

104769 - Refuting the notion of those who say, “We are not worshipping You for fear of Your Hellfire or for hope of Your Paradise”

the question

I feel that I am doing acts of worship and obedience motivated by love of Paradise and fear of Hell, and not motivated by love of Allah or love of obedience. What is the reason for that? What is the remedy? I want to do any act of worship out of love for Allah and love of obeying Him first and foremost. How can I achieve that?

Detailed answer

This confusion that appears in your question results from the well-known but mistaken notion that “we do not worship Allah for fear of His Hellfire or out of hope for His Paradise; rather we worship Him out of love for Him.” Some of them say it differently, suggesting that if anyone worships Allah out of fear of His Hellfire, this is the worship of a slave, and if anyone worships Him out of hope for His Paradise, this is the worship of a trader, and they claim that the true worshipper is the one who worships Him out of love for Him, may He be exalted!

However it is worded, or whatever form it appears in that conveys that meaning, and no matter who says it, it is mistaken and is contrary to the noble teachings of Islam. This is indicated by the following:

1. There is no contradiction between love, fear and hope, such that you could want to worship your Lord, may He be exalted, out of love for Him only, because the one who fears Him, may He be exalted, and puts his hope in Him is not devoid of love for Allah; indeed, he may have greater love for him than many of those who claim to love Him.
2. According to Ahl as-Sunnah, correct Islamic worship must be based on love and veneration; love generates hope and veneration generates fear.

Shaykh Muhammad ibn Saalih al-‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Worship is based on two great principles, namely love and veneration, the outcome of both of which is that: “they used to hasten on to do good deeds, and they used to call on Us with hope and fear” [al-Anbiya’ 21:90]. From love comes hope and from veneration comes fear.

Hence acts of worship involve both instructions and prohibitions. Instructions are based on hope and seeking to reach the One who issued these instructions, and prohibitions are based on veneration and fear of the Almighty.

If you love Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, you hope for that which is with Him and you long to reach Him, and you seek the path that leads to Him and you obey Him in the most perfect manner. If you venerate Him, you fear Him and every time you think of committing a sin, you call to mind the greatness of the Creator, may He be glorified and exalted, and you refrain. “And indeed she did desire him and he would have inclined to her desire, had he not seen the evidence of his Lord. Thus it was, that We might turn away from him evil and illegal sexual intercourse” [Yoosuf 12:24].

This is one of Allah’s blessings to you, that if you think of a sin, you find Allah before you, so you fear Him and dread His punishment, therefore you keep away from that sin, because you worship Allah with hope and fear.

Majmoo‘ Fatawa ash-Shaykh al-‘Uthaymeen (8/17, 18)

3. The worship of the Prophets, scholars and pious people is based on fear and hope, and it is not devoid of love of Allah. Whoever wants to worship Allah, may He be exalted, in only one of these ways is an innovator and the matter may go as far as kufr (disbelief).

Allah, may He be exalted, says – describing those who are called upon, such as the angels, Prophets and the righteous – (interpretation of the meaning):

“Those whom they call upon (like ‘Eesa (Jesus) son of Maryam (Mary), Uzair (Ezra), angel, etc.) desire (for themselves) means of access to their Lord (Allah), as to which of them should be the nearest and they (‘Eesa (Jesus), Uzair (Ezra), angels, etc.) hope for His Mercy and fear His Torment” [al-Isra’ 17:57].

And Allah, may He be blessed and exalted, says – describing the Prophets – (interpretation of the meaning):

“Verily, they used to hasten on to do good deeds, and they used to call on Us with hope and fear, and used to humble themselves before Us” [al-Anbiya’ 21:90].

Ibn Jareer at-Tabari (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

What is meant by the word “hope” is that they used to worship Him, seeking that which they hoped for of His mercy and grace. And “fear” means dread of His punishment and penalty, if they failed to worship Him and committed sin.

Something similar to what we have said concerning this matter was said by the commentators. Tafseer at-Tabari (18/521)

Al-Haafiz Ibn Katheer (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The words (interpretation of the meaning) “Verily, they used to hasten on to do good deeds” [al-Anbiya’ 21:90] mean: they used to hasten to do that which would bring them closer to Allah, and to do acts of obedience to Him.

