

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

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Focus On Yourself

Here's a fun story.

A young couple moved into a new neighborhood. In the morning while they are eating breakfast, the young woman saw her neighbor hanging the laundry outside. "That laundry is not very clean", she said. "She doesn't know how to wash correctly. Perhaps she needs better laundry soap." Her husband looked on, but remained silent. Every time her neighbor would hang her laundry to dry, the young woman would make the same comments.

About one month later, the woman was surprised to see nice clean laundry on the line and said to her husband: "Look, she has learned how to wash correctly. I wonder who taught her this."

The husband said, "I got up early this morning and cleaned our windows".

Lesson: If our windows are dirty, we see things as dirty. What we see is a reflection of our inner-selves! What we see when watching others depends on the cleanliness and purity of the window through which we look.

[12:53] "I do not claim innocence for

myself. The self is an advocate of vice, except for those who have attained mercy from my Lord. My Lord is Forgiver, Most Merciful." This verse informs us that we are incompetent, because without God's mercy, our self was created to promote sin. This helps explain why being a human is so difficult, and also why we have to work so hard.

[90:4] *We created the human being to work hard (to redeem himself).*

[76:3] *We showed him the two paths, then, he is either appreciative, or unappreciative.*

This is my war, fighting with myself. I fight everyday battling myself to not commit sins, battling myself to remember God's blessings, and battling myself to be appreciative.

[14:34] *And He gives you all kinds of things that you implore Him for. If you count GOD's blessings, you can never encompass them. Indeed, the human being is transgressing, unappreciative.*

I know it is difficult to be appreciative and positive all the time. God does let me know however, that even if I filled 99% of my time being appreciative of

God's blessings, I would still miss being appreciative of some of the blessings He provides me with.

[30:30] *Therefore, you shall devote yourself to the religion of strict monotheism. Such is the natural instinct placed into the people by GOD. Such creation of GOD will never change. This is the perfect religion, but most people do not know.*

On one hand, 12:53 teaches that the self was created as an advocate of vice. On the other hand, 30:30 teaches us we have a natural instinct to worship God alone. It seems we were created with both the nature to sin and the nature to worship God. My life on this earth is a test and it will show which one is going to win.

There are times when someone will say something that bothers or upsets me. I start thinking to myself, someone should do something about this. Which part of this next verse am I forgetting?

[4:126] *To GOD belongs everything in the heavens and the earth. GOD is in full control of all things.*

Thank You, God, for this knowledge. If

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I was spending 99% of my time being appreciative and counting God's blessings, I wouldn't have time to feel bothered or get upset or worry about what needs to be changed. I have enough of my own faults to correct, let alone worrying about what others are doing.

So is there anything I should be doing when associating with others?

[3:20] If they argue with you, then say, "I have simply submitted myself to GOD; I and those who follow me." You shall proclaim to those who received the scripture, as well as those who did not, "Would you submit?" If they submit, then they have been guided, but if they turn away, your sole mission is to deliver this message. GOD is Seer of all people.

Praise be to God, God provides us with everything! Everything is already His, including our own selves. Through His mercy, God sent the Quran that teaches how to deal with believers, disbelievers and hypocrites. I have to constantly battle myself to worship God alone at all times and be appreciative of His blessings. When dealing with others all I need to do is remind them to also submit to God alone. I don't have to worry if they actually submit. It seems like my job is to ask others to submit to God, but my focus is on submitting myself to God. *[10:105] I was commanded: "Keep yourself devoted to the religion of monotheism; you shall not practice idol worship.* God is telling me to keep myself devoted to the religion of monotheism. Just keeping myself positive and appreciative 99% of the time is hard enough, let alone worrying about keeping others on track.

[75:13] The human being will be informed, on that day, of everything he did to advance himself, and everything he did to regress himself. Thank You, God, for the mercy that I will only have to answer for what I did myself. Imagine my fate if I had to answer for what others were doing.

[26:3] You may blame yourself that they are not believers. [26:4] If we will,

we can send from the sky a sign that forces their necks to bow.

[5:105] O you who believe, you should worry only about your own necks. If the others go astray, they cannot hurt you, as long as you are guided. To GOD is your ultimate destiny, all of you, then He will inform you of everything you had done.

How can I focus on myself in my submission to God alone?

[17:36] You shall not accept any information, unless you verify it for yourself. I have given you the hearing, the eyesight, and the brain, and you are responsible for using them.

There are so many opinions and so much nonsense in the world that I am skeptical of most things. Even when I am verifying something, I question the source. The only things that I fully trust as a source are God and the Quran. This is a blessing because it helps keep me less involved with nonsense.

