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Goodwill and Advice*

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Abstract



Good will (also referred to as benevolence) is among noble moral characteristics. All divine prophets were well-wishers for humanity. Benevolence does not have a specific form or method; it encompasses a broad spectrum that includes various types of actions and sayings. Advice and guidance toward that which is advantageous spiritually and materially, teaching the ignorant, admonishing the negligent, defending the weak and unable, preventing slips and mishaps, and assisting toward reform are among the instances of benevolence. A true well-wisher has to have adequate knowledge and experience. He should view those whom he wishes to advise with an open mind and deep insight and eventually show love and compassion to them. Conditions of advice and counsel, ways of developing benevolence in oneself, signs of true benevolence, and its effects are other matters discussed in this paper. One's benevolence toward others results in salvation and development.

Keywords

benevolence, Islamic ethics, moral characteristics, goodwill, advice.

* Translated by Yasar Ebrahim

Introduction

According to our beliefs as Muslims, creation was founded upon goodness and generosity. With His mercy and beneficence, God willed only good for his servants. In addition to all the material and spiritual blessings that He has placed at their disposal, He sent prophets one after another, and they showed people the path of righteousness and piety, and taught them the necessary efforts that were required of them in order to achieve salvation.

Additionally, it is impossible for human beings to live a life of solitude; in order to maintain their own lives and fulfill their needs, they have no choice but to interact and cooperate with each other, and benevolence plays a significant role in cementing the bonds between individuals within a society. As a result, in order for living conditions to progress on both personal and societal levels, it is necessary that individuals do not concern themselves only with their own welfare and needs but also with those of others.

All divine prophets were well-wishers for humanity. They tried to ensure that humanity was able to achieve salvation and ultimate happiness. They strived to guide their people with sincerity to their good. From these efforts, a pure living standard came into existence, based on which the Muslims see themselves as one Ummah, members of the same family, or organs of the same body, coming together to assist and help one another in various circumstances. That which is desired is desired for everyone, and that which is disliked is also disliked for everyone. Sympathy, compassion, mercy, kindness, and so forth are concepts rooted in the spirit of benevolence and goodwill toward others.

Definitions

In Arabic, the word “*nuṣḥ*” means benevolence. This word and its derivatives frequently appear in the Holy Quran and in the

traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt (a). *nush* or *nasih* is defined as any action or saying that contains goodwill, advice and benefit for the addressee.

This term either originally meant being sincere, pure, or correct—thus, pure honey was called “*nasih*”—or it meant to repair or strengthen, and in this sense the work of a tailor was called “*nush*,” because he would repair clothes (Raghib al-Isfahani, 1412 AH, 1:808). Based on this, this term was applied to the action of trying sincerely to reform and improve the actions of others.

Primarily, the term *nush* is associated with anything that is pure and sincere, whether in speech or action, or whether related to material or spiritual affairs. In the words of Allamah Majlisi, *nasih* is an action or speech in which the benefit of the addressee has been intended. So *nasih* or giving advice to a believer is to guide him to his material and spiritual good—to educate him if he is ignorant, remind him if he is negligent, defend him if he is weak, respect him in his youth and old age, ignore the slanders about him, protect him, and direct benefits in his direction (Majlisi, n.d., 71:358).

In his *al-Nihayah*, Ibn al-Athir defines *nasih* as follows: “The word ‘*nasih*’ means to wish well for a person upon whom wellness is desired, and no other word has the ability to convey this meaning on its own except this word” (Ibn Athir, n.d., 5:63). Similarly, the author of *Taj al-‘arus* mentions that “*nasih*” means wishing well for another person and guiding and advising him toward that which is beneficial and good for him (Zubaydi, 1414 AH, 4:230).

Therefore, the word *nasihat* has the meaning of advice, counsel, sincerity, benevolence, and goodwill. This word and its derivatives appear in the verses of the Holy Quran and traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt (a) with one of the above meanings. In the view of Allamah Naraqī, rancor and jealousy are the antonyms of

benevolence: “Benevolence means wishing God to always bless Muslims and becoming unhappy when any afflictions befall them. In the traditions, benevolence has also been used to mean guiding Muslims toward that which is beneficial and advantageous for them, which in reality is a necessary corollary of the first meaning” (Naraqī, 1431 AH, 407).