“and they used to call on Us with hope and fear” – ath-Thawri said: “hope” i.e., for that which is with Us, and “fear” i.e., of Our punishment.

“and used to humble themselves before Us” – ‘Ali ibn Abi Talhah said, narrating from Ibn ‘Abbaas: That is, affirming what Allah revealed. Mujaahid said: (It means) truly believing. Abu’l-‘Aaliyah said: Abu Sinaan said: Humbling oneself refers to fear that is constantly in the heart and never leaves it. It was also narrated from Mujaahid that “[they] used to humble themselves” means that they were people of humility. Al-Hasan, Qataadah and ad-Dahhaak said: “[they] used to humble themselves” means that they humbled themselves before Allah, may He be glorified and exalted. All of these views are close in meaning. Tafseer Ibn Katheer (5/370)

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Some of the early generations said: The one who worships Allah on the basis of love alone is a heretic; the one who worships Him on the basis of fear alone is a Haroori (i.e., a Khaariji); the one who worships Him on the basis of hope alone is a Murji'; but the one who worships Him on the basis of love, fear and hope is a believer who affirms His Oneness. Majmoo' al-Fatawa (15/21)

4. They believe that Paradise is trees, rivers and al-hoor al-'iyn, and they fail to realise that the greatest thing in Paradise that one may strive to attain is seeing Allah, may He be exalted, and experiencing that joy. The Fire is not just scorching wind and scalding water, and Zaqqoom (a horrible tree in Hell that bears bitter fruit); rather it is the wrath and punishment of Allah, and being deprived of seeing Him, may He be glorified and exalted.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Thus things become clear and the confusion in the notion of those who say "I do not worship You out of longing for Your Paradise or out of fear of Your Hellfire; I only worship You out of longing to see You" is dispelled.

The one who says this, and his ilk, think that Paradise does not mean anything other than food, drink, clothing, marriage, and other created things that may be enjoyed. Hence one of the shaykhs made a mistake when he heard the words of Allah (interpretation of the meaning), "Among you are some that desire this world and some that desire the Hereafter" [Aal 'Imraan 3:152], and said: Where is the one who seeks Allah? Another one said, concerning the words of Allah, may He be exalted (interpretation of the meaning), "Verily, Allah has purchased of the believers their lives and their properties, for the price that theirs shall be Paradise" [at-Tawbah 9:111]: If lives and properties are in return for Paradise, then what about gazing upon Him?!

All of that is because they think that Paradise does not include gazing upon Him. But in fact, Paradise is the place that encompasses all kinds of joy and delight, and the most sublime joy therein is gazing upon the Countenance of Allah. This is one of the joys that they will attain in Paradise, as the texts confirm. Similarly the people of Hell will be veiled from seeing their Lord, and will enter the Fire. Moreover, if the one who said these things knew what he was talking

about, then in that case his statement may be interpreted as meaning: Even if You did not create fire or did not create Paradise, it would still be a must that You should be worshipped, and that people should strive to draw close to You and aspire to look at You. What he means by Paradise in this case is what people may have of enjoyment. Majmoo‘ al-Fatawa (10/62, 63)

Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

In fact it may be said that Paradise is not merely a name for trees, fruits, food, drink, al-hoor al-‘iyn, rivers and palaces. Most people are mistaken concerning that which is called Paradise. Rather Paradise is the name for an abode of absolute and perfect delight, and one of the greatest joys of Paradise is that of gazing upon the Countenance of Allah and hearing His words, and the delight of being close to him and attaining His pleasure. There is no comparison between what it contains of delightful food, drink, clothing and images and this sublime joy. The least of His good pleasure is greater than Paradise and all that it contains of such things, as Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “But the greatest bliss is the Good Pleasure of Allah” [at-Tawbah 9:72].

The saheeh hadith mentions seeing Allah: “By Allah, Allah will never give them anything that will be dearer to them than gazing upon His Countenance.” According to another hadith: “When Allah, may He be glorified, manifests Himself to them and they see His Countenance with their own eyes, they will forget all the bliss that they have been enjoying; they will be distracted from it and will not pay any attention to it.”

