

'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb narrated saying that God's Messenger (peace be upon him) said:

- 1 Actions are but by intention
- 2 And every man shall have but that which he intended.
- 3 Thus, he whose migration is [intended] for God and His Messenger, his migration is for God and His Messenger,
- 4 And he whose migration is for the achievement of some worldly benefit or for taking some woman in marriage, his migration is for that for which he migrated'. ⁽¹⁾

1 Related by al-Bukhari, 6689; Muslim, 1907.

From the Qur'an

- ﴿Say: 'My Lord has enjoined justice, and that you set your whole selves [to Him] at every time and place of prayer, and call on Him, sincere in your faith in Him alone. As it was He who brought you into being in the first instance, so also [to Him] you will return.﴾ (7: 29)
- ﴿Pray to God, then, sincere in your faith in Him alone, however hateful this may be to the unbelievers.﴾ (40: 14)
- ﴿To anyone who desires a harvest in the life to come, We shall grant an increase in his harvest; whereas to the one who desires a harvest in this world, We shall give a share of it, but he will have no share in the life to come.﴾ (42: 20)
- ﴿He who leaves his home, fleeing from evil unto God and His Messenger, and is then overtaken by death, his reward is reserved for him with God. God is much-forgiving, ever-merciful.﴾ (4: 100)
- ﴿It is God who has created death as well as life, so that He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct. He alone is the Almighty, Much-Forgiving.﴾ (67: 2)

The Narrator

'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb belonged to the 'Adiy branch of the Quraysh tribe. He was the second of the rightly-guided caliphs, and one of the ten companions of the Prophet given the assurance of admittance into Heaven. He was given the title *al-Fārūq*, which means 'separator, divider', because he had the insight to distinguish right from falsehood. He embraced Islam in Year 6 of the start of the Islamic message, and his conversion to Islam was a mark of added strength for Islam and the Muslims. He participated in all military expeditions with God's Messenger (peace be upon him). He succeeded Abu Bakr al-Ṣiddīq as caliph in Year 13 AH, 634 CE. He was renowned for fairness and justice, as well as firmness, courage and defence of what is right. During his reign, many countries, including Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Egypt, were liberated and became parts of the Islamic State. He became a martyr when he was assassinated in Year 23 AH, 645 CE. He was buried in 'Ā'ishah's apartment, next to the graves of the Prophet and Abu Bakr.

Summary

In this hadith, the Prophet makes clear that the main principle for the evaluation and acceptance of people's actions is the intention behind any action. Essentially, intention distinguishes what is done by habit from what is done as an act of worship. It distinguishes good from evil. A legitimate action may be done by two different people, but only one of them intends his action as an act of obedience to God and earns a reward for it. The other entertains no such intention, and therefore earns no reward. A person who migrates for God's sake, following the Prophet's Sunnah, will earn God's reward, but the one who migrates for some other purpose will only get what he intends.



Message and Meaning

This hadith is one of the most important hadiths in Islam. Some scholars describe it as representing 'one-third of Islam'.⁽¹⁾



It is intention that gives any action its particular nature. Intention is the purpose formulated in one's mind as to what a particular action is done for. This is what distinguishes an act of worship from ordinary action. Likewise, different types of worship are given their distinctive characteristics. Only actions done for God's sake are accepted and rewarded, while other actions are rejected.



Actions may be similar but intentions are different. The reward of any action is based on a person's intention. If one intends one's deed for a good purpose, reward will be forthcoming; but if an action is intended for an evil purpose, punishment is incurred. If no intention is associated with an action, it earns no reward and incurs no liability. In fact, an action is variably assessed on the basis of people's intentions.

Good intention does not impart any goodness to a bad deed. Some people invented a method of praising God which is unacceptable in Islam. 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd criticized them. They said to him: 'Abu 'Abd al-Raḥmān, we only wanted to do what is good'. He said: 'Many a person cannot attain his good purpose'.⁽²⁾



The Prophet clarifies the point in question, giving the example of migration, which means abandoning the land of unbelief to live in the land of Islam. A person may undertake such migration 'for God and His Messenger'. It is thus intended 'for God' in all sincerity, as an act of worship, and 'for His Messenger', obeying his order and following his practice. Such is the real migration that is honourable and noteworthy.

In this instance, the Prophet does not mention the reward earned by this migration, but implies that it is of the superior type. This is the same as God, Mighty and Exalted, does not specify the reward for fasting. He says: 'All man's actions are his except fasting: it is Mine and I reward it'.⁽³⁾



A person may migrate for some ordinary purpose, such as doing some commercial business or marrying a particular woman. Such migration is not considered from a religious point of view and, as such, earns no reward, although migration is one of the most rewarding acts of worship. It is evaluated on the basis of the person's own intention. The same applies to all types of worship. The Prophet does not mention that such a person earns any reward, because his action is not intended as a pure act of worship. Needless to say, people differ in their intentions.

