

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S MERCY

PART VI

MOHAMMAD ALI SHOMALI¹

ABSTRACT: In the previous part, we studied the role of God's mercy in aiding humanity through sending messages of guidance from Prophets Noah and Salih, as well as sending books of guidance such as the Torah and the Qur'an. We also studied the ways God supports human beings through His mercy, which includes protecting people from following Satan,² from the plots of enemies to misguide them³ and from the tempting soul.⁴ We also looked at the role of divine mercy in the purification of the soul⁵ and preventing people from despair⁶ as His mercy is far greater than people's sins. In this part, we will explore the different types and levels of divine forgiveness and understand how God may even transform one's immoral deeds into good ones. Afterwards, we will refer to people's response to divine mercy and finally examine how those who practice patience receive additional mercy from God.

The role of God's mercy in forgiveness

Out of His mercy, God forgives the sins of those who repent:

¹ Associate Professor of the Imam Khomeini Education & Research Institute, Qum.

² The Qur'an 4:83

³ 4:113

⁴ 12:53

⁵ 24:21

⁶ 39:53

فَتَلَقَّى آدَمُ مِنْ رَبِّهِ كَلِمَاتٍ فَتَابَ عَلَيْهِ إِنَّهُ هُوَ التَّوَّابُ الرَّحِيمُ

Then Adam received certain words from his Lord, and He turned to him clemently. Indeed He is the All-clement, the All-merciful. (2:37)

Allah first taught Adam the words, and when Adam used those words to repent, Allah accepted. Thus, Allah Himself initiated this. It is important to note that this is not restricted to Adam: Allah forgives everyone who sincerely and honestly tries to change for the better:

قُلْ يَا عِبَادِيَ الَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُوا عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِن رَّحْمَةِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْعَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ

Say [that God declares], ‘O My servants who have committed excesses against their own souls, do not despair of the mercy of God. Indeed God will forgive all sins. Indeed He is the All-forgiving, the All-merciful.’ (39:53)

Transforming immoral deeds into good ones

Not only does God forgive the repentant, but He also may transform one’s bad deeds into good ones:

إِلَّا مَن تَابَ وَءَامَنَ وَ عَمِلَ عَمَلًا صَالِحًا فَأُولَٰئِكَ يُبَدِّلُ اللَّهُ سَيِّئَاتِهِمْ حَسَنَاتٍ وَ كَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَّحِيمًا

...excepting those who repent, attain faith, and act righteously. For such, God will replace their misdeeds with good deeds, and God is all-forgiving, all-merciful. (25:70)

This is more than merely forgiving someone's wrong actions. People certainly do not possess this trait. When people forgive someone, they may not punish the sinners for what they have done, but they may still remember the sinner's actions and reveal it to others. And even if we supposedly forgive them and forget what they have done completely, we do not usually consider the immoral actions of people as good actions and reward them accordingly. It is not common for people to reward someone who betrays or disobeys them. Conversely, God not only forgives, but He may transform your immoral actions into good actions, and as a result, He rewards you for it.

When we read the record of our deeds on the Day of Judgment, we may see that we spent our lives missing many opportunities. Moreover, our record shows our many good deeds in helping people although we know that we may not have helped anyone. There were, for example, a hundred people in need of your help and you did not help them, though it is displayed in your record that you have helped those hundred people. Though it is difficult to believe, your record would read, "These hundred people are those people that you did not help, but when you genuinely repented and felt terrible for what you failed to do, you truly and sincerely felt that you did something wrong. By the time you wanted to help, there was no opportunity. Either your time was up or those people were not available. But since you sincerely regretted that, we have written that you have helped a hundred people." This is the way God, out of His vast generosity treats us, although this is for those who sincerely and wholeheartedly move towards Him without cheating or taking advantage of His mercy. They truly desire to change for the better with honesty and sincerity.

The role of God's mercy in easing our affairs

Sometimes God, out of His mercy, eases our affairs by giving us some exemptions or somehow reducing our obligations. For example, regarding ‘*qisās*’ (retaliation), the Qur’an says:

O you who have faith! Retribution is prescribed for you regarding the slain: freeman for freeman, slave for slave, and female for female. But if one is granted any extenuation by his brother, let the follow up [for the blood-money] be honourable, and let the payment to him be with kindness. That is a remission from your Lord and a mercy; and should anyone transgress after that, there shall be a painful punishment for him. (2:178)

If someone has killed another person, the victim’s guardians have the right to demand punishment for the perpetrator. But if those who have lost a loved one ask for blood money instead of retaliation, God accepts this. This is a type of facility God provides you with, so that if the guardians of the victim are satisfied, it is as if God is saying, “I’m happy and indeed God loves us to forgive one other (though if the perpetrator is determined to repeat his crime it is another matter).” God gives us the right to demand the perpetrator’s execution, but if you forgive your brother or sister in Islam who committed this wrong action and you know that he is remorseful, God accepts it, and He does not insist that you kill that person.

