

Some Answered Questions, Good Deeds and Their Spiritual Prerequisites

'Abdu'l-Bahá

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Good Deeds and Their Spiritual Prerequisites

Question: Those who do good works, who are well-wishers of all mankind, who have a praiseworthy character, who show forth love and kindness to all people, who care for the poor, and who work for universal peace—what need do they have of the divine teachings, with which they believe they can well afford to dispense? What is the condition of such people?

Answer: Know that such ways, words, and deeds are to be lauded and approved, and they redound to the glory of the human world. But these actions alone are not sufficient: They are a body of the greatest beauty, but without a spirit. No, that which leads to everlasting life, eternal honour, universal enlightenment, and true success and salvation is, first and foremost, the knowledge of God. It is clear that this knowledge takes precedence over every other knowledge and constitutes the greatest virtue of the human world. For the understanding of the reality of things confers a material advantage in the realm of being and brings about the progress of outward civilization, but the knowledge of God is the cause of spiritual progress and attraction, true vision and insight, the exaltation of humanity, the appearance of divine civilization, the rectification of morals, and the illumination of the conscience.

Second comes the love of God. The light of this love is kindled, through the knowledge of God, in the lamp of the heart, and its spreading rays illumine the world and bestow upon man the life of the Kingdom. And in truth the fruit of human existence is the love of God, which is the spirit of life and grace everlasting. Were it not for the love of God, the contingent world would be plunged in darkness. Were it not for the love of God, the hearts of men would be bereft of life and deprived of the stirrings of conscience. Were it not for the love of God, the perfections of the human world would entirely vanish. Were it not for the love of God, no real connection could exist between human hearts. Were it not for the love of God, spiritual union would be lost. Were it not for the love of God, the light of the oneness of mankind would be extinguished. Were it not for the love of God, the East and the West would not embrace as two lovers. Were it not for the love of God, discord and division would not be transmuted into fellowship. Were it not for the love of God, estrangement would not give way to unity. Were it not for the love of God, the stranger would not become the friend. Indeed, love in the human world is a ray of the love of God and a reflection of the grace of His bounty.



TRANSLATION

It is clear that human realities differ one from another, that opinions and perceptions vary, and that this divergence of thoughts, opinions, understandings, and sentiments among individuals is an essential requirement. For differences of degree in creation are among the essential requirements of existence, which is resolved into countless forms. We stand therefore in need of a universal power which can prevail over the thoughts, opinions, and sentiments of all, which can annul these divisions and bring all souls under the sway of the principle of the oneness of humanity. And it is clear and evident that the greatest power in the human world is the love of God. It gathers diverse peoples under the shade of the tabernacle of oneness and fosters the greatest love and fellowship among hostile and contending peoples and nations.

Observe how numerous were the diverse nations, races, clans, and tribes who, after the advent of Christ, gathered through the power of the love of God under the shadow of His Word. Consider how the differences and divisions of a thousand years were entirely abolished, how the delusion of the superiority of race and nation was dispelled, how the unity of souls and sentiments was attained, and how all became Christians in truth and in spirit.

The third virtue of humanity is goodly intention, which is the foundation of all good deeds. Some seekers after truth have held intention to be superior to action, for a goodly intention is absolute light and is entirely sanctified from the least trace of malice, scheming, or deception. Now, one can perform an action which appears to be righteous but which is in reality prompted by self-interest. For example, a butcher raises a sheep and guards its safety, but this good deed of the butcher is motivated by the hope of profit, and the end result of all this care will be the slaughter of the poor sheep. How many are the goodly and righteous deeds that are in reality prompted by self-interest! But the pure intention is sanctified above such faults.

Briefly, good deeds become perfect and complete only after the knowledge of God has been acquired, the love of God has been manifested, and spiritual attractions and goodly motives have been attained. Otherwise, though good deeds be praiseworthy, if they do not spring from the knowledge of God, from the love of God, and from a sincere intention, they will be imperfect. For example, human existence must encompass all perfections in order to be complete. The power of sight is highly prized and precious, but it must be aided by that of hearing; the hearing is highly prized, but it must be aided by the power of speech; the power of speech is highly prized, but it must be aided by that of reason; and so on with the other powers, organs, and members of man. When all these powers, senses, parts, and organs are combined together, perfection is attained.

