocrisy to contaminate our actions. Performing good deeds with more energy and liveliness when people are watching is a sign of hypocrisy.

However, sometimes discerning hypocrisy becomes very difficult. For instance, some people deceive their conscience by performing good deeds vigorously in private so as to convince themselves that their liveliness for doing good in public is not a sign of hypocrisy. In such cases, the deeds performed in public and in private are both infected with hypocrisy.

As mentioned before, going to extremes must always be avoided. Some people, for instance, totally deprive themselves of attending the congregational prayers, of preaching and delivering sermon, and of teaching and writing in order to be safe from hypocrisy. Such excessive behaviours are not acceptable in Islam.

In Islamic traditions, we read that if someone performs a good deed sincerely for the sake of God, his or her deed will not be harmed if people find out about it. Therefore, commending publically those who do good, in order to encourage others, is advisable and is something that great religious figures have always done. This will not nullify the reward of the person who has performed the good deed either.

The Qur'an and Islamic traditions have frequently encouraged people to give their wealth in charity both secretly and openly, indicating that it is possible to perform good deeds in public and, at the same time, maintain one's sincere intention. In fact, some of the religious practices in Islam such as congregational and Friday prayers, pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj), funeral procession, jihad, and so forth are done in public. And this by no means compromises the necessity of having a sincere intention in all of them.

### **How Can Hypocrisy Be Cured?**

Like other vices, hypocrisy is cured by eradicating its roots and by becoming aware of its harmful consequences. As previously mentioned, the root of hypocrisy is *shirk-i af'ali* (i.e., associating others with God in being independent causes of actions") and being ignorant of the true *tawhid* ("oneness of God"). If we firmly believe in *tawhid-i af'ali* (i.e., the belief in God being the only independent cause of the universe) and become certain that our honour and lowliness is in God's hands, that He provides sustenance for all creatures, and that people's hearts are under His control, we would never act hypocritically to attract people's attention.

If we truly believe that whoever is with God has everything and whoever is detached from Him has nothing, if we firmly believe in the verse that says,

“If God helps you, no one can overcome you, but if He forsakes you, who will help you after Him?”  
(Qur’an 3:160),

and if we really believe that

“all honour belongs to God” (Qur’an 4:139),

we would not corrupt our deeds by hypocrisy to attract people’s attention, respect or trust.

Some scholars of ethics believe that the main root of hypocrisy is ambitiousness which is caused by three factors: seeking people’s admiration, trying to avoid their reproach, and coveting others’ possessions. As an example, one may join the army, in order that people say how brave he is, that they do not reproach him for being a coward, or that he could gain worldly benefits. But these intentions are not valuable in the eyes of God.

Thinking about the deadly consequences of hypocrisy also greatly helps us in eradicating it. Hypocrisy is like a fierce fire that burns the stack of one’s deeds to the ground. It not only ruins one’s righteous deeds, but it is a grave sin that denigrates him in this world and the Hereafter. Hypocrisy deteriorates the foundations of one’s salvation. It is a kind of disbelief, infidelity, and polytheism. It ruins one’s character, self-esteem, and dignity. The most miserable people on the Day of Judgment will be the hypocrites! Moreover, it is not possible to hide hypocrisy for a long time. Usually, the insincere intentions of

the hypocrites will be quickly revealed, and they lose people's admiration and respect.

On the other hand, the joy of having a sincere personality is incomparable with anything. It is much more pleasant than the limited sense of satisfaction that one receives through people's praise and attention.

Some scholars of ethics have suggested that one way of curing hypocrisy is hiding the righteous deeds and worshipping in private until one gets used to sincere works. Of course, this does not mean refraining from congregational and Friday prayers, Hajj, or other deeds that are by their nature done in public. Failing to perform these deeds as they should be performed entails great spiritual losses, both for the individual and for the society.

### **Is Being Joyful When Performing Righteous Deeds Inconsistent with Sincerity?**

Many people wonder why they feel happy when they perform good works. Is it a sign of hypocrisy that they feel joy in performing righteous deeds? The answer is that it depends on the source of this happiness: if it originates from divine grace and from the luminous nature of worshipping, it is absolutely compatible with sincerity; but if it originates from being seen by people, it is incompatible with sincerity, though the deed would not be invalid if the intention behind it was not to be seen by people.

