

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Explanation of the Meaning of “Brotherhood” in the Ḥadīth:

“None of you believes until he wants for his brother what he would want for himself.”

by

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Question: “In the *Arba‘in* of al-Nawawī, the thirteenth ḥadīth talks about brotherhood. Imām al-Nawawī says the *ukhuwwa* in this ḥadīth is that of Banī Ādam (i.e., of all humanity). Could you say more on this ḥadīth, and what other scholars have said on its meaning and implications?”

الحمد لله الذي أمرنا بالتعاون والاتحاد ونهى عن التخالف والانفراد
من حبل الناس وأوصينا بقوله واعتصموا بحبل الله جميعاً ولا
تفرقوا والصلاة والسلام على خير خلقه وخلق عظيم محمد عبده
ورسوله وعلى آله وصحبه ومن تبع هداه إلى يوم الدين

The ḥadīth is that of Anas Ibn Mālik (may Allāh be well pleased with him!):

لَا يُؤْمِنُ أَحَدُكُمْ حَتَّى يُحِبَّ لِأَخِيهِ مَا يُحِبُّ لِنَفْسِهِ

[literally: None of you believes until he wants for his brother what he would want for himself.]¹

¹ Related by Abū ‘Awāna, al-Ṭayālīsī, Aḥmad, ‘Abd ibn Ḥamīd, al-Dārimī, al-Bukhārī, Muslim, Ibn Mājah, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā’ī, al-Rūyānī, Abū Ya‘lā, Ibn Ḥibbān, al-Ṭabarānī, al-Qudā‘ī, al-Bayhaqī, Ibn Abī Shayba and al-Daylamī with variants.

According to the famous author of the *Risāla* in Mālikī *fiqh*, Imām Ibn Abī Zayd al-Qayrawānī – as related by Imām al-Nawawī in his *Minhāj* of ḥadīth² – this ḥadīth is the last of the four ḥadīths that constitute the famous “Sum of Good *Adab*” [*Jimā‘ Adab al-Khayr*], the first three being:

1. to speak little;
2. to mind one’s own business;
3. not to be angry,

and in fact, according to many scholars then and now, this ḥadīth is one of the core principles of our religion and way of life [*Uṣūl al-Dīn*].

From the outset, it must be noted that all scholars are in agreement that “*īmān*” in the *matn* of this ḥadīth is to be qualified and that what is denied of *īmān* here is in fact the “complete *īmān*” [*kamāl/tamm/nihāyat/ḥaqīqat al-īmān*], not *īmān* or faith itself. Therefore, it must not become a question of a Muslim having *īmān* or not when he or she does not love his fellow “brother” (that is to say, it is not a question of Muslim *vs.* *Kāfir*).

Imāms al-Nawawī and Ibn al-‘Imād (may Allāh be pleased with them both!), for instance, were among our scholars who understood “brotherhood” in this ḥadīth (from the phrase: *li-akhihi* [his brother] in the *matn*) to include all of humanity, *i.e.*, the brotherhood of mankind (in the other *ta’wīl*, “brotherhood” simply refers to Muslims). In fact, Imām Najm al-Dīn al-Ṭūfī, the Ḥanbalī *mufasssir*, more plainly than any other medieval interpreter of this ḥadīth, used the expression “*maḥabbat al-insān*” [the love for mankind].³ This, it turns out, is not astonishing, for his own *Mujtahid* Imām related a ḥadīth (reproduced below) that bears out the full relevance of our topic.

² al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 2:210.

³ Ṭūfī, *Ta’yīn*, 125.

The implication of *mahabbā* [love] with respect to brotherhood, whether taken in its universal sense (of mankind) or in its limited sense (of Muslims only), is that we wish for him what we wish for ourselves as well. So in the case of Muslims, for example, our wish is for him to remain in Islam while for the non-Muslim, on the other hand, our wish is for him to be in Islam; the motivation for this love, of course, should be none other than the sincere concern, ultimately, for well-being in the Hereafter. In fact, according to Imām al-Ghazālī (may Allāh be pleased with him!), this principle is the acme of *sukūn*, *i.e.*, being at peace with the rest of creation, of which the sum is in fact, good manners or good *Adab* among people. And the peak of good *Adab*, says the Ḥujjat al-Islām, is that “you do not burden people according to your own pleasure, but burden yourselves according to their pleasures so long as they do not violate the *Sharī‘a*.”⁴

The most judicious explanation of this ḥadīth, indeed, was given by the collector, Imām al-Nawawī himself (and the same *sharḥ* was again related, but later ascribed by some to another Shafi‘ī jurist, the meticulous Ibn al-‘Imād):

“It is better for that [saying of the Prophet, may Allāh's blessings and peace be upon him!] to be interpreted in the sense of universal brotherhood, so that it includes the non-Muslim and the Muslim. Thus he wants for his non-Muslim brother what he would want for himself, that is [read: *min li-l-bayan*] his converting to Islam; just as he wants for his Muslim brother his remaining in Islam. That is why it is recommended to supplicate for divine guidance [*Hidāya*] on behalf of the non-Muslim.”⁵

⁴ al-Ghazālī, *Ayyuhā l-Walad*, 131.

⁵ al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Arba‘īn*, 123.

Let us close with another version of this ḥadīth, a most appropriate one for our discussion, and this is the version of the *Mujtahid* Imām Aḥmad (as well as of Abū Ya‘lā, Ibn Ḥibbān, and al-Rāfi‘ī – the latter apparently through Ibn ‘Umar; may Allāh be well pleased with them all!):

لَا يَبْلُغُ عَبْدٌ حَقِيقَةَ الْإِيمَانِ حَتَّى يُحِبَّ لِلنَّاسِ مَا يُحِبُّ لِنَفْسِهِ مِنَ الْخَيْرِ

[A man will not achieve true *īmān* until he wants for (other) men what he would want for himself of the good.]

Remarkably, this version has all three provisos that are indispensable for the teacher to explain and teach this ḥadīth: *Ḥaqīqa*, *Nās*, and *Khayr*. *Mā shā’ Allāhu kāna!* This shows why we should never limit ourselves (our scholars call those of us who suffer from this condition “*qāṣirīn*”: people of limited insight) by reading a ḥadīth or the Qur’ān literally [*zāhīran*] or hurriedly [*murūq al-sahm*]: for we will end up injuring ourselves! May Allāh keep us far from that malady and give us the patience to open our hearts and minds instead: *Āmīn!*

May this be sufficient and beneficial!

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