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# CHAPTER 13

## ON ENVY

According to the knowers of Islam, envy is defined as the wish that a person whom one dislikes should not receive a good that Allah has bestowed upon him, although his having this gift does not in any way harm anyone in this world or the Hereafter. Or else it is to wish that he might lose what he has already received. To agree with someone who feels this way is also considered to be envy.

If envy comes upon you unintentionally and is undesired, so that you feel ashamed of it, scholars of morals rule that it is excusable.

Envy becomes one of the greater sins when one is guilty of intention, premeditation, and desire to harm some innocent person, hoping he might lose what is due to him and trying to influence events so that he does. Some authorities say that envy is a sin only if one acts upon one's envy. Abu Hurayrah reported that the Prophet said:

> My Lord in His mercy does not consider sinful the maleficent thoughts of my people as long as they do not declare them or act upon them. (Bukhari and Muslim)

An unintended urge or thought that comes upon us can be controlled and left unexpressed, for

> On no soul does Allah place a burden greater than it can bear. (*Baqarah*, 286)

Once such things are not acted upon, they cannot be considered sinful. And such divine mercy is not a privilege of Muslims alone, but applies to all creatures, who are all the people of that Prophet who was sent as Allah's mercy upon the whole world.

Ibn Abi Dunya reported that the Prophet said, "There are three dangers from which nobody is able to save himself: doubt, ill luck, and envy. "

We may suggest a solution to these three problems: When you are in doubt or consider something to be bad luck or are envious, you should simply not act upon these impressions, not even contemplate them or talk about them. Then, if Allah wills, they will not pose a danger.

Someone asked the saint Hasan al-Basri his opinion on envy. He said, "It is a painful and distressing feeling, yet if you don't act upon it, it will not harm you."

One might ask how is it that denying Allah or inventing deviations in religion, even if not expressed, are considered to be great sins, while other

ugly characteristics such as envy, arrogance, and hypocrisy, if unexpressed or without effect on other people, may be excused. Are they not all subjective, hidden in one's heart, and perhaps unintentional? It must be realized that faithlessness, disregard for religious law, and inventing one's own law, are beliefs that affect one's whole being, becoming an identity and determining all of one's actions. Envy, arrogance, and hypocrisy are only part of a person's character. They are isolated traits. Although they are considered sinful in themselves, when by the effort of the envier, envy is kept out of action, it is like an idea that has not taken form. Therefore, it does not exist, and is not blameworthy.

Unfortunately, if these ugly faults exist in us, they very seldom stay hidden unless we have made it our life's goal to cleanse our hearts from evil influences and to beautify them with characteristics meeting with Allah's pleasure.

A hypocrite pretends to be an obedient servant of Allah and does the right thing in public. On these occasions he may even appear to be inwardly praying or being meditative. Although those acts in themselves are commendable, as capitulations to insincerity they become sinful. However a person afflicted by envy, when he prevents himself from manifesting his feelings, acts in opposition to what envy demands. Therefore one who is smitten by this ugly state but does not act upon it is forgiven.

(Arrogance, selfishness, is usually not a temporary state but a constant characteristic, like being a disbeliever or inventing one's own religion. Therefore it is particularly evil. Allah knows best.)

There is also a kind of envy in which one wishes for oneself what some other person has. Such an envier does not wish the other person to lose the thing; he only wants it for himself as well. If the object of this desire is a worldly benefit, it is a permissible ambition. If it is directed toward someone else's religious and spiritual superiority, so that one wishes and tries to be like him, this kind of envy is even commendable.

Another state related to envy is resentment felt toward someone who has many benefits, yet does not use what he has either for the enhancement of his spiritual state or for the advancement of his religious community. On the contrary, his wealth, power, or intelligence is used to sin and to create discord among the believers. In such circumstances, to wish that what such a person possesses should be taken away, and even to act upon the wish, may be considered as a pious act of jealousy.