Undoubtedly this is how it is; rather it is greater than anyone could estimate or imagine, especially when the lovers there attain the companionship of their Beloved, for “A man will be with the one whom he loves.” And there is no exception from this ruling; rather it is confirmed. What bliss, what pleasure, what joy and what triumph could even come close to the joy, pleasure and delight of that companionship ? Is there any bliss greater than the joy of being with the Beloved, for no one could give you any joy that is more sublime, more perfect or more beautiful than that?

This – by Allah – is the knowledge that lovers are prepared to strive hard to attain; it is the banner around which all those who have knowledge of Allah rally; it is the essence of Paradise and the true life thereof, and by means of that one will be able to enjoy Paradise, for on it Paradise is based.

How can it be said that “Allah should not be worshipped in hope of His Paradise and out of fear of His Hellfire” ?

Similarly, with regard to the Fire – we seek refuge with Allah from it – for those who enter it the pain of being veiled from Allah, and of being disgraced by Him, and feeling His anger and wrath, and being far away from Him, will be greater than the pain they suffer because of the flames burning their bodies and souls. In fact the flames of this fire start in their hearts, and this is what causes the flames to torment them physically.

The aim of the Prophets, Messengers, siddeeqs, martyrs and righteous people is Paradise, and their flight is from the Fire. Allah is the One Whose help we seek and in Him we put our trust. There is no power and no strength except with Allah, and Allah is sufficient for us and the best disposer of affairs. Madaarij as-Saalikeen (2/80, 81)

5. The implication of that view is to think lightly of the creation of Paradise and Hell, at the time when Allah has created them both and prepared each one of them for those who deserve it. He has made Paradise as an incentive for the worshippers to worship Him, and He has made Hell in order to scare people away from committing sin and disbelieving in Him.

6. The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) asked Allah for Paradise and sought refuge with Him from Hell, and he taught his Companions (may Allah be pleased with them) to do likewise. Thus the scholars and worshippers inherited these teachings from them, and they did not see that as undermining or detracting from their love for their Lord, may He be exalted, or regard it as indicative of some shortcoming in the quality of their worship.

It was narrated that Anas said: Most of the supplication of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was: “Allahumma Rabbana aatina fi'l-dunya hasanah wa fi'l-aakhirah hasanah wa qina ‘adhaab al-naar (O Allah our Lord, give us that which is good in this world and

that which is good in the Hereafter, and protect us from the torment of the Fire).” Narrated by al-Bukhaari (6026)

It was narrated that Abu Hurayrah said: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said to a man: “What do you say during your prayer?” He said: I recite the Tashahhud then I ask Allah for Paradise and seek refuge with Him from Hell, but by Allah I do not understand your mumbling or the mumbling of Mu’aadh. He said: “It is concerning them [Paradise and Hell] that we are mumbling.

Narrated by Abu Dawood (792) and Ibn Maajah (3847); classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh Ibn Maajah.

It was narrated that al-Bara’ ibn ‘Aazib said: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said to me: “When you go to bed, do wudoo’ as for prayer, then lie down on your right side, then say: ‘Allaahumma aslamtu wajhi ilayka wa fawwadtu amri ilayka wa alja’tu zahri ilayka raghbatan wa rahbatan ilayka, la malja’a wa laa manjaa minka illa ilayka. Allaahumma aamantu bi kitaabika alladhi anzalta wa nabiyyika alladhi arsalta (O Allah, I have turned my face towards You and entrusted my affairs to You and relied completely upon You, out of hope and fear of You. There is no refuge or safe haven from You except with You. I believe in Your Book which You have revealed, and in Your Prophet whom You have sent).’ Then if you die, you will have died in a state of fitrah, so make these your last words.” Narrated by al-Bukhaari (5952) and Muslim (2710).

Taqiy ad-Deen as-Subki (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Those who strive (in worship) are of different types. There are some who worship Him for what He is, and because He is deserving of that, for He alone deserves that, even if He did not create Paradise or Hell. This is the meaning of the view of those who say, “We do not worship You for fear of Your Hellfire or out of hope for Your Paradise.” In other words: rather We worship You because You are deserving of that. Yet despite that, the one who says that still asks Allah for Paradise and seeks refuge with Him from Hell. And there are some ignorant people who think the opposite of that. They are ignorant, for the one who does not ask Allah for Paradise and for

salvation from Hell is going against the Sunnah, because part of the Sunnah of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) is to do that. When that person told the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) that he was asking Allah for Paradise and seeking refuge with Him from the Fire, and he said: I do not understand your mumbling or the mumbling of Mu‘aadh, the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “It is concerning them [Paradise and Hell] that we are mumbling.”