Types of response to divine mercy

God gives mercy to people in different ways. But when people receive divine mercy they respond differently: there are those who are appreciative and grateful and who use this mercy wisely, and there are those who are ungrateful or fail to acknowledge it. Sometimes they do not take it as a gift from God; rather, they take it to happen by chance or firmly believe it to be their own achievement. If they have a good family, upright children, a respectable reputation, or a decent education,

they believe it to be a result of their own accomplishments instead of God's generosity. Allah says to Prophet Muhammad:

فَإِنْ أَعْرَضُوا فَمَا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ عَلَيْهِمْ حَفِيظًا إِنَّ عَلَيْكَ إِلَّا الْبَلَاغُ

If they [the people that you speak to them to guide them] turn away, you are not sent to be controlling them [and holding them] your responsibility is just to deliver [the message]. (42:48)

The task of the prophets was to deliver the divine message. Whether or not people believe it is not the prophets' responsibility nor will they be questioned for it. The prophets are accountable for delivering the message in the best possible way: no one is asked or even able to force others to believe. Faith dwells in the heart and the only one who has control over his heart is the individual himself. Therefore, no guide or propagator should feel disappointed if people do not appreciate what he offers after having made sure that he has carried out his responsibility properly. Similarly, a very capable doctor who diagnoses illness correctly and prescribes a good medicine to a patient who in turn chooses not to take it may feel sad, although he should not be blamed, and nor should he blame himself for the patient's wrong choice.

Prophet Noah is a great example. He toiled for nine hundred and fifty years⁷ and after such a long ministry, only some eighty people believed in his message - an average of one person in every 12 years - but by no means can this be taken as a sign of his failure or shortcoming. On the contrary, Prophet Noah is one of the five greatest prophets who are called 'Prophets of Great Determination' (*ulu'l-'azm*).⁸

⁷ The Qur'an 29:14

⁸ The Qur'an 46:35

Thus, what is important is to deliver the message properly. For example, if someone gives you an envelope with a letter inside and asks you to deliver it, your responsibility is to ensure that this letter reaches him. You are not expected to give it to another person to deliver it; that person may forget. You should not merely put it in the post; it may get lost. If you place it outside his door, it may be windy or there may be children who could misplace it. Your responsibility is to ensure that it reaches the hand of that person. However, whether he opens the letter, reads it, or acts upon it after having read it is not your responsibility. He may throw it away, skim through it, or read it and not act upon it. As far as you are concerned, you have done your job well when you took all the trouble and ensured that this message reached him.

Unfortunately, what happens many times is that we do not ensure that the message of God is properly delivered. For example, even if we are familiar with the message of God, we may not know how to appropriately deliver it to those who live under certain circumstances in a way they receive it well and take it seriously. Sometimes we create productive books and essays, but they are never published or if they are published they may not be written in proper language usage and style and even if so, they may not be well distributed. Most of our books are distributed in our own circles and many outsiders are unfamiliar with them. And if by chance they come to know about them, there is no system to order them as they do with other books. If they go to the bookstores or visit mainstream booksellers on the internet, they still may not be able to find them. We have to ensure that in the same way people receive a myriad of other messages from business corporations and the media, Allah's message reaches them in a very honorable and respectful way, in a way that they can appreciate it, and not just by, say, placing it on their doorstep. Afterwards, the decision to act upon it rests with them. We have to ensure that the message is reaching them. Today we are far behind this point. Many people really do not have access to

good materials that present Islam wisely. Instead, they have to make efforts to find it.

In any case, after mentioning the above point, the Qur'an says:

وَإِنَّا إِذَا أَذَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ مِنَّا رَحْمَةً فَرِحَ بِهَا وَإِنْ تُصِيبُهُمْ سَيِّئَةٌ بِمَا قَدَّمَتْ
أَيْدِيهِمْ فَإِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ كَفُورٌ

... Indeed when We let man taste Our mercy, he exults in it; but should an ill visit them because of what their hands have sent ahead, then man is indeed very ungrateful. (42:48)

Human beings tend to become overjoyed when they receive God's mercy and consequently they may get carried away, feel smug, and forget God. On the other hand, when severe difficulties occur to them, they may forget the blessings God gave them in the past and complain over their current ones. After having received thousands of different types of mercy, now having to face one problem makes them nag and grumble. When people are given their daily necessities they easily become complaisant and forget the role they are obliged to take; on the other hand, and when not given the same thing for one day, they complain and question the good qualities of the Giver. This common reaction in human beings that happens often can be purged with enough training and education.

