

Advice from His Eminence, Sayyid Ali al-Sistani (may the Almighty prolong his life) to the Believing Youth

The Request:

“In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful. “The Best of greetings to the highest Religious Authority, His Eminence, Grand Ayatullah al-Sayyid Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani.

“We are a group of young college students and social activists. We would like to ask Your Eminence for advice that can be useful to us in this day and age, describing the role of the youth and what is required of them to play that role. Other advice that would be beneficial to the youth is also appreciated.

- A group of college students and social activists”

The Response:

In the Name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful

All praise belongs to God, Lord of the worlds, and may peace and blessings be upon Muhammad and his pure progeny.

Peace be upon you, and the mercy of God, as well as His blessings.

I would like to give to the dear youth –whom I care about as much as I care about myself and my family- eight precepts that can provide them with happiness in this world and the Hereafter. They are the essence of the message of God, the Glorified, to His creation. They are also the advice of God’s wise and pious servants and what I have extracted from experience and knowledge:

First: It is necessary to truly believe in God, the Glorified, and in the Hereafter. Never neglect this belief. It is proven by clear evidence and decreed by the straight path. Every creature in this world –if man can explore its depths– is a novel production that attests to an omnipotent maker and a mighty creator. The messages of God have come incessantly through His Prophets to remind mankind of this fact and to indicate that this life –as He planned it- is in fact an arena in which He tests His servants to see who is best in conduct. A person who is blind to the existence of God and the Hereafter would not know the meaning of this life, its horizons, and its aftermath, and would be walking in darkness. Therefore, maintain your belief and make it the most important and the most precious of your belongings. Try to increase your certainty of it, make it present with you at all times, and preserve it with strong foresight and penetrating vision.

If you find a weakness in your faith at a moment of vigorous youth, such as when feeling burdened by a religious obligation or fancying an impermissible pleasure, then do not completely sever your relationship with God, the Exalted, because that will make it harder for you to return. One may refuse obeying God’s commands at times of health and strength, yet he will be forced to go back to his Lord at times of weakness and disability. Therefore, remember at the time of vigor –which is a very short period- the times of weakness, decay, ailment, and aging.

Never question the proven principles in order to justify your wrong conduct and behavior, follow doubts you do not have the patience to research and disprove, give way to immature thoughts, be allured by life’s pleasures and vanity, or resent the exploitation of religion by some for their personal interest. Rightfulness is not measured by men. Instead, men are measured by rightfulness.

Second: Have good morals, such as wisdom, consideration, kindness, modesty, frugality, prudence, patience, etc. They are the main causes of happiness in this world and the Hereafter. The closest of the people to God, the Glorified, and the one with deeds that weigh heavy on the scale is the one with the best morals. Therefore, improve your conduct with your parents, family, children, friends, and all people. If you find deficiencies in yourself, do not overlook them. Hold yourself accountable and carry yourself with prudence toward good morals. If you find yourself unable to behave morally, then do not lose hope. Pretend to have high morals. You will be rewarded more than a person who is naturally good-mannered.

Third: Try to learn a trade and acquire a specialty, and exhaust yourself in that pursuit. There are many blessings in this; it occupies a portion of your free time, you can support yourself and your family, benefit society, do good deeds using the money you earn, sharpen your mind, broaden your experience, and your wealth becomes more blessed. That is because the harder wealth is earned, the more blessed and pleasant it is. Furthermore, God, the Exalted and Immaculate, loves the hardworking person who exhausts himself with work and trade, and dislikes the idle person who is dependent on others and spends his time in play and diversion. Do not waste your youth without learning a trade or specialty. God, the Glorified, has put in youth bodily and spiritual energies so that a person can acquire skills he can use for the rest of his life. Do not waste it in play and negligence.

Attend to your vocation and specialty until you become proficient in it. Do not speak without knowledge, and do not practice without experience. If you do not know or cannot do something, acknowledge your deficiency and apologize to your clients or customers, or refer them to those more experienced than you are. This increases your credibility in their eyes. Do your work with interest, attention, and enjoyment; do not make it your goal to just collect money even from impermissible sources. There is no blessing in forbidden wealth. A person who acquires wealth from impermissible sources is prone to adversity sent to him by God that will make him part with that money on top of his affliction and toil. Such wealth does not make one rich in this life, and becomes a curse in the afterlife.

Make yourself the scale with which you measure your conduct with others. Do to others what you do to yourself and what you would have them do to you. Be kind to people as you would like God, the Glorified, to be kind to you. Maintain your profession's ethics and conventions, and do not use inferior ways that you would be ashamed to declare. Keep in mind that the worker and the specialist have a duty toward the customers and clients who put their trust in them. Be a counselor to them, and never deceive them. That is because God, the Glorified, watches you and knows about your deeds, and He will punish you sooner or later, for cheating and betrayal are the most disgraceful of deeds and have the severest of results and consequences.

Let physicians in particular follow this advice more strictly because they deal with people's bodies and minds. Therefore, let them not disobey the above advice, or they will face severe consequences.