1 Ibn Daqīq al-ʿĪd, *Sharḥ al-Arbaʿīn al-Nawawīyyah*, p. 24; Ibn Rajab, *Jāmiʿ al-ʿUlūm wal-Ḥikam*, Vol. 1, p. 71.

2 Related by al-Dārimī, *Sunan*, Hadith No. 210.

3 Related by al-Bukhari, 5927; Muslim, 1151.



Implementation

1

Make sure of having a good intention and watch your heart and mind. Strive to ensure that you do all your actions in obedience of God. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: ‘God does not look at your shapes or wealth, but He looks at your hearts and deeds’.⁽¹⁾

2

Do not be pleased with your own or someone else’s action, if it is associated with the wrong motive. Actions are interlinked with the intention behind them.

3

Entertain plenty of good intentions, because a believer’s intention goes further than his action. When one intends to do some good action, one earns a reward, whether one manages to act on such intention or not. On his way back from the Tabuk Expedition, the Prophet said: ‘There are in Madinah some men who are with you whenever you have covered a distance, or crossed a valley. They have been detained by some valid reason’.⁽²⁾ A different hadith quotes the Prophet (peace be upon him) as saying: ‘One man is granted wealth and knowledge by God. He uses his wealth according to his knowledge, spending it for rightful purposes. A different man is granted knowledge by God but no wealth. He says within himself: “Had I had the same as this person, I would have used it in the same way he is using [his wealth]”. Both earn the same reward’.⁽³⁾

4

Muslims in the early generations used to learn proper intention as they learnt good action. They learnt intention through careful watching, self-improvement and striving for what is good. Yaḥyā ibn Kathīr said: ‘Learn good intention, because it goes further than action’. Sufyān al-Thawrī said: ‘It was my intention that I strove hardest against, because it always kept changing’.⁽⁴⁾

5

An ordinary, habitual action is transformed through intention into an act of worship. Thus, a person may intend eating his food to increase his energy to perform worship and do good deeds. A businessman may intend his trading to help build human life, benefit the Muslim community, earn a lawful income to support his family, etc. A student of Islamic Studies may intend his learning to benefit himself and his community to follow the example of prophets and scholars. A woman may intend her sleep to have some rest so that she can continue with her good actions and worship. They, thus, earn reward for all these actions. Mu‘ādh ibn Jabal said: ‘As for me, I have some sleep and do some night worship. I thus seek the reward for my sleeping and my night worship’.⁽⁵⁾

1 Related by Muslim, 2564.

2 Related by Muslim, 4423.

3 Related by Ahmad, 18024; Ibn Mājah, 4228.

4 Ibn Rajab, *Jāmi’ al-‘Ulūm wal-Ḥikam*, Vol. 1, p. 70.

5 Related by al-Bukhari, 4344.



If you are about to do something, make sure to intend it as an aspect of your submission to God, the Exalted. Zubayd al-Yamāmī said: 'I love to have a proper intention in everything, including eating and drinking'. If the action you intend to do appears to you of little significance, remember God's greatness and the reward He grants for any action intended to draw the doer closer to Him. 'Abdullāh ibn al-Mubārak said: 'Intention may elevate a small action as it may also downgrade a great action'.⁽¹⁾



Always be alert, making sure that Satan cannot divert your acts of worship, changing their purpose to that of earning good reputation among your community. If you do, you end up a loser. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'God, Blessed and Exalted, said: I am the least in need of having an associate. Therefore, whoever does something for someone else's sake as well as Mine will have that action rejected by Me and left to him and his associate'.⁽²⁾



Combine good intention with following God's Messenger (peace be upon him). This is the essence of migration for God and His Messenger. Commenting on the Qur'anic verse that says: '[God] has created death as well as life, so that He may put you to a test to show who of you is best in conduct' (67: 2), al-Fuḍayl ibn 'Iyāḍ said: 'The best kind of action is that which is most sincere and most correct. It is most sincere when it is done for God alone, and it is most correct when it follows the Sunnah. An action which is sincere but incorrect is rejected, and the one which is insincere but correct is rejected'.⁽³⁾



If you wish to be considered noble, well-mannered, God-fearing, having a fine character, intelligent and free, then be sincerely devoted to God, Mighty and Exalted, and make sure to follow the Prophet so that you ensure good reward.

1 Al-Ethyūbī, *al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ al-Thajjāj*, Vol. 32, p. 606.

2 Related by Muslim, 2985.

3 Ibn Rajab, *Jāmi' al-'Ulūm wal-Ḥikam*, Vol. 1, p. 72.