In the world today we meet with souls who sincerely desire the good of all people, who do all that lies in their power to assist the poor and succour the oppressed, and who are devoted to universal peace and well-being. Yet, however perfect they may be from this perspective, they remain deprived of the knowledge and the love of God and, as such, are imperfect.

Galen the physician wrote in his commentary on Plato's treatise on the art of governance that religious beliefs exert a profound influence on true civilization, the proof being as follows: Most people cannot grasp a sequence of logical arguments, and stand therefore in need of symbolic allusions heralding the rewards and punishments of the next world. The sign of this is that we see today a people called Christians who believe in the rewards and punishments of the next world and who show forth goodly deeds that are like those of a true philosopher. Thus we all

plainly see that they have no fear of death and that they are, by virtue of their ardent yearning for justice and equity, to be regarded as though they were true philosophers.

Now observe closely how great the sincerity, the self-abnegation, the spiritual emotions, the pure intentions, and the good deeds of the Christian believers must have been for Galen—a philosopher and physician who was not himself a Christian—to attest to the morals and the perfections of these people and call them true philosophers. Such virtues and qualities cannot be attained through good deeds alone. If virtue only meant that some good be obtained and bestowed, then why do we not praise this burning lamp which lights the room, even though its light is without a doubt a good thing? The sun nurtures all earthly things and fosters their growth and development by its heat and light—what greater good is there than this? Nonetheless, since this good does not flow from goodly motives and from the love and knowledge of God, it does not impress in the least. But when someone offers a cup of water to another, he is shown appreciation and gratitude. An unthinking person might say, “This sun which gives light to the world and manifests this great bounty must surely be praised and glorified. For why should we praise a man for such a modest gift and not yield thanks to the sun?” But if we were to gaze with the eye of truth, we would see that the modest gift bestowed by this person stems from the stirrings of conscience and is therefore praiseworthy, whereas the light and heat of the sun are not due to this and thus are not worthy of our praise and gratitude. In like manner, while those who perform good deeds are to be lauded, if these deeds do not flow from the knowledge and love of God they are assuredly imperfect.

Aside from this, if you consider the matter with fairness you will see that these good deeds of the non-believers also have their origin in the divine teachings. That is, the Prophets of old exhorted men to perform them, explained their advantages, and expounded their positive effects; these teachings then spread among mankind, successively reaching the non-believing souls and inclining their hearts towards these perfections; and when they found these actions to be laudable and to bring about joy and happiness among men, they too conformed to them. Thus these actions also arise from the divine teachings. But to see this, a measure of fair-mindedness is called for and not dispute and controversy.

Praise be to God, you have visited Persia and have witnessed the loving-kindness which, through the sanctified breezes of Bahá'u'lláh, Persians have come to show forth to all humanity. Formerly, if they chanced upon a follower of another religion, they would set upon him, display the utmost enmity, hatred, and malice, and even regard him as impure. They would burn the Gospel and the Torah and would wash their hands if they had been soiled by touching these Books. But now, most of them recite and interpret, as required by the occasion, from the contents of these two Books in their assemblies and gatherings, and expound and elucidate their inner meanings and mysteries. They show kindness to their enemies and treat bloodthirsty wolves with tender care, as they would the gazelles of the meadows of God's love. You have seen their conduct and character, and you have heard of the morals which the Persians had in former times. Can this transformation of morals and this rectification of speech and conduct be brought about other than through the love of God? No, by God! If we undertook to spread such morals and manners merely by means of knowledge and learning, a thousand years would pass and still they would not have been achieved among the masses.

In this day, thanks to the love of God, this has been achieved with the greatest ease. Take heed, then, O ye of understanding heart!