How to receive more mercy from God

For those who appreciate divine mercy in the first place, God provides them with extra mercy. In this way, the mercy will not be wasted nor turned against them, because those who do not appreciate divine blessings and benefit from them will be questioned and will be worse off compared to those who were not given it at all. And if such

ungrateful people are given more, their problems will only increase. For example, if God has given me a child and I do not look after him it would be better for me if I am not given more. Or if He has given me money when I lack money management skills, it would be better if He withholds it from me. However, if one is grateful and knows how to appreciate God's bounties, He will offer him even more:

لَئِنْ شَكَرْتُمْ لَأَزِيدَنَّكُمْ

If you are grateful, I will surely enhance you [in blessing] (14:7)

Elsewhere, the Qur'an says:

يُدْخِلُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ فِي رَحْمَتِهِ وَ الظَّالِمِينَ أَعَدَّ لَهُمْ عَذَابًا أَلِيمًا

He admits whomever He wishes into His mercy, and as for the wrongdoers, He has prepared for them a painful punishment. (76:31)

The mercy that God gives to the people with whom He is pleased is an additional mercy to the general mercy everyone is given. God gives mercy to everyone, but He gives more to those who are appreciative, and lets them go deeper into the ocean of His mercy. On the other hand, those who are unjust and ungrateful will lose and suffer. It is noteworthy that in Islam, any bad action is considered an act of injustice whether it affects others or the agent himself. Indeed, even when someone does injustice to other people, he first does injustice to himself and wrongs himself before he wrongs and harms others. For example, if I use unpleasant words when speaking, this is disrespectful to the addressee, but it is first harming my own personality and will bring shame to me. When people hear me speaking in such a way, they will feel sympathetic with the addressee, but they all will become

against me. So, though I wanted to humiliate someone, I have only humiliated myself. Honorable and dignified people do not treat others disrespectfully, but you cannot expect the dishonorable to do everything.⁹ A person who has no honour for himself may do anything. There is nothing to stop him. Imam Hadi (a) is quoted as saying:

مَنْ هَانَتْ عَلَيْهِ نَفْسُهُ فَلَا تَأْمَنُ شَرَّهُ

*Do not feel secure from the bad actions of those who have no respect for themselves.*¹⁰

Thus, those who have honour for themselves would not commit sins and acts of injustice and therefore would not be deprived from receiving extra mercy from God.

I. The patient receives extra mercy

One group that receives more mercy from God is the patient:

وَلَتَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِّنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَ
الْقَمَرَاتِ وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَتْهُمُ مُصِيبَةٌ قَالُوا إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا
إِلَيْهِ رَاغِبُونَ أُولَئِكَ عَلَيْهِمْ صَلَوَاتٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ وَرَحْمَةٌ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ
الْمُهْتَدُونَ

We will surely test you with a measure of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth, lives, and fruits; and give good news to the patient —those who, when an affliction

⁹ A person who has honour for himself does not dress everything, even if he is alone. It is said that once one of *Ulamā* who was always wearing ‘*abā*’ (veil) and ‘*amāmah*’ (turban) in a very formal way in his own house was told by someone: “No one is here. Why do you put on this official dress?” He replied: “I am myself here.”

¹⁰ *Bihar al-Anwar*, v.72, p. 301, h.11 & v.75, p. 366 h.5; *Mizan al-Hikmah*, v.2, p. 982, h.10.

visits them, say, "Indeed we belong to God, and to Him do we indeed return." It is they who receive the blessings of their Lord and [His] mercy, and it is they who are the [rightly] guided. (2:155-157)

We are certainly going to be tried and examined in different ways. Sometimes there is fear in general or due to lack of security. There may be hunger; you may not have food for yourself, your children, or your friends. Or there may be losses in fruits, in money, or in life. We may lose the things or the people who are dear to us. These are all different occurrences with which God tests us with.