By closely analyzing the meaning of this term and examining the instances of its application, the following points can be understood:

1. Benevolence encompasses a broad spectrum that includes various types of actions and sayings. Guidance toward that which is advantageous spiritually and materially, teaching the ignorant, admonishing the negligent, defending the weak and unable, preventing slips and mishaps, and assisting toward reform are among the instances of benevolence.

Benevolence does not have a specific form or method; the benevolent person, based upon his own initiative, works toward benefitting others with various methods such as criticizing, praising, admonishing, completing, and confirming (Surush Mahallati, 1375 Sh, 140).

Benevolence in the Holy Quran and Traditions

The apostles of God always wanted what was best for mankind and spared no effort to guide them to the source of virtue and goodness. Noah, for instance, struggled painstakingly to guide his people toward that which was good and beneficial for them for nearly a thousand years. The Holy Quran quotes him as saying, “I communicate to you the messages of my Lord, and I am your well-wisher, and I know from Allah what you do not know” (7:62). However, despite all his goodwill and efforts, his people replied to him: “O Nuh, you have disputed with us already, and you have

disputed with us exceedingly. Now bring us what you threaten us with should you be truthful” (11:32). In response to them, Noah replied, “My exhorting and advice will not benefit you, much as I seek to exhort you, if Allah wishes to consign you to perversity, He is your Lord, and to him you shall be brought back” (11:34).

Similarly, Hud called his people to worship God for many years; however, they responded by calling him simple-minded, ignorant, and liar. In response to them, Hud said, “I communicate to you the messages of my Lord and I am a trustworthy well-wisher for you” (7:68).

After showing his people the miracle they had requested and seeing their continued disbelief, Salih was disappointed and said, “O my people! Certainly, I communicated to you the message of my Lord, and I was your well-wisher, but you did not like well-wishers” (7:79).

Shu’ayb, just like the other apostles, was a well-wisher for his people, but his words and advice had no effect on their hard hearts. He, therefore, turned away from them and addressed them saying, “O my people! Certainly, I communicated to you the messages of my Lord, and I was your well-wisher. So how should I grieve for a faithless lot?” (7:93)

In addition, the traditions of the Ahl al-Bayt (a) give great importance to the subject of benevolence and goodwill. For example, the Prophet (s) is reported to have said, “God has said, ‘The dearest of the actions by which My servant worships Me is being a well-wisher for My sake’” (Khuramshahi and Ansari, 1376 Sh, 262).

Moreover, the most religious individual in society is that person who is the most benevolent. The Prophet (s) is reported to have said, “The most religious amongst you is he who is the most benevolent in respect to all Muslims and has the purest heart” (Kulayni, 1362 Sh, 2:164).

In another instance, the Prophet (s) equated religion with being

benevolent. It is reported that he has said, “Surely religion is benevolence.” According to another hadith, when he said this, he was asked, “O apostle of God, toward whom?” to which he replied, “Toward God, His book, apostles, the leaders of the Muslim community, and the Muslim community” (Fattal al-Nisaburi, n.d., 2:424).

In another hadith, the Prophet (s) is reported to have said. “Whoever guarantees for me five things, I will guarantee paradise for him: benevolence toward God, benevolence toward His prophet, benevolence toward the Book of God, benevolence toward the religion of God, and benevolence toward the Muslim community” (Fattal al-Nisaburi, n.d., 2:424). Allamah Majlisi explains this tradition as follows:

Benevolence toward God means having a correct belief with regards to His unity and oneness and a pure intention when worshipping Him; with regards to the book of God, i.e. the Holy Quran, it means affirming it as being from God and acting upon its teachings; toward the Prophet (s), it has the same meaning: affirming his prophethood as being from God and that obeying him is obligatory; and its meaning in regards to the Imams is obeying them as the path of Truth. Finally, toward the Muslim community, it is to guide them toward that which is beneficial for them. (Majlisi, n.d., 64:273)

Whoever takes steps in guiding the community to its good has acted upon the hadith “All creation are the dependents of God” (Hakimi, 1380 Sh, 1:690), and that will result in the elevation of his rank in the Hereafter. In this regard, the Prophet (s) is reported to have said, “Indeed, the loftiest of people in the sight of God on the Day of Judgment are those who made greater efforts in being benevolent and well-wishers for people” (Majlisi, n.d., 71:358).

