The subject matter of today’s khutba is purity of intention in our actions. There is a hadith that highlights the importance of sincerity of intention (ikhlas al-niyyah) in all our actions. This hadith is so significant that most of the classical scholars of hadith (mhaddithun) begin their collection of ahadith with this particular hadith: It is narrated on the authority of Amirul Mu’minin, Abu Hafs ‘Umar bin al-Khattab (RA), who said: I heard the Messenger of Allah (SAW) say: “Actions are (judged) by motives (niyyah), so each man will have what he intended. Thus, he whose migration (hijrah) was to Allah and His Messenger, his migration is to Allah and His Messenger; but he whose migration was for some worldly gain, or for a wife he might marry, his migration is to that for which he migrated.”

Allah (SWT) does not accept any deed, no matter how virtuous it might appear to be, unless the deed has been done with purity of intention and for His sake. In Arabic, niyyah (intention) is the intent and will. It is the intention behind what one wants or is willing to do, whether the action is carried out or not. It is also said to be the state of one’s mind at the time one carries out an action or the mental faculty by which one deliberately decides upon a course of action.

Imam Rajab, a traditional Muslim scholar commenting on this hadith said, “The first sentence of the hadith, “innama al-a’mal bi-l-niyyat,” is a declaration that the voluntary actions of a person are a consequence only of that person’s purpose to perform the act or bring it into existence. The second sentence, “wa innama li-kulli imri` ma nawa,” is a declaration of religion’s judgment of the act in question. Thus, if the intention motivating an act is good, then performance of the act is good and the person receives its reward. As for the corrupt intention, if the action it motivates is corrupt, the person receives punishment for it. Therefore, acts in themselves, their goodness, foulness or neutrality, from the perspective of religion are judged according to the actor’s intention that caused their existence.”

Allah (SWT) has made it very clear in Surat al-Baiyinah that we should be sincere and have the purest of intentions in our ‘ibadah toward Him. “They were only ordered to worship Allah, making their deen sincerely His as people of pure natural belief, and to establish prayer (salat) and pay alms (zakat) — that is the true faith” (al-Baiyinah, 98:5). The word deen in the ayah refers to sincere devotion in the ‘ibadah (worship and obedience) of Allah (SWT), such ‘ibadah being all-inclusive, and not just partial. The ‘abd or true slave of Allah (SWT) should have sincere intention behind all of his or her actions, whether such actions involve the Creator or His creation. Two persons doing the same pious act with different intentions will be judged equally by us, but the judgment of their action with Allah (SWT) will depend upon the intentions behind their action—the states of their hearts at the time of performing the particular act, which is known only to Allah (SWT). To explain this phenomenon, there is a hadith that says, “The one who prays and wants people to see him has commit-
ted shirk. The one who fasts and wants the people to know about his fasting has committed shirk. The one who gave charity (sadaqah) and wants people to know about his charity has committed shirk.”

Interestingly, the import and spirit of this hadith also appears in the Bible (Matthew, 6:1-16). Excerpts taken from it read as follows: “Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven” "So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth; they have received their reward in full.” “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth; they have received their reward in full.” “When you fast, do not look somber as the hypocrites do, for they disfigure their faces to show men they are fasting. I tell you the truth; they have received their reward in full.” All prophets of God share the same teachings coming from the same source—from God, Most High. The Prophet (SAW), as we know, was blessed with the most concise and precise speech (jawami’ul kalim). The words of the hadith might be few, but the meanings behind them are very profound.