Abu Hurayrah reported that the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) said:

> Surely Allah is jealous for His good servants. So should the faithful be for each other. Allah's jealousy for the faithful is against the temptations of evil. (Bukhari)

This commendable jealousy is a protective attitude toward someone dear, aimed at preventing any wrong from coming upon him. Allah is jealous of human beings to protect them from setting up partners to Him, giving themselves false gods. And the worst sign in human beings, which separates us from our Lord, is the thought that we are free—free to do whatever we wish without considering whether it is right or wrong. The faithful should be jealous for their own selves and for their families and others entrusted to them against misbehavior, revolt against Allah, or acts or tendencies that will lead to either. We should be jealous of anyone who might be instrumental in leading us and our dependants toward evil. That is one of the most important necessities of our religion.

Abu Hurayrah reported:

> Sa`d ibn `Ubadah came to the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) and asked, "O Messenger of Allah, if I catch a man who is committing adultery with my wife, should I leave him alone unless there were four witnesses to the act?"
>
> The Prophet said, "Yes."
>
> Sa'd said, "I hope this is not your personal judgment. By Allah, if I hadn't heard this order from you, I would finish off such a man with my sword, four witnesses or not!"
>
> Then the Prophet said to those present: "Listen to me well. If Sa`d thinks he is jealous, I am more jealous than he, and Allah is the most jealous of all." (Muslim)

This quality of protectiveness must not be confused with the ordinary jealousy between men and women, or between friends and competitors.

Hadrat `A'ishah recounted:

> One night the Prophet left my room and I became jealous, thinking that he was going to one of his other wives, and followed him. When the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) saw me, he said, "What is happening to you, `A'ishah? Are you jealous?"
>
> I answered, "Indeed, it is normal for a woman like me to feel jealous over someone like you."
>
> Then the Prophet said, "I see that you have come with your own devil."
>
> And I said, "Does everyone have a private devil?"
>
> He said, "Indeed, they do."
>
> I asked, "Do you also?"
>
> And the Prophet said, "Yes, but by the help of Allah, I was able to make my devil into a Muslim and submit to Allah Most High." (Muslim)

The cure of envy is through its opposite: the antidote is wishing people well. To wish well for people is a kind of beneficence to which our religion

orders us. That is especially so when we see that the abundant blessings poured upon someone are bringing spiritual as well as material benefits to that person and to the people around him. Then we should not only wish that his good fortune lasts and increases, but try to help see that it does.

Tamim al-Dari reported:

> The Prophet said, "The practice of religion is to wish others well."
> Someone asked, "Specifically whom should we wish well?"
> He answered, "Allah; His words in the Qur'an; the leaders of the people; and all Muslims." (Muslim)

A part of helping people to obtain the good things we wish for them is to advise them. Hudhayfah (r.a.) reported that the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) said:

> Whoever does not spend effort to give good advice for the well-being of other Muslims is not one of us. Whoever does not remember Allah, His Messenger, the leaders of Muslims, and all the believers, think well of them and wish well for them morning and night, is not truly one of us. (Tabarani)

Envy, in addition to being maleficent in itself, becomes an instrument to bring upon the envier at least eight other major evils:

The first is that envy may erase the rewards we hope to receive from our devotions, good deeds, and obedience to Allah. Abu Hurayrah related that the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) said:

> Beware of envy, because it burns to ashes all of one's good deeds. (Abu Dawud)

Although according to religious law a sin does not cancel a good deed, in the end greater sins overwhelm a person's good deeds and may drive one to faithlessness in this world and overturn the balance of fate when good deeds are weighed against sins on the Day of Judgment.