Giving importance and attention to the issues and problems of

the Muslim community is in itself a manifestation of benevolence, and a person who does not possess such a trait cannot be called a Muslim; the Prophet (s) is reported to have said, “Whoever does not give importance to the affairs of the Muslims is not a Muslim” (Kulayni, 1362 Sh, 2:164).

In addition, no one should avoid being a well-wisher with the excuse that his addressee may become upset and annoyed with his advice. Imam Ali (a) is reported to have said, “Advise and be a well-wisher for your brother sincerely, regardless of whether it is pleasant for him or not” (Hakimi, 1380 Sh, 1:278).

It is clear that goodwill and benevolence can be manifested in a variety of ways. It can take the form of advice and exhortation, assisting and helping individuals achieve their legitimate goals, or protecting them against danger. In this regard, the Prophet (s) is reported to have said, “Whoever prevents flood or fire from harming a group of Muslims, admission to Paradise becomes necessary for him” (Hakimi, 1380 Sh, 1:278).

Therefore, a doctor who cures his patient from a disease with an accurate diagnosis, an architect who turns a piece of land into a safe shelter for others with his precise design, a driver who drives carefully and within the limits of traffic laws, a firefighter who bravely puts out a fire, a baker who ensures that bread reaches the hands of his customers, a teacher who strives to educate his student, and many other people who show goodwill and benevolence toward the servants of God will all benefit from the bounties and effects of this action.

It is fascinating to note that the span of goodwill is so vast that it even encompasses one’s enemy. Imam Ali (a) is reported to have said, “Chivalry is in four things: being humble while having wealth, forgiving while having the upper hand, benevolence toward one’s enemy, and giving without counting it as a favor” (Daylami, 1412 AH, 1:194). This is why sitting with scholars has

been greatly emphasized, as it guides a person toward goodwill (Majlisi n.d., 1:205).

At the level of advice, even if it is aimed at the most wretched of people, it must be treated as a trust and be done with complete confidentiality, kindness, and goodness, and no treachery should occur. Imam Sadiq (a) is reported to have said, “Regardless of whom you have taken a trust from, even the killer of Imam Husayn, it must be returned to its owner; also, do not be treacherous to whoever has hope in your goodwill and benevolence” (Majlisi n.d., 47, 155).

Conditions of the Adviser and Well-Wisher

1. Absence of Hostility

The first condition of the one wishing to give advice is that he should not be the enemy of the one whom he seeks to advise, as advising is a type of benevolence and goodwill. Imam Ali (a) is reported to have said, “A person who chooses his enemy as his adviser, and seeks his guidance and goodwill is an ignorant person” (Tamimi al-Amidi, 1366 Sh, 255)

2. Intellectual Capacity

A person must choose an advisor that has the necessary intellectual capacity. Imam Ali (a) is reported to have said, “Do not seek advice and counsel from a person lacking intellect, for indeed such a person will deceive even if he wishes to advise and guide” (Tamimi al-Amidi, 1366 Sh, 228).

3. Honor and Dignity

Explaining the reason why one should not seek advice from a dishonorable person, Imam Ali (a) is reported to have said, “The

dishonorable one does not sincerely advise anyone except out of desire or fear, so when the desire or fear disappears, he returns to his true nature” (Tamimi al-Amidi, 1366 Sh, 225), because such a person cannot have true affection for others. One who seeks advice should avoid such people. In another tradition, it has been mentioned, “Giving sincere advice is a characteristic of the noble ones” (Tamimi al-Amidi, 1366 Sh, 225).

4. Practicing What One Preaches

A person who does the opposite of what he says will never be a good guide and counselor for others. Imam Ali (a) is reported to have said, “How can one who deceives himself give sincere advice to others?” (Tamimi al-Amidi, 1366 Sh, 225)

Conditions of Counsel

1. Being Understandable by the Addressee

Imam Sajjad (a), in his treatise on rights, mentions that one of the rights of the one who seeks advice is that the advice given to him must be at his level of understanding. In contrast to counsel, where the advisor must speak the truth even if it goes against the opinion and whims of the addressee, the advisor must speak in a way that suits the temperament of the advice seeker.

The well-wisher in his advice must also tell the truth but in a way that is comforting and easy for the seeker to hear. He should use words that can be easily understood. Body language and tone have a direct and great influence on the advice. The Imams would, in an indirect way, use words and sentences in such a calculated and precise manner that would leave a lasting impression on their addressees.

