

ومن كلام له (عليه السلام) في النهي عن عيب الناس

About backbiting and speaking ill of others [1]

وَإِذَا مَا يَنْبَغِي لِأَهْلِ الْعَصْمَةِ وَالْمَصْنُوعِ إِلَيْهِمْ فِي السَّلَامَةِ أَنْ يَرْحَمُوا أَهْلَ الذُّنُوبِ وَالْمَعْصِيَةِ، وَيَكُونَ الشُّكْرُ هُوَ الْغَالِبَ عَلَيْهِمْ وَالْحَاجِزَ لَهُمْ عَنْهُمْ، فَكَيْفَ بِالْعَائِبِ الَّذِي عَابَ أَخَاهُ وَعَمِيرَهُ يَبْلُوَاهُ! أَمَا ذَكَرَ مَوْضِعَ سِتْرِ اللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ ذُنُوبِهِ [مَا] هُوَ أَعْظَمُ مِنَ الذَّنْبِ الَّذِي عَابَهُ بِهِ! وَكَيْفَ يَذْمُهُ بِذَنْبٍ قَدْ رَكِبَ مِثْلَهُ؟! فَإِنْ لَمْ يَكُنْ رَكِبَ ذَلِكَ الذَّنْبَ بَعَيْنَهُ فَقَدْ عَصَى اللَّهَ فِيمَا سِوَاهُ، مِمَّا هُوَ أَعْظَمُ مِنْهُ، وَإِيمَ اللَّهِ لَئِنْ لَمْ يَكُنْ عَصَاهُ فِي الْكَبِيرِ، وَعَصَاهُ فِي الصَّغِيرِ، لَجَرَّأَتْهُ عَلَى عَيْبِ النَّاسِ أَكْبَرَ!

Those who do not commit sins and have been gifted with safety (from sins) should take pity on sinners and other disobedient people. Gratefulness should be mostly their indulgence and it should prevent them from (finding faults with) others. What about the backbiter who blames his brother and finds fault with him? Does he not remember that Allāh has concealed the sins which he committed while they were bigger than his brother's sins pointed out by him? How can he vilify him about his sins when he has himself committed one like it? Even if he has not committed a similar sin he must have committed bigger ones. By Allāh, even if he did not commit big sins but committed only small sins, his exposing the sins of people is itself a big sin.

يَا عَبْدَ اللَّهِ، لَا تَعْجَلْ فِي عَيْبِ أَحَدٍ بِذَنْبِهِ، فَلَعَلَّهُ مَغْفُورٌ لَهُ، وَلَا تَأْمَنْ عَلَى نَفْسِكَ صَغِيرَ مَعْصِيَةٍ، فَلَعَلَّكَ مَعْدَبٌ عَلَيْهِ؛ فَلْيَكْفُفْ مَنْ عِلْمَ مِنْكُمْ عَيْبَ غَيْرِهِ لِمَا يَعْلَمُ مِنْ عَيْبِ نَفْسِهِ، وَلِيَكُنِ الشُّكْرُ شَاغِلًا لَهُ عَلَى مَعَاوَاتِهِ مِمَّا ابْتَلَى بِهِ غَيْرَهُ.

O creature of Allāh, do not be quick in exposing anyone's sin for he may be forgiven for it, and do not feel yourself safe even for a small sin because you may be punished for it. Therefore, every one of you who comes to know the faults of others should not expose them in view of what he knows about his own faults, and he should remain busy in thanks that he has been saved from what others have been indulging in.

Footnote :

[1] The habit of fault finding and backbiting has become so common that even the feeling of its evilness has disappeared. And at present neither the high avoid it nor the low; neither the high position of the pulpit prevents it nor the sacredness of the mosque. Whenever a few companions sit together their topic of conversation and engaging interest is just to discuss the faults of their opponents with added colourisation, and to listen to them attentively. Although the fault finder is himself involved in the faults which he picks up in others, yet he does not like that his own

faults should he exposed. In such a case, he should have consideration for similar feelings in others and should avoid searching for their faults and hurting their feelings. He should act after the proverb: “Do not do unto others what you do not want others to do unto you.”

Backbiting is defined as the exposure of the fault of a brother-in-faith with the intent to vilify him in such a way as to irritate him, whether it be by speaking, acting, implication or suggestion. Some people take backbiting to cover only that which is false or contrary to fact. According to them to relate what was seen or heard, exactly as it was, is not backbiting, and they say that they are not backbiting but only relating exactly what they saw or heard. But in fact backbiting is the name of this very relating of the facts, because if it is not factually correct it would be false accusation and wrong blame. It is related about the Prophet that he said : “Do you know what backbiting is?” People said, “Allāh and His Prophet know better.” Then he said, “Backbiting means that you say about your brother a thing which pains him.” Someone said, “But what if I say what is actually true about him?” The Prophet replied, “It is backbiting only when it is factually true, otherwise you would be accusing him falsely.”

There are many causes for indulging in backbiting, and because of this a man commits it sometimes knowingly and sometimes unknowingly. Abū Ḥamīd al-Ghazālī has recounted these causes in detail in his book *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūmu’-d-dīn*. A few of the important ones are :

- 1) To make fun of anyone or to make him appear abased.
- 2) To make people laugh and to display one’s own jolliness and high spiritedness.
- 3) Expressing one’s feelings under the influence of rage and anger.
- 4) To establish one’s own superiority by speaking ill of others.
- 5) To disprove one’s connection or involvement in a matter; namely that a particular evil was not committed by oneself but by someone else.
- 6) To associate oneself with some group when in their company in order to avoid strangeness with them.
- 7) To belittle a person from whom it is feared that he will expose some fault of one’s.

- 8) To defeat a competitor in the same calling.
- 9) To seek position in the audience of someone in power.
- 10) To express sorrow by saying it is sad that so-and-so has fallen in such and such a sin.
- 11) To express astonishment, for example, to say it is wonderful that so and so has done this.
- 12) To name the committer of an act when expressing anger over it.

However, in some cases fault finding or criticising does not fall under backbiting:

- 1) If the oppressed complains of the oppressor in order to seek redress, it is not backbiting. Allāh says about it: Loveth not Allāh open utterance of evil in speech except by one who hath been wronged . . . (Qur'ān, 4:148)
- 2) To relate anyone's fault while giving advice is not backbiting because dishonesty and duplicity is not permissible in counselling.
- 3) If in connection with seeking the requirements of a religious commandment the naming of a particular individual cannot be avoided, then to state the fault of such person to the extent necessary would not be backbiting.
- 4) To relate the misappropriation or dishonesty committed by someone with a view to saving a Muslim brother from harm would not be backbiting.
- 5) To relate the fault of someone before one who can prevent him from committing it is not backbiting.
- 6) Criticism and expression of opinion about a relater of traditions is not backbiting.
- 7) If a person is well acquainted with someone's shortcoming, then to relate such a fault in order to define his personality, for example, describing a deaf, dumb, lame or handless person as thus, is not backbiting.
- 8) To describe any fault of a patient before a physician for purposes of treatment is not backbiting.

9) If someone claims wrong lineage then to expose his correct lineage is not backbiting.

10) If the life, property or honour of someone can be protected only by informing him of some fault, it would not be backbiting.

11) If two persons discuss a fault of another which is already known to both it would not be backbiting, although to avoid discussing it is better, since it is possible one of the two might have forgotten it.

12) To expose the evils of one who openly commits evils is not backbiting as the tradition runs : "There is no backbiting in the case of he who has torn away the veil of shamefulness."