Here we see the leader of the first and the last saying these words, so whoever believes in something other than that is ignorant and is deceived.

Four things are essential to the etiquette of Ahl as-Sunnah: following the example of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him); expressing one’s need for Allah, may He be exalted; seeking the help of Allah; and being steadfast in following that path until death.

This was stated by Sahl ibn ‘Abdullah at-Tastari, and it is true. Fatawa as-Subki (2/560)

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Everything that Allah has prepared for His close friends is part of Paradise, and gazing upon Him is part of the bliss of Paradise. Therefore the best of creation used to ask Allah for Paradise and seek refuge with Him from Hell. When he asked one of his companions what he said in his prayer, he said: I ask Allah for Paradise and I seek refuge with Allah from Hell, but I do not understand your mumbling or the mumbling of Mu‘aadh. He said: “It is concerning them [Paradise and Hell] that we are mumbling. Majmoo‘ al-Fatawa (10/241)

7. If anyone wants to worship Allah, may He be exalted, on the basis of love only, without fear or hope, then his religious commitment is in danger and he is the worst of innovators; indeed the matter may go so far as putting him beyond the pale of Islam. Some of the leading heretics say: We worship Allah out of love for Him, even if our ultimate fate is eternity in Hell. Some of them believe that love alone will earn the pleasure of Allah. In this belief he resembles the Jews and Christians, of whom Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And (both) the Jews and the Christians say: ‘We are the children of Allah and His loved ones.’ Say: ‘Why then does He punish you for your sins?’ Nay, you are but human beings, of those He has created, He forgives whom He wills and He punishes whom He wills. And to Allah belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth and all that is between them, and to Him is the return (of all)” [al-Maa’idah 5:18].

Taqiy ad-Deen as-Subki (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

With regard to the one who bases his relationship with Allah on love only, and worships Allah on the basis of love only, he has gone to extremes in his ignorance and has started to believe that he has a high status that has raised him from the level of servitude and its insignificance, which is humiliating and brings one low, but he has been raised (or so he believes) to the highest level of love, as if he feels that he himself is safe and has a covenant with his Lord to make him among those brought near to Allah, let alone those on the Right Hand (who are safe from the punishment of Allah). Nay; rather he will be reduced to the lowest of the low.

What one must do is observe proper etiquette with Allah, show humility before Him, feel very insignificant and small before Him, fear the punishment of Allah, not feel secure against the plan of Allah, hope for Allah’s grace, seek His help to discipline oneself, and then say, after striving hard in worship: “We have not worshipped You as You deserve.” He should admit his shortcomings, pray for forgiveness following the prayers, acknowledging his shortcomings in worship; he should pray for forgiveness in the last hours of the night, before dawn, acknowledging his shortcomings even after having stayed up all night in prayer, so how about the one who does not get up and pray at night? Fatawa as-Subki (2/560)

Al-Qurtubi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“and invoke Him with fear and hope” [al-A’raaf 7:56]. This is a command to the individual to be on the alert, in a state of fear and hoping for the mercy of Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, so that hope and fear will become like the two wings of a bird that carry him steadfastly on the path of righteousness; if he is left with only one, then he will be doomed. Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Declare (O Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him)) unto My slaves, that truly, I am the Oft-Forgiving, the Most-Merciful.

And that My Torment is indeed the most painful torment” [al-Hijr 15:49-50].

Tafseer al-Qurtubi (7/227)

You can see that you have to follow the same path in your worship as the Prophets and the righteous did before you. So do what Allah has commanded you to do of worshipping Him in the manner that He loves, seeking thereby to draw close to Him, hoping for the reward that He has prepared for the worshippers, and fearing His wrath and punishment if you fall short in acts of obedience or fail to do them. Whoever claims to love his Lord, may He be exalted, let him show Him his obedience to His Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), as Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Say (O Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) to mankind): ‘If you (really) love Allah then follow me (i.e. accept Islamic Monotheism, follow the Quran and the Sunnah), Allah will love you and forgive you of your sins. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful” [Aal ‘Imraan 3:31].

And Allah knows best.