

Some Answered Questions, The Justice and Mercy of God

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Translated. Original Persian



Some Answered Questions, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Fifth Edition, page 306

The Justice and Mercy of God

Know that justice consists in rendering to each his due. For example, when a workman labours from morning till evening, justice requires that he be paid his wage, but bounty consists in rewarding him even when he has done no work and expended no effort. So when you give alms to a poor man who has made no effort and done nothing for your benefit to deserve it, this is bounty. Thus, Christ besought forgiveness for those responsible for His death: This is called bounty.



Now, the question of the excellence or baseness of things is determined either by reason or by religious law. Some believe that it is based on religious law: Such is the case with the Jews, who believe that all the commandments of the Torah are binding and that they are matters of religious law rather than of reason. Thus they say that one of the commandments of the Torah is that meat and butter cannot be eaten together, for this is “trefah” (and “trefah” in Hebrew means unclean, while “kosher” means clean). This they say is a question of religious law and not of reason.

But the divine philosophers hold that the excellence or baseness of things depends upon both reason and religious law. Thus, the prohibitions on murder, theft, treachery, falsehood, hypocrisy, and iniquity are based on reason: Every rational mind can grasp that these are all vile and reprehensible. For if you merely prick a man with a thorn he will cry out in pain: How well must he realize then that murder, according to reason, is vile and reprehensible. And were he to commit such a crime, he would be held accountable for it whether the prophetic message had reached him or not, for reason itself grasps the reprehensible character of this deed. Thus, when such a person commits such base actions, he will assuredly be held to account.

But if the prophetic injunctions have not reached a place and the people fail, as a result, to act in conformity with the divine teachings, then they are not held accountable according to the laws of religion. For instance, Christ enjoined that cruelty should be met with kindness. If a person remains unaware of this injunction and acts according to the promptings of nature, that is, if he returns injury for injury, then he is not held accountable according to the laws of religion, for this divine injunction has not been conveyed to him. Although such a person is not deserving of divine bounty and favour, God will nevertheless deal with him in His mercy and grant him forgiveness.



TRANSLATION



Now, vengeance is reprehensible even according to reason, for it is of no benefit to the avenger. If a man strikes another, and the victim chooses to exact revenge by returning the blow, what advantage will he gain? Will this be a balm to his wound or a remedy for his pain? No, God forbid! In truth the two actions are the same: Both are injuries; the only difference is that one preceded the other. Therefore, if the victim forgives, or better still, if he acts in the opposite manner, this is praiseworthy.

As for the body politic, it punishes the aggressor but not to exact revenge. The purpose of this punishment, rather, is to deter and dissuade, and to oppose iniquity and aggression, so as to prevent others from extending their hand likewise in oppression. But if the victim chooses to forgive and to show instead the greatest mercy, this is most approved in the sight of God.