God, the Glorified and Exalted, says, "Woe to the defrauders who use short measures, who, when they measure [a commodity bought] from the people, take the full measure, but diminish when they measure or weigh for them. Do they not know that they will be resurrected?" (83:1-4). Furthermore, the Prophet, may God's blessings be upon him and his progeny, said, "God likes if you do a job, to do it excellently."

Also, let college students and professors seek to encompass whatever is related to their field of specialty that comes from institutes of science, especially the science of medicine, in order for their knowledge and treatment to be on the cutting edge of contemporary science. Moreover, they should pay attention to advancing science themselves through useful scientific articles and pioneering discoveries, thereby rivaling other institutes of science as much as they can. They should disdain being mere students of others and mere consumers of the tools and equipment others make. Instead, they should actively contribute to advancing science, just as their ancestors were pioneers and leaders of science in previous times. No generation is worthier than another one. Therefore, you should nurture the young who have distinctive abilities, who possess genius, and who exhibit intelligence and excellence, even if they are from the lower classes. Support them as you support your children, so they may reach the high levels of beneficial knowledge. You will get rewarded for all they produce, and your society and offspring will benefit from them.

Fourth: Engage in good deeds and morals and abstain from bad ones. Prosperity and abundance arise from virtue, and misery and evil –except those sent by God to examine His servants- arise from vice. God, the Glorified, says, "Whatever affliction that may visit you is because of what your hands have earned, and He excuses many [an offence]" (42:30).

Virtuous deeds include holding oneself responsible, chastity in appearance, eyesight, and behavior, sincerity, maintaining the bonds of kinship, returning the consignment, fulfilling commitments and obligations, resolve in righteousness, and disdaining vile conduct and behavior.

Vicious deeds include abhorred tribalism, being easily enraged, impermissible entertainment, showing off to people, extravagance at times of wealth, aggression at times of poverty, grumbling at times of adversity, doing evil to others particularly the weak, wasting of money, ingratitude to abundance, conceit in sin, assisting in injustice and aggression, and loving to be thanked for a deed one did not do.

I want to stress the issue of chastity with regard to young unmarried women, because women are more affected by the consequences of neglecting it due to their delicateness. Thus, let them not be deceived by superficial emotions, and not enter casual relationships whose enjoyment ends quickly and what stays is their complications and

consequences. Young unmarried women should only think about a stable life that contains the elements of loyalty and happiness. There is no more dignified woman than one who maintains her composure and strength, who is reserved in her appearance and behavior, and who busies her time with her life, work, and school.

Fifth: Try to start a family by getting married and procreating without any delay. Having a family is a source of pleasure and affability, a motive for hard work, a cause for sobriety and being responsible, an investment of energy for the future, and a defense against forbidden and lowly deeds. It has been narrated that one who gets married has attained half of his religion. Foremost, marriage is a necessary course of life and a natural human instinct. Those who abandon it fall into trouble and are inflicted with dullness and laziness. Do not be afraid of being impoverished by marriage, because God, the Glorified, has put many causes of abundance in marriage that one may not be aware of at first. Also, pay attention to the character of the woman you want to marry, and to her piety and discipline, and do not be occupied with evaluating her beauty, her appearance, and her job, because those traits are a veil that may be removed when life reveals its hardships. There are warnings in the Hadith against marrying a woman merely for her looks. Moreover, one who marries a woman for her piety and character will have a blessed marriage.

Let young unmarried women and their guardians not favor getting a job over starting a family, because marriage is a necessary course of life, while a job is more of a complement to it. It is not wise to abandon the former for the sake of the latter. Those who do not understand this principle will regret it later in life when regret is of no use. Life's experiences attest to this.

Guardians are not permitted to prevent their daughters from getting married, nor are they permitted to put obstacles in their way using improper traditions not required by God, such as asking for exorbitant dowers or waiting for cousins and sayyids, because there are many sources of corruption in these traditions. God made fathers the custodians of their daughters only so that they counsel their daughters and choose the best option for them. One who confines a woman for other than her interest has committed a sin that endures as long as her suffering, and has opened one of Hell's doors upon himself.

Sixth: Seek charity and helping people, particularly orphans, widows, and the disadvantaged, and always observe the public interest. Such practices enhance your faith, discipline your soul, and purify your wealth and abundance. They also entail proposing virtue, cooperation in piety and God-fearfulness, silently enjoining good and forbidding evil, an assistance to the authorities in keeping order and protecting the public interest, and a cause for a better society. They are a blessing in this world, and a balance in the Afterlife. God, the Glorified, loves a community that lives in solidarity and cooperation, in which everyone cares about the interests of others as he cares about his own interest.

God says, "If the people of the towns had been faithful and maintained piety, We would have opened to them blessings from the heaven" (7:96), and says, "Allah does not change the condition of a nation, unless it changes what is in its heart..." (13:11) The Prophet, may God's blessings be upon him and his progeny, said, "One of you does not become a believer until he likes for his brother what he likes for himself and dislikes for his brother what he dislikes for himself," and also said, "One who establishes a good tradition gets rewarded for it, and gets rewarded for those who follow that tradition."