[6:114] Shall I seek other than GOD as a source of law, when He has revealed to you this book fully detailed? Those who received the scripture recognize that it has been revealed from your Lord, truthfully. You shall not harbor any doubt.

A beautiful thing about reading a verse in the Quran is: God is the Teacher who inspires us to understand it how it is meant for us at that time. We could read a verse and have two different understandings and it doesn't make you right and me wrong, or you wrong and me right. Only God is all knowing. May God increase my knowledge, it seems like this is one of the reasons I should focus on my own self.

[79:40] As for the one who revered the majesty of his Lord, and enjoined the self from sinful lusts. Enjoin the self from sinful lusts. Sinful lusts can be classified as a lot of different things. Anything that diverts our attention from worshiping God alone could be a sinful lust. The human being must work hard to not be engaged

with sinful lusts.

[7:205] You shall remember your Lord within yourself, publicly, privately, and quietly, day and night; do not be unaware. This covers 100% of our time. Remember God within ourselves, all the time. Praise God.

[10:49] Say, "I possess no power to harm myself, or benefit myself; only what GOD wills takes place." Each community has a predetermined life span. Once their interim comes to an end, they cannot delay it by one hour, nor advance it.

That verse is the key with the self. It provides the secret of how the self operates, how changes are made within the self, and how the self exists. God is in control of all things at all times, He is even in control of our own selves. God provides us with the Quran as a guidance of how to deal with the believers, disbelievers and hypocrites. God even gives us the exact words to use. God shows us in several verses that we need to focus on our own selves and worry about our own necks. How we see the world depends on how we are, how dirty our own windows are.

There was a great example provided at Quran study about dealing with road rage and aggressive drivers. When someone is racing in front of us, cuts us off, or whips around us, we have a choice to be appreciative or unappreciative. Will we get upset and yell at them or will we remember 58:11?

[58:11] O you who believe, if you are told, "Please make room," you shall make room for each other to sit. GOD will then make room for you. If you are asked to get up and move, get up and move. GOD raises those among you who believe, and those who acquire knowledge to higher ranks. GOD is fully Cognizant of everything you do.

Depending on how our self is, that will dictate how we react. If the windows of our eyes are dirty everything will look dirty to us. If the windows of our eyes are clean, God willing, we can be

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appreciative. God, please help us focus on ourselves to commit 100% of our time to worshiping God alone. God, please help us be guided so no one can harm us. God, please provide us with your mercy, to accept You are in control of all things at all times.

[2:286] GOD never burdens a soul beyond its means: to its credit is what it earns, and against it is what it commits. "Our Lord, do not condemn us if we forget or make mistakes. Our Lord, and protect us from blaspheming against You, like those before us have done. Our Lord, protect us from sinning until it becomes too late for us to repent. Pardon us and forgive us. You are our Lord and Master. Grant us victory over the disbelieving people."

Robert

* * * * *

Feedback

We all want to improve, achieve more and be better people. One tool to do so is critically examine oneself regularly (59:18); see where we may be falling short of God's reminders in the Quran. Another is to hear reminders from fellow submitters (51:55). If we are doing the reminding, we must do so in the best possible manner. But are we as open to reminders as we are to reminding others? If others try to help our soul by pointing out how we're doing and where we could improve, and do so using warm words of wisdom, kind constructive criticism, or "360-degree feedback", then do we welcome it?

The painful answer may be, "No." Our fragile egos are partly to blame. We all want to meet our own expectations of ourselves, and so being critiqued — or even the prospect of being critiqued — can present a threat. For this reason, rather than us welcoming feedback, our first response could become a defensive knee-jerk reaction. Such reflexes serve to

make us feel better about ourselves and yet they stop our souls from becoming better.

Ignorance is bliss

Sometimes we don't even realize we are deflecting feedback. For example, people may seek feedback only from supportive allies, or only for matters in which they know they excel. Other times, someone may be excessively harsh on oneself knowing that kind Submitters will try to offer words of encouragement instead of criticism. But perhaps the simplest deflection technique is to avoid hearing feedback at all.

Since it isn't always possible to ignore or avoid critical feedback, sometimes our ego may find other ways to protect itself. One of the other handy tools Satan uses is misdirection: focusing attention away from our flaws.

For example, when we observe that we have "performed poorly", one may blame the circumstances ("I missed the Contact Prayer because of my alarm clock"). Or point to other people's shortcomings and away from our own ("I'm doing much better than others out there").

Another tactic Satan likes to play is have us discredit the feedback-giver. We see clear examples of this when arrogant leaders insult, ridicule and attack God's messengers. God willing, we do not react that arrogantly, but we should be aware of what the ego is capable of.

Preparing oneself

But are these defensive reactions to feedback inevitable, or can we avoid them? What can we do to better listen to reminders that improves our souls, God willing.