Imam al-Sajjad (a) says in that treatise, “The right of the one who seeks your advice is that you should advise him to the level of his

capacity, and speak to him in such a way that it is comforting for him to hear and easy for him to understand. Surely, every intellect has a level of thought by which it comprehends speech, but in all cases act with kindness” (Majlisi, n.d., 71:19).

2. Conditions of Time and Place

Paying attention to the conditions of time and place in advice and admonishment is of great significance, as individuals at certain times and states are not prepared to listen or accept any advice or guidance and are more likely to react in a negative manner.

For example, giving advice to someone in public and in front of a large audience will probably result in a negative and unconstructive reaction. A father who admonishes his child in front of others will not achieve his desired objective.

Similarly, certain people are severely troubled by their disgraced social status, so advising such people in public will bring about the opposite result; not only will they ignore the advice but they will also act in a contrasting fashion. Imam Ali (a) is reported to have said, “Your advice given in front of other people is considered a rebuke and defamation” (Tamimi al-Amidi, 1366 Sh, 225).

In addition, considering time appropriateness when giving advice is also of great importance. Imagine that your child comes home tired after having given an exam, in which he feels he has not done well. If at this moment you start to compare him with his classmates and be critical of his efforts, this will only have a detrimental effect on his psyche and temper.

Benevolence and Goodwill in the View of Muslim Scholars

In his *The Alchemy of Happiness (Kimiya-ye sa'adat)*, Ghazali counts goodwill and advice as a requirement of friendship. He writes,

The fifth right is to teach him whatever he requests of knowledge and religion, for that which saves your brother from the Fire is more important than that which eases worldly troubles. If he does not act upon what he was taught, then he should be advised, admonished, and made to fear God. However, this admonishment must be done in private with compassion, for admonishment in public is a rebuke and defamation. That which is said must be said with kindness, not with repulsion, for the Prophet (s) said, “A believer is a mirror of a believer”; that is, he sees his own faults and defects in his brother. So, when your brother speaks to you in private and mentions your faults, you must not get angry, just as you do not get angry when a person informs you that there is a snake or scorpion inside your shirt.

Know that all the vices within you are like snakes and scorpions, but unlike snakes and scorpions, whose stings harm the body, the effects of vices are left on the soul, which are worse than the stings of snakes and scorpions of the material world...

So, it was a sign of religious willingness to see these things as a divine favor. God says, “but you did not like well-wishers,” (Quran, 7:79). And whoever does not like well-wishers is from those whose foolishness and pride have defeated their religion. (Ghazali, 1380 Sh, 1:407-8)

A Story about Benevolence and Goodwill

While the companions of the Prophet (s) were sitting with him, he said to them, “Shortly a person will enter, who is from the people of Paradise.” Then a man from the Helpers entered, while the water from his ablution was dripping from his beard. He greeted the people at the mosque and began praying. The next day, the Prophet (s) repeated his saying and again the same man

appeared. On the third day, the same thing occurred. When the Prophet (s) left the mosque, one of the companions followed that man for three days but saw nothing special in terms of worship.

After the third night, that companion said to the man, “I heard the Prophet (s) saying such and such about you, and I wanted to understand what act of worship you did that made you one of the people of Paradise.” The man replied, “I do not perform anything special except what you saw, but I do not see any impurity in any Muslims [i.e., I ignore their impurities if I see any], and I am not jealous of the bounties and gifts that God has given them [i.e. in a word I am a well-wisher of the people].” That companion responded, “This is what has enabled you to reach and achieve that high station” (Fayd Kashani, 1417 AH, 5:325).

Ways of Developing Benevolence in Oneself

By pondering upon the following, one can develop and strengthen benevolence and goodwill in oneself:

1. There must be belief in the benevolent God, who created the world upon the pillars of goodness and compassion, and who is also a well-wisher of His servants. Therefore, the true servants and believers in God must inculcate this divine attribute within themselves and be well-wishers of one another.

2. It must be realized that the benefit of benevolence and goodwill toward others returns back to ourselves. We can only develop and perfect ourselves if it is possible for others to do the same, for if this was not the case, then we would not be able to perform great tasks in solitude.