Zubayr ibn `Awwam reported that the Prophet said:

> You have inherited some of the bad habits of those before Islam: envy and hostility among yourselves. Both shave parts of you all. I am not talking about shaving your hair. These bad behaviors shave off your faith. I vow upon the One who holds Muhammad's soul in His hand that unless your faith is perfect, you will not be able to enter Paradise. And as long as you do not love each other for Allah's sake, your faith is not perfect. Shall I teach you something that will help you love each other? Greet each other saying "Allah's peace and compassion and blessings be upon you." (Tirmidhi)

The second evil that envy may cause is revolt against our Maker, because the envier gossips, lies, curses, fights against the one he envies unjustly, although his victim does not deserve it. This is tyranny, which Allah detests. Damrata ibn Sa'lebe reported that the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) said:

> People are considered to be doing good for each other as long as they are not envious of each other. (Tabarani)

The third evil that envy may bring upon us is the anger of the Prophet and the loss of the opportunity of his intercession on the Day of Judgment. `Abdullah ibn Busr reported:

> The Messenger of Allah said, "The envier who envies, the two-faced hypocrite, and the sorcerer who tells of the future do not belong to me, nor I to them." Then he recited the verse from the Qur'an:
>
> Those who tyrannize a believing man or woman by accusing them of a sin they have not committed are liars, and will bear a heavy load of sin. (*Ahzab*, 58) (Tabarani)

The fourth danger of envy is that it may transport one to the gates of Hell. Both Ibn `Umar and Anas ibn Malik reported:

> The Messenger of Allah said, "There are six kinds of people who because of their six faults will be sent to Hell even before being judged on the Day of Judgment." Someone asked who they were. The Messenger of Allah answered, "Tyrannical rulers because of their injustice; bigots because of their idolatry; celebrated people because of their arrogance; dishonest businessmen because of their cheating and lying; the people of backward places because of their ignorance; and the people who know better because of their envy." (Daylami)

The fifth maleficence of envy is its effect on the person envied. If not checked, it may cause disasters for its object. That is why Allah orders people to take refuge in Him from the attack of the envier, just as He asks us to take refuge in Him from the temptations of the accursed Devil. Mu`adh ibn Jabal reported that the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) said:

> When you receive in abundance from your Lord that which you needed, keep it a secret. For anyone who is thus blessed will suffer the envy of others. (Tabarani)

The sixth pain that envy brings is the totally unnecessary trouble, hardship, and suffering that envy causes to the envier himself. A saintly man among the Muslims of the second generation after the Prophet, Ibn Sammak, has said:

> I have never seen a tyrant who appears to be a victim like the envier. He is constantly troubled and in pain, his mind has abandoned him, and he is continuously punished by none other than himself.

The seventh ill that envy brings is blindness of the heart, which becomes unable to see reality. Sufyan al-Thawri said:

> If you can avoid being envious of others, you will be quick to understand all and everything.

And finally, envy is a barrier that prevents us from ever reaching our wish or our goal, whatever it is. For when envy affects us, we are not able to see the real causes and effects of things when they happen, nor do we receive the sympathy and help of anybody in obtaining what we hope to achieve. It is said that a person who is afflicted with envy will never be a leader of men.

There are two encouragements to help us resist envy. One is intellectual and the other is practical. Intellectually, we have to be convinced that the evils envy causes in our daily life and our spiritual life, both in this world and the Hereafter, must be blamed on ourselves alone. The one we envy is totally innocent and our envy is not ever going to cause him any harm. On the contrary, it may do him good here, and certainly will enhance his spiritual life in the Hereafter. On the religious level, we must realize that our envy is a sign that we neither accept nor believe in God's will and justice: it indicates that we are critical of God, even angry at Him. This is close to denial and a great sin. Meanwhile the one whom we envy will not lose Allah's blessings: perchance they may even increase, and certainly he is not sinning. In the Hereafter, as an innocent victim of tyranny, he will benefit. Each word, each action the envier spends against his victim is a spiritual gift to him that will be deducted from the envier's good deeds and given to the envied one on the Day of Judgment. And in this life, certainly, public opinion will be against the tyrant and his condemnation will be a victory for the victim.

Practically, we may resist the feeling of envy coming upon us by an effort to turn things around. If you have an urge to talk against the one who attracts your envy, you should praise him instead. If you feel superior to him, you should behave humbly toward him. If your envy demands that you work against the one you envy, you should force yourself to be kind and generous toward him. Instead of cursing him and hoping he will lose the thing you envy, you should pray to Allah to increase His blessings upon him.