We read in Islamic traditions that a companion of Imam Baqir (a) asked him about a person who "performed a good deed and was seen by another person, and this made him happy." The Imam (a) replied,

“There is no harm [in this]. Everyone likes that good things appear from him among people; [there would be nothing wrong with this] if he did not do this for that [i.e., if he did not perform his good deed for the sake of being seen by people]” (Kulayni 1986, 2:297).

In another tradition, we read that Abu Dharr asked the holy Prophet (s), “someone performs a good deed for himself [seeking closeness to God] and [it makes] people like him?” The holy Prophet (s) replied, “This is early tidings for the believer” (Majlisi 1982, 68:370).

### **What is the Difference between Hypocrisy and *Sum‘ah*?**

Another issue here is the difference between hypocrisy and *sum‘ah* (i.e., letting people hear about one’s righteous deeds). Are they both incompatible with sincerity? Do they both make one’s deeds invalid?

A hypocritical act is usually defined as a righteous deed that someone performs, not sincerely for the sake of God, but for the sake of *being seen* by other people to gain reputation and status. We should add here that equally hypocritical is a good deed that someone performs in order that other people *hear* about it (*sum‘ah*). These types of deeds are all the same in being hypocritical, insincere, and invalid.

However, *sum‘ah* sometimes refers to people hearing about one’s good deed after it was performed with sincerity, even if one becomes happy that others have heard about it. We mentioned earlier that this does not invalidate one’s actions and is not a sign of hypocrisy.

Now, if someone performs a righteous deed for the sake of God, but later tells other people about it in order to increase one’s reputation and status, he or she has committed a kind of hypocrisy, called

hypocrisy after deed. Although this kind of hypocrisy does not invalidate the deed, it seriously diminishes its value.

Some of our great scholars have counted ten ways in which hypocrisy may contaminate a righteous deed:

1. When someone performs a deed merely for the sake of being seen by people. In this case, the deed is certainly invalid.
2. When one performs a deed for the sake of God and at the same time for the sake of being seen by people. This deed is invalid as well.
3. When one performs some of the obligatory parts of one's deed (like prostration in the daily prayers) hypocritically. This also invalidates the deed, even if it is still possible to repeat that part with sincere intention. We can say that making an insincere intention in the acts of worship is like losing one's *taharah* (purity) while in prayer. It is recommended, though, not to break the act of worship as a precaution, but to repeat that part with sincere intention, finish the deed, and then repeat the entire act from the beginning.
4. When one performs some of the recommended parts of one's deed (such as *qunut* in prayers) hypocritically. According to some scholars, this also nullifies the deed.
5. When the action is done for the sake of God, but an insincere intention is made regarding the place chosen for performing the deed, like when someone performs his prayer in a mosque, not so that people see him praying, but so that people see him going to the mosque. In this case, also, the deed is void.
6. When one performs an action for the sake of God, but with an insincere intention related to the timing, like a person who performs his prayers right on time so that people see him praying promptly. This kind of insincerity also invalidates the action.
7. When insincerity occurs in relation to the quality and features of the action, like when prayer is done in congregation or with a

humble appearance for the sake of being seen by people in those states but the prayer itself is performed for the sake of God. These hypocritical qualities also nullify the action, because the quality of an action is not separate from the action.

8. When an action is performed for the sake of God, but the preparations done for it were done hypocritically, like a prayer that was performed in the mosque for the sake of God, but the hypocrisy took place on the way to the mosque. Many scholars believe, based on the principles of Islamic Jurisprudence, that this type of hypocrisy does not nullify the action, because the preparations are separate from the action itself.
9. When hypocrisy occurs in the external features of an action, such as when prayer is performed for the sake of God, but the performer makes *tabt al-banak* (i.e., the recommended act of turning the tail of the turban around the neck from below) out of hypocrisy. Although hypocrisy is ignoble in all its forms, it does not nullify the main action in this case.
10. When one performs an action for the sake of God, but becomes happy when people see him, without this having an impact on his intention. In this case, also, the deed remains valid because the purpose and intention behind it has been sincere.

This concludes our discussion about hypocrisy. There are other issues that remain to be discussed which can be covered in in-depth studies.

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