



Assalamu Alaikum

Dear Students,

I hope this letter reaches you with the best of health and Iman. Just sending a reflection.

We are at the beginning of a new Islamic year: 1436. It has been 1436 (lunar) years since the Prophet, may peace be upon him, left his beloved hometown of Makkah (Mecca). He was escaping murder from the leaders of Makkah, murder from his own relatives. That event was the “Hijra.”

Consider his crime: he was preaching. He was not preaching an overthrow of the current system, yet his preaching had consequences that were social, economic, political. In the Christian story of Jesus, may peace be upon him, we have something similar: his message was not political, yet it had political consequences. Those who were invested in the status quo found these messages threatening, and moved to have the callers removed, by execution. In both Traditions, the attempted killing was a failure: according to Islam, Muhammad escaped to Yathrib, and according to Christianity, Jesus was resurrected, may peace be upon them. Further, the attempted executions were processes that led to the Callers becoming something much greater in influence. Today, more than half of the world is either Muslim or Christian.


Within both these Traditions, Islam and Christianity, we have this fundamental lesson: social change begins with a change within the individual believer. We are taught at least twice in the Qur’an that Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is within themselves. This change is in both directions. If a people are in a position of superiority, Allah will not change their condition unless they change what is within themselves, from morality to corruption. And, if a people are downtrodden, Allah will not change their condition until they change what is within themselves: from less piety to more piety.

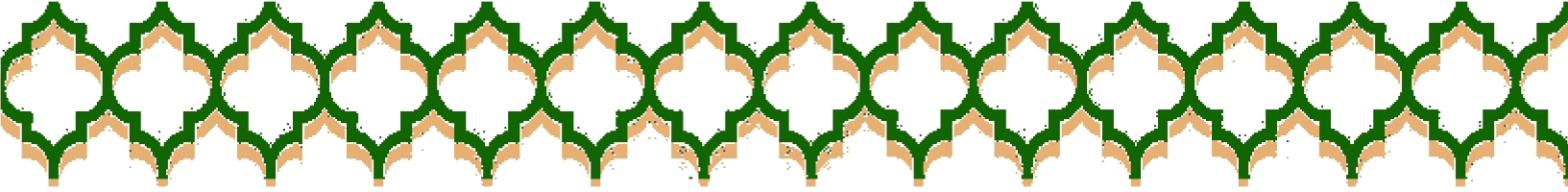
Consider this when you look at the world, especially your world. In addressing any dissatisfaction, the first place to look is the most difficult place: within yourself. We have that folk saying: remember that when you point your finger at someone, three fingers point back at you. It is easy to blame our shortcomings on others. It is easy to focus on the faults of others as a way of diverting from any attention on our own faults.

Now, take it deeper: consider what you think of the Divine. Do you think of the Divine as merciful upon you? Do you think that the Divine disapproves of you? Do think that the Divine cares for you, or is ambivalent? Do you think that the Divine is eager to reward you, or forgive you, or punish you? You control what you think of the Divine.

Many students come to me, convinced that the Divine hates them. Some students come to me thinking that Allah holds them in unique favor, above all others. The reality is that it is your choice to believe that God loves or hates you.

Even deeper: what I see in God is a projection of what I see in myself. Meaning, if I believe that God hates me, it might mean that I need to work to reduce my own self-loathing. If I believe that God uniquely loves me above everyone else, it means that I might need to work on this excessive self-love.





Further, what you think of God in the deepest places in your heart will influence how you see the world around you, and how you see what happens in your world. But, if you think of God as punishing, then you will see the struggles in your life as punishment. If you see Allah as merciful upon you, then you will see the struggles of your life as difficult, yet merciful because they could have been worse. Again, let me repeat: you control this. Thus, if you get into a car accident, you will interpret the event according to what you see in God. If in your mind God is a punisher, then you will see the accident as punishment. If God is merciful, then you will see the accident as something that could have been so much worse. If you see God as ambivalent, then you will see God as abandoning you when struggle hits.

So, why did the Prophet, may peace be upon him, escape Makkah? Was it to save his own life? If that was truly the case, then he would not leave his beloved Ali in his bed in his place, may Allah ennoble his face. He could have left without doing so.

Rather, he left Makkah for the same reason that -- despite the Makkan's offers to him, he could not stop preaching -- because he was instructed by God to do so. He had to place his trust in the Divine to take care of himself, Ali, and the rest of his followers, may peace be upon him, and may Allah be pleased with them. Why did Abu Bakr stay back, when all the other Muslims were sent to Yathrib? Again, out of obedience, may Allah be pleased with him. When the two were hiding in a cave, just as the Quraysh seemed like they were going to find them, Abu Bakr became tense. The Prophet, may peace be upon him, reminded him that the third with them was Allah.

And in this we have a fundamental lesson. If I have to evaluate my self-worth according to anything, it is according to my obedience and trust on Allah. I have an inherent self worth because of my being human. Beyond that, my self worth is based on the kind of human I am in my heart, according to what Allah prescribes. That is something I control: I control my level of surrender to and reliance upon Allah. As I change that, I also change what is happening in my world around me, and to me.

The new year, then, becomes an annual reminder and opportunity to renew this understanding. The new year becomes an annual reminder for hope. In our society, we speak of New Year resolutions. At the very least, think of the new year, taking place right in the middle of your semester, as a new reminder of his story, may peace be upon him, and yours.

Next week, Insha Allah, we will see that the new year is a reminder of something else.

God knows best.

May Allah bless you.

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