These attempts may not be sufficient to prevent us from envy if we have this bad character well rooted in us. To uproot envy from our being for once and all, we have to analyze the causes of this bad habit and eliminate

them. There are six principal origins of envy in human beings: egotism, arrogance, fear, ambition, bad intentions, and vengefulness.

1. Egotism is the conviction that nobody has any right to preference over oneself. An egotist cannot bear the thought that somebody might claim to be superior to him because of attaining more wealth or knowledge or higher position or esteem or any other qualities that are better than what he himself possesses. When other people also agree to the superiority of his adversary, he may well wish him dead. If an egotist detaches himself by not comparing himself to people who are better off than he and not wishing them to be reduced to a level below him, but remains content with his state, comparing himself to others who are not as fortunate as himself so that he becomes thankful, then he has found his cure for envy.

2. Arrogance is less an acquisition than it is an aspect of a person's character. Usually an arrogant person's pride is not justified by any quality he possesses. That is why when others truly possess the qualities the arrogant one imagines are his, he wishes their loss, since he fears his rivals may ascend to a state superior to his own. The cure for this is in trying to know oneself, as well as in recognizing admirable qualities in others and respecting them. If you are not able to admit any inferiority because of the rooted evil of your arrogance, then imitating humility may help to save you from the disastrous effects of your condition, and one day your imitation may become real.

3. Fear is usually created by a real or imaginary adversary to whom we might lose whatever we have. We may be afraid to lose our life, our well-being, our possessions, our position, our honor, our love, our neighbors' esteem. Then we become envious of anything that may come into the hands of our adversary, since we fear it will strengthen him against us. This is perhaps the commonest cause of envy. We find this competitiveness not only among the highest officials of the government and highly placed people of business, and among religious scholars and respectable people of knowledge, but in every home between husband and wife or among children jealous for attention or between men and women competing for someone's love.

4. Envy caused by ambition is related to envy caused by the fear of losing what we have. The difference is that while the latter is defensive, the first urges us to attack. The ambitious person feels secure in what he has, but wants something that is in somebody else's hand. He wants to be on top with nobody above him, and he wants to be recognized as such. Because of this, nobody is safe from him. If he learns that somebody at the other end of the world is above himself, he will feel competitive and become envious of him. The ambitious one is usually envious of other people in the field in which he feels he excels, whether that is in possessions, in a profession, in strength, or in looks. But sometimes he may be jealous of qualities and

possessions of other people that have made them renowned even when he has no wish to excel in their fields. For the strongest motivation driving an ambitious person to be envious has little to do with real competition, not even with reality. All he wants is to be praised.

5. Some people have bad intentions and thoughts almost indiscriminately against everybody. They wish no one to have anything good. They are not arrogant or ambitious, they are not even jealous of other people's good fortune and covetous for themselves. They are simply negative. They suffer when they hear praise of somebody they don't even know; they suffer at news that something good has happened. When they hear about a disaster that has befallen a stranger, they are happy and wish that other people might suffer the same misfortune. It is as if any good received by anybody has somehow been taken away from them. If anyone loses anything, it is as if they gain it themselves. The people for whom they wish the worst are not necessarily their enemies. They may not even know them. This sickness is the worst kind of envy, practically impossible to cure unless such a person fully realizes his sickness, wishes to be cured, and is ready to go through a long period of education at the hands of an enlightened teacher.

6. Envy caused by vengefulness is graver than any of the other causes, because vengeance is a disaster capable of destroying lives. There are three aspects of vengeance to be considered. The first is that we must know what vengeance really is: a destructive feeling of hatred toward some person or group of people, or even toward an idea or a concept, that urges us not only to feel justified but even obliged to destroy our adversary.

According to religious teaching, this feeling (unless produced by genuine injustice) may be unlawful even if it is not exteriorized or acted upon. Also, someone may become incensed by a just action taken against him to prevent him from doing wrong, or to force him to do right. If he reacts vengefully, he is certainly sinning.

If we are wronged, we should try to right the wrong. If we are incapable of exacting our rights, then instead of being vengeful we should leave matters in the hands of God and wait for justice on the Day of Judgment.