Research suggests that people are more open to receiving diagnostic feedback if they first think about the positive traits they most value in themselves and remember past occasions when they demonstrated those traits. This can help them overcome the "threatening" nature

of feedback. While we may not want to think we're "all that", we can believe that God is Most Gracious, Most Merciful (1:1, 1:3) and the One who guides us (1:6). We can trust in Him to help us through. Most of us were idol worshipers before finding the message. Would not the One who guided us to His message, allow us to see the paths of improvement, if we sincerely implore Him (19:48)? The feedback we receive from another person may or may not be correct. But if it is correct, we can seek comfort in knowing God is Forgiver, Most Merciful. And that overcoming a weakness only makes our soul stronger.

Classic psychological studies on persuasion show that people can easily trick themselves into thinking they enjoyed an unpleasant task, if they only believe they actively chose to do it. Could something similar work with feedback? Can we convince ourselves to accept advice by believing that we chose to receive it?

We can also consider the question, "Would we rather find out now if we are wrong or on the Day of Judgment?"

To avoid changing to please others rather than God, we must also reflect on feedback sensibly with the tools God has given us, i.e., the policy manual called the Quran, taken in context. The Quran is not only a mercy, it minimizes our risk of misunderstanding, and it is a source of guidance that can prevent us from straying, and it fosters improvement.

Kinds of feedback

There are different kinds of feedback, positive and negative. God may use "negative" feedback like pinches as reminders (in the big picture these should be considered a mercy from God). There is also positive feedback such as signs from God and reassurance (5:12). At the same time, we should examine our actions using the Quran to guard against our works being adorned in our eyes by Satan (43:37).

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The system

God says He loves the steadfast (3:146) and those who trust in Him (3:159).

Sometimes when I cannot find answers, I wait, and ask God and trust He will show me at the proper time.

We should also remember that the Quran is complete (6:114). We should carefully study the Quran for answers including taking things in context (4:82) and following the whole Quran (6:19, 15:91, 5:101). We should look at things in light of God's attributes and use common sense (17:36). The Quran talks about listening to all words and following the best. All viewpoints must be considered and compared to the Quran in its entirety to arrive at the best. Anything outside the Quran should be rejected.

[39:18] They are the ones who examine all words, then follow the best. These are the ones whom GOD has guided; these are the ones who possess intelligence.

Lip service is not enough. If I find I'm doing something wrong, I should not only acknowledge it verbally but sincerely make an effort to change. Repentance is followed by reformation (2:160, 3:89, 4:146). If I believe the book is from God, then my actions should reflect this. This is feedback to test my innermost convictions.

[6:54] ... Your Lord has decreed that mercy is His attribute. Thus, anyone among you who commits a transgression out of ignorance, and repents thereafter and reforms, then He is Forgiving, Most Merciful."

The test also mandates that we wholeheartedly submit, we hear and obey, and follow the system God has given us. Once we have the right answer from Quran, we must show steadfastness, trust, and confidence in God's system. Believing in God means trusting in God.

Satanic tricks

The best of us will commit sins, even God's prophets. But when someone suggests we are duped by Satan, do we take it personally? We should not.

We should be careful and examine ourselves against what the Quran says. We should also be wary of Satan's whispers that play on our ego. Satan's lies may also try to push us away from the Quran or entice us with things that go against God's system (7:20, 2:268, 17:64).

When someone shows us a clear verse in the Quran, Satan may say, "Be open to alternate ideas so you don't have to change", i.e., have doubt. Or, "How can so many people be wrong?" Satan wants us to go freewheeling, without the Quran, so we can fall off the cliff. Satan will do anything to make us go astray and fall out of God's protection.

Be aware of bad responses (in ourselves) to feedback, including ridiculing (49:11), backbiting (49:12), being angry and belligerent (22:72). It's usually a sign we're wrong. Also, be aware of apathy (4:97, 5:79). And in general, anything that takes us away from being absolutely devoted to God alone and following the Quran.

How to counter Satan

We can counter Satan by following God's system. This includes behaving nicely with each other (17:53) and discussing in a civil and logical fashion as friends, not enemies (41:33-35) and seeking refuge in God anytime the devil whispers (7:200-201, 23:97-98, 41:36).

[41:34] Not equal is the good response and the bad response. You shall resort to the nicest possible response. Thus, the one who used to be your enemy, may become your best friend.

[41:35] None can attain this except those who steadfastly persevere. None can attain this except those who are extremely fortunate.

While not easy, that is something we can consider while dealing with feedback. Reacting in a way that our "enemy" becomes our "best friend." We have to set the example in our own responses to reminders first, before we expect others to react perfectly. How better to remind than setting the best example?