Furthermore, we must know that if others are pleased with their living conditions, they will manifest better relations and interactions in society, and create a better environment to live in. So, when we and our friends have the same goals and objectives,

there will be greater fervor and motivation to achieve them, and hence we will attain success sooner.

Also, from a psychological view, when we wish well for others and have compassion for them, we will be more content and pleased with our lives. For when we want good for a person who upsets us, this will result in the change of his attitude and behavior toward us. Additionally, when we are selfish and only want everything for ourselves, this will lower the possibility of self-development and cause us to face many problems in our lives. Therefore, being a well-wisher toward others in reality is being a well-wisher toward oneself.

Signs of True Benevolence

Many people pretend being benevolent and compassionate only to reach their own personal goals and gain benefits. In our personal and social life, we are in need of individuals who, out of pure benevolence and goodwill, come to our aid when we face difficulties and obstacles. In this situation, opportunists and greedy people take advantage of helpless and confused individuals, disguising themselves as advisors and well-wishers. Thus, it is necessary for people to know the attributes of a true well-wisher and benevolent person and not be deceived by opportunists.

The Prophet (s) mentions four qualities of true well-wishers: “The signs of an advisor [and well-wisher] are four things: (1) he judges based on the truth, (2) he himself acts upon the truth, (3) he wants for others what he wishes for himself, and (4) he never violates the rights of others” (Harrani, 1404 AH, 20).

Similarly, Imam Ali (a) saw it sufficient for a person to be a true well-wisher if he forbade others from that which displeases himself (Majlisi, n.d., 75:80).

Thus, goodwill and benevolence toward oneself is crucial; before a person takes a step to guide and be benevolent toward

others, he must first recognize his own good and move toward it. A person who is not a well-wisher toward his own soul and works for his own destruction by committing sins and acquiring vices cannot be an adequate well-wisher for others. Introducing a true well-wisher, Imam Ali (a) is reported to have said, “Indeed, the most obedient of people in relation to God are those who are most advising to themselves, and the most disobedient of people in relation to God are those who are most deceptive to themselves” (Majlisi, n.d., 74:293).

Finally, only an individual who is not jealous of others can be their true well-wisher. In this regard, Imam Sadiq (a) is reported to have said, “Goodwill from a jealous person is impossible” (Majlisi, n.d., 71:194).

Personal and Social Effects of Benevolence

1. Being Well-Esteemed in the Eyes of God

Because a well-wisher and benevolent person has a pure intention and because the criterion of action is the intention, he gets closer and closer to God until he achieves the highest state of proximity reserved solely for the benevolent. The Prophet (s) is reported to have said, “The most well-esteemed believers in the eyes of God on the Day of Judgment are those who made efforts most on earth in being benevolent and showing goodwill to His creation” (Majlisi, n.d., 71:358).

2. Admission to Paradise

The Prophet (s) is reported to have said, “Whoever can guarantee for me five things, I will guarantee Paradise for him.” He was then asked what they were, and the Prophet (s) replied, “Goodwill toward God, goodwill toward the Apostle of God, goodwill toward

the book of God, goodwill toward the religion of God, and goodwill toward the Muslim community” (Majlisi, n.d., 72:65).

3. Love and Friendship

A completely sincere well-wisher will advise and guide others at the appropriate time and place and will mention to them that which is in their best interests. By listening to his advice and admonitions, they improve themselves and their lives, and thus the bonds of friendship among them are strengthened. Imam Ali (a) is reported to have said, “Goodwill results in love” (Tamimi al-Amidi, 1366 Sh, 224).

4. Removing Calamity from the Muslim Community

The Prophet (s) is reported to have said, “Be a well-wisher for the people and treat them with kindness, for if you do this and God is wrathful against the people of the town in which you happen to be, He will have mercy on them for your sake” (Tabrisi, 1370 Sh, 457)

Summary

One’s benevolence and goodwill toward others does not only result in their salvation and finding their path to perfection but it will also impact one’s own development and happiness. For when everyone in a society is caring and benevolent toward others, the society will progress and become healthy and vibrant.

A true well-wisher has to have adequate knowledge and experience. He should view those whom he wishes to advise with an open mind and deep insight. He should have pure goodwill toward others and eventually show love and compassion to them. It may be that he experiences a new spiritual life that contains such purity that is impossible to compare it to his previous material life.

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