Seventh: Attend to the responsibilities you have assumed, whether in family or in society. Let fathers attend to their children, and husbands attend to their wives. Abstain from violence and cruelty even when there is a need for strictness in order to preserve the family and society. The methods of strictness are not limited to bodily injury and distasteful remarks. There are other means and approaches of discipline that can be learned from experts and specialists. Indeed, cruel measures oftentimes result in the opposite of what is intended. They cause the bad condition to take deeper roots and break the person they are supposed to adjust. There is no good in strictness that causes injustice, and a mistake cannot be remedied with a sin.

Let those who assume responsibilities in society attend to their responsibilities. Let them be counselors to society and not betray it, for God is the custodian of everybody and He will call them to account on the Day of Resurrection. Therefore, do not spend public money wastefully, do not make decisions that harm the public, and do not exploit your position to establish a class of people who cover up for each other, do not help each other to forbidden interests and dubious monies, remove others from positions they deserve, or deny them services they have a right to. Treat all people equally. Do not use your public job as a means to fulfill private obligations such as kinship, past favors, etc., because fulfilling private obligations with public funds is injustice and corruption. If you ever have the option to choose one over an equally qualified other, then choose the weaker one who has no sponsor and no supporter except God, the Glorified. Let nobody take religion or sect into consideration when working for the public, for the true religion is based on the true principles of justice, doing good, honesty, etc. God says, "Certainly We sent our apostles with manifest proofs, and We sent down with them the Book and the Balance, so that mankind may maintain justice" (57:25). Also, the Imam, may peace be upon him, said, "I heard the Prophet of God, may God's blessings be

upon him and his progeny, say on various occasions, ‘A nation in which the weak cannot take back his property from the strong without stuttering will not be sanctified.’” Anyone who does not follow this principle would be deceiving himself with false wishes and false hopes. The true followers of just leaders such as the Prophet, may God’s blessings be upon him and his progeny, Imam Ali, may peace be upon him, and the Martyr Imam al-Husayn, may peace be upon him, are those who follow their teachings and emulate their conduct. Let those who assume public responsibilities read the letter of Imam Ali, may peace be upon him, to Malik al-Ashter upon sending him to Egypt. That letter is a full description of the principles of justice and fidelity. It is very beneficial to governors and even people with lesser responsibilities. However, the bigger one’s responsibility is, the more useful reading this letter will be to him.

Eighth: Have a spirit of learning and an interest in increasing your knowledge and wisdom in all stages of your life and in all conditions. Reflect on your deeds and traits and their effects, and ponder the incidents that happen around you and their results, so that you become more knowledgeable and experienced every day, for there is a lesson and guidance in every act or incident, and there is a message and meaning in every happening. Every occurrence reveals courses and phenomena, and represents examples and lessons to those who pore over it. Therefore, never neglect supplying yourself with more knowledge and experience until the last day of your life. The more knowledgeable a person is, the more trials and errors he will avoid. God, the Glorified, says, “And he who is given wisdom, is certainly given an abundant good” (2:269), and He says to His Prophet, may God’s blessings be upon him and his progeny, “And say, ‘My Lord! Increase me in knowledge.’” (20:114)

Moreover, one should acquaint himself with three books, contemplating and reflecting on his readings from them:

First and foremost is the *Qur’an*. It is the last message of God to His creation. He sent this message to sharpen the minds and make streams of wisdom spring from them, and also mellow the rigid hearts. He narrated stories in it as examples to its readers. One should not abandon reading this book to himself, thereby making his soul feel God is talking to him. That is because God, the Exalted, sent this book as a message to the world.

The second is *Nahj al-Balaghah*. This book explains the meanings of the Qur’an in an eloquent style that provokes a spirit of reflection, contemplation, learning, and wisdom. Therefore, one should read it whenever he has a chance, and imagine that Imam Ali, may peace be upon him, is addressing him directly. Also, one should pay special attention to the letter of Imam Ali, may peace be upon him, to his son, Imam al-Hasan, may peace be upon him.

The third is *al-Sahifah al-Sajjadiyah*. It contains eloquent supplications whose meanings are extracted from the Qur’an. There are teachings in those supplications about how one’s orientation, obsession, vision, and ambition should be. They also teach one how to call himself to account and how to scrutinize and criticize himself, particularly the supplication of Makarim al-Akhlaq (Noble Moral Traits).

These eight commandments are the foundation for steadfastness in life. However, I have written them only as a reminder. They are obvious because one can see them in the light of righteousness, the brilliance of truth, the purity of innateness, the proof of reason, and the experience of life. Also, divine messages and the instructions of the enlightened have stressed them. Therefore, everyone should follow them, particularly the youth, who are in the peak of their energy and their bodily and spiritual abilities. Even if they do not follow all of them, let them know that taking a little is better than abandoning the lot, and obtaining a part is better than losing the whole. God, the Glorified, says, “So whoever does an atom’s weight of good will see it, and whoever does an atom’s weight of evil will see it.” (99:7-8)

I ask God to help you to achieve happiness and righteousness in this life and the Afterlife, as He is the Lord of Success.

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