Let us clarify the above verse (2:155-157) and the like. Some may assume that when God says that He tests you it means that He is deliberately causing these problems to happen to you specifically. Quite the contrary; there may be many cases in which God Himself is not pleased at all with bad events happening such as murder or theft. If someone murders my child, this is not an action that God wanted, but now that it is happening it can serve as a test for me. Therefore, whatever happens to you for any reason, it is to be interpreted as a test that if passed, you will be upgraded in this world and the hereafter. For example, suppose I am a driving instructor who sits next to my trainee as he drives in the city. All of a sudden, a person for whatever reason ignores the red light and turns in front of us. As the trainer, I am expected to watch my trainee to test him. Though I had not asked the careless driver to pass us so suddenly, this can still serve as a test. With careful observation of my student's performance, I may either tell him he demonstrated good driving skills or I may tell him that he still needs more training. Although the careless driving of the third party was unforeseen, I can still take this incident as a test. Hence, people's wrong decisions and the negative consequences others suffer as a result can serve as tests, even though God has not intended for those bad actions and negative events to happen.

To clarify, when God says, “I test you with everything,” it does not mean that He purposely takes away your dear ones, or causes lack of security and in short, is behind every problem.¹¹ What this means is that whatever happens, good or bad, He observes your performance and how well you deal with the circumstances. This is also by itself a blessing for those who want to improve their book of deeds; at any time and under all circumstances they have the opportunity to make progress. This is not normally the case in worldly records and competitions. If you are a swimmer, for example, you fervently practice to strike a good record and move upwards, but unfortunately, the only time the judges accept your work is when you perform it in an official competition. So if during your exercises or friendly competitions you manage to raise your record, they will not accept it from you even if it is filmed and watched by a large audience.

In any case, those who prove to be patient after experiencing all the tests and trials, God says, “Give glad tidings to the people who are patient!”¹² There must be a great reward for such people for God to ask His Prophet to give *bishārah* (glad tidings) to them. Thus, God is not going to give people everything they desire.¹³ But God will give the

¹¹ There needs to be a subtle line drawn between unity with respect to actions (*tawhid-e af'āli*) and attributing bad actions of people to God. These two should not be confused.

¹² The Qur'an 2:155

¹³ There is a beautiful story that can help us to understand this point better. Nādir Shāh Afshār (1688 – 1747, the Iranian ruler who enlarged his empire from the Indus River to the Caucasus Mountains) was once going for a battle with his troop when he met a very young boy carrying a book. He asked the boy what his name was. He replied: “*Nasr Allah*” (God's victory). The king became very happy and took it as a sign of victory in that battle. Then the king asked where the boy was going. He said that he was going to “*Maktab*,” where they had lessons on the Qur'an. When asked by the king what they studied in Maktab the boy replied: “Chapter *Al-Fath*.” The king became even happier. And gave the boy one *dinār* (golden coin), but the boy started crying. Nādir asked him why he cried. He replied, “I cry because when I go home and my mother sees this in my hand, she would ask me, ‘Where did this come from?’” Nādir said, “Tell her that the king has given this to me.” He said, “I would certainly tell her that this is given by the king, but she would not accept.” Nādir asked why. He said, “My mother would tell me that if king gives something, he doesn't give just one *dinār*. Kings give in bulk, so this cannot be from the king.” Nādir Shāh decided to give him a bunch of *dinārs* and then he took it and went home.

patient so much that they would be fully satisfied and indeed it will go beyond their expectations, since it will be without any measure:

إِنَّمَا يُوفَّى الصَّابِرُونَ أَجْرَهُمْ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ

...Indeed the patient will be paid in full their reward without any reckoning. (39:10)

It is not one thousand times more, or even one million times more. Rather, it is similar to giving a blank cheque to someone. So as far as God is concerned, there is no limit and any limit that may be there is because of their own capacity.

One of the things that we find in the Qur'an about the patient is that "God would send His salutations and mercy to them" (39:10).¹⁴

The patient are those who receive extra mercy in addition to the general blessings everyone receives because of their appropriate attitude towards God's bounties as well as the difficulties and trials that they experience.

Interestingly, we read in Ziyarah of Ashura that those who truly mourn for Imam Husayn (a) and share with him his suffering and tragedies can expect to be given the reward of the patient and to receive His salutations and mercy:

اللَّهُمَّ اجْعَلْنِي فِي مَقَامِي هَذَا مِمَّنْ تَنَالُهُ مِنْكَ صَلَوَاتٌ وَرَحْمَةٌ وَمَغْفِرَةٌ

Oh Allah! Please include me right now among those who receive from you salutations, mercy and forgiveness.

¹⁴ The Qur'an 2:157

Thus, any problem that happens to you can turn it into a bonus for yourself, if you exercise patience, remain persistent, and continuously walk on the right path. On the Day of Judgement you will see that what you have achieved in this way can be much more than what you expected, such as your good deeds of prayer and fasting. The good deeds are certainly very important and necessary, but the one act that we know to be rewarded without measure is patience. Of course, such patience is only possible for those who perform their duties and seek assistance from their acts of worship and charity.