Allah Most High says:

> Whoever forgives and makes reconciliation, his reward is due from Allah. (*Shura*, 40)

and

> Let forgiveness be a part of your nature, guide people to do good, and do not associate with the ignorant. (*A`raf*, 199)

Abu Hurayrah reported that the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) said:

> Allah gives His promise and honor to the one who forgives and the one

> who behaves humbly for the sake of Allah; and generosity never decreases anyone's riches. (Tirmidhi)

If we forgive someone who has done us wrong when we are unable to obtain his just punishment, that is commendable. But if we forgive the one who has done us wrong while we could easily have him punished, it is highly praiseworthy.

In some exceptional circumstances, it is better to pursue your right than to forgive. These are the cases where forgiving the injustice would encourage the wrongdoer and cause him to tyrannize others, whereas fighting for your right might stop him. However in such cases we must be very careful not to try to obtain more than what was taken from us. The punishment must be equal to the wrong done and never in excess, because in that case, the victim would be tyrannizing the tyrant.

The second aspect of vengeance is that there are many evils that a vengeful person both causes and suffers himself. Among them are envy, taking pleasure in other people's misfortunes, belittling, lying, gossiping, giving people's secrets away, mocking people, tyrannizing, hiding the truth, and preventing justice. All these darken the heart, hurt others, and cause a person to sin.

Wasila ibn Eskaa reported that the Prophet said:

> Do not rejoice at the misery of your brother. For if you do, Allah will give him well-being, and try you with calamities. (Tirmidhi)

To rejoice at misfortunes that befall your adversary, especially to believe them a response to your prayers asking for his punishment, is certainly worthy of blame. If someone you dislike is made to suffer, you should consider that it may be a test of how you will react, and fear Allah's retribution. Instead of feeling avenged, you should feel sad and pray that the misfortune be lifted from your enemy. Only when the punishment of your enemy will surely prevent him from tyrannizing others, and may be a lesson to other tyrants, does a feeling of satisfaction at his difficulties become other than condemnable.

Even between friends, when one is unjust to the other and causes him harm, the victim stops talking to his fellow and cuts all relations. Abu Hurayrah related that the Prophet said:

> It is not lawful for a believer to be angry at another believer for more than three days. When they meet, they should salute each other. If both do, they will share Allah's pleasure. If one does not respond, he will be sinning. (Abu Dawud)

In another version of the same tradition, it is said:

> Whoever is angry and hostile toward a believer for over three days is at risk of Hellfire.

This reconciliation dictated by the Prophet only relates to animosity between believers pertaining to worldly affairs. If the matter pertains to moral or religious affairs, and if an immoral and irreligious person is guilty of persecuting a decent person, it is permissible, in fact advisable, for him to seek justice and to keep away from the guilty party.

According to our religion, whether a person unjustly maltreated by another belittles his adversary, acts arrogantly, lies or gossips about him, gives away unsavory secrets of his opponent, makes ugly jokes about him, causes him pain in any way, injures his relationship with his family and friends, prevents him from performing his obligations to others, or prevents him from receiving mercy and forgiveness, he himself is sinning. Such are the sins that vengefulness brings upon us.

Ibn `Abbas related that the Prophet said:

> If a person is without three bad characteristics, Allah may forgive his other sins. They are setting up partners to Allah, engaging in sorcery, and indulging in vengefulness and hatred against Muslims. (Tabarani)

In another tradition, Jabir ibn `Abdullah related that the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) said:

> On every Monday and Thursday the angels report the states of all humanity. All who have realized, admitted, and repented their sins are forgiven, except for the vengeful, who cannot repent because of their vengeance. (Tabarani)

In yet another tradition from the same source related by Mu`adh ibn Jabal, the Messenger of Allah (s.a.w.s) said:

> On the night of the 15th of the month of *Sha`ban*, Allah Most High looks upon all His creation with love and compassion and forgives their sins, except for the ones who take other gods besides Him and the ones who seek vengeance. (Tabarani)

The third aspect of vengeance is that one of its principal causes is anger.

*"On Envy"*

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