The shirk mentioned in the above hadith refers to riya (showing off), which comes under the category of al-shirk al-khafi (the hidden shirk). As for the major shirk, it is the worst sin that one could commit. Allah (SWT) is willing to pardon any person for any sin except the sin of shirk, which implies associating anything or anyone with Allah (SWT). We find this stated clearly twice in Surat al-Nisa’, once in ayah 48, and the second time in ayah 116. “God will not forgive anyone for associating something with Him, while He will forgive whoever He wishes for anything besides that. Whoever ascribes partners to God is guilty of a monstrous sin” (al-Nisa’, 4:48). “...Surely, God will not forgive the ascribing of partners to Him. He forgives whoever He will for anything other than that. Whoever ascribes partners to God has strayed far indeed” (al-Nisa, 4:116). Any sin other than the sin of shirk is pardonable. Allah’s messenger (SAW) said, “A prostitute was forgiven by Allah, because, passing by a panting dog near a well and seeing that the dog was about to die of thirst, she took off her shoe, and tying it with her head-cover she drew out some water for it. So, Allah forgave her because of that.”

We need to be very careful that our intentions at all times are pure and that they are solely for the sake of Allah (SWT). There is a hadith which vividly describes how best of actions may result in worst of consequences, if not accompanied with sincerity and good intention, and if not done solely for the sake of Allah (SWT). Ibn Al-Qayyim explains the hadith of ‘the first three to be thrown into Hell on the Day of Resurrection.’ He says: “From Abu Hurairah, who said, “I heard the Messenger of Allah say, ‘Verily, the first to be judged on the Day of Resurrection will be a man who had died as a martyr. He will be brought forward. Allah will remind him of the favors He had bestowed upon him and the man will acknowledge them. Then He will ask him: ‘What did you do to express gratitude for it?’ The man will reply: ‘I fought for Your Cause till I was martyred.’ Allah will say: ‘You have lied. You fought for Your Cause till I was martyred.’ Command will then be issued about him and he will be dragged on his face and thrown into Hell.”

The ayahs 15 & 16 of Surat Hud also point toward the message about the consequences of one’s intentions. “As for those who desire the life of the dunya and its finery, We will give them full payment in it for their
actions. They will not be deprived here of their due. But such people will have nothing in the akhirah but the Fire. What they achieved here will come to nothing. What they did will prove to be null and void’” (Hud, 11:15-16). The Qur’an tells us that everyone acts according to his or her shakilah (nature). ‘Say: Each man acts according to his nature, but your Lord knows best who is best guided on the Path’ (al-Isra’, 17:84). The term shakilah includes meanings of attitude, nature, pattern, culture, background, circumstances, and the limits ordained by God within which one has to operate. People will do what they want to do but their actions will be essentially judged on the basis of the intentions behind the actions.

The benefits of good intentions and about the recording of deeds have been enumerated in a hadith qudsi. Ibn `Abbas (RA) reported that the Messenger of Allah (SAW) related from his Lord (SWT): “Verily Allah has recorded the good deeds and the evil deeds.” Then he clarified that: “Whosoever intends to do a good deed but does not do it, Allah records it with Himself as a complete good deed; but if he intends it and does it, Allah records it with Himself as ten good deeds, up to seven hundred times, or more than that. But if he intends to do an evil deed and does not do it, Allah records it with Himself as a complete good deed; but if he intends it and does it, Allah records it down as one single evil deed.” The hadith with this text is a clarification from the part of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) about the way of recording deeds. Another version of the hadith is: “If My servant considers doing a sin, do not record it against him. If he acts upon it, record it as one sin. If he considers doing a good deed and does not do it, record it as one good deed, and if he actually does it, record it as 10 good deeds.”

Sincere intention is a shield against Satan, our arch enemy, who had said, “My Lord, because You misled me, I will make things on the earth seem good to them and I will mislead them all, every one of them except Your slaves among them who are sincere.” (al-Hijr, 15:39-40). With the rampant vices that we see everywhere, humanity at large seems to have been misled by Satan. Let us strive to be among those true sincere slaves of Allah (SWT) whom Satan will not be able to mislead in sha’ Allah. We have no choice but to be sincere in our ‘ibadah of Allah (SWT). “They were only ordered to worship Allah, making their deen (Ibadah) sincerely His as people of pure natural belief, and to establish prayer (salat) and pay alms (zakat) — that is the true faith” (al-Baiyinah, 98:5).

Edited by Dr. Munawar Haque
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