

Ayyuha 'l-Walad*
By
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(excerpts)

IV. O youth, the advice is easy, the difficulty is accepting it, since it is bitter in the taste of the follower of passionate desire, because prohibited things are cherished in their hearts; especially whoever is seeking formal knowledge, and is busying himself about excellence of [science and] the improvement of the soul [and jurisprudence] and the praises of the present world, for he accounts that knowledge alone is a means in which will be his safety and his salvation, and that he can get along without work; and this is the belief of the philosophers. Praise the Great God! he does not know this much, that when he acquires knowledge, if he does not work according to it, the indictment against him is certain. As the Apostle of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, said "The person most severely punished in the day of resurrection is the learned one whom Allah the Exalted does not benefit by reason of his knowledge."

V. O youth, do not be bankrupt of works, nor empty of states; be assured that knowledge alone does not strengthen the hand : a parable of this is, if a man in the wilderness wore ten Indian swords and other weapons, and the man were brave and a warrior, and a terrifying lion attacked him, what do you think ? would the weapons ward off the evil from him without his using them and thrusting with them? it is perfectly obvious that they would not ward (it) off, except by activity. Just so, though a man read a hundred thousand scientific questions and understood them or learned them they do not benefit him except by working. And similarly, if a man had fever and jaundice, his cure is in oxymel and barley broth, and he will not regain his health except in their use.

Though thou measure two thousand rattles of wine,
Unless thou drink, no thrill is thine.

Knowledge is the tree, and working is its fruit; and though you studied a hundred years and collected a thousand books, you would not be prepared for the mercy of Allah the Exalted, except by working, as Allah the Exalted said,
"And verily nothing (shall be reckoned) to man but that for which he made effort."

VII. O youth, how many nights you have remained awake repeating science and poring over books and have denied yourself sleep! I do not know what the purpose of it was. If it was attaining worldly ends and securing its vanities and acquiring its dignities and surpassing your con-temporaries, and such like,¹ woe to you, and again woe; but if your purpose in it was the vitalizing of the Law of the Prophet, Allah bless him and grant him

* Scanned from George Henry Scherer, *Al-Ghazali's Ayyuha 'L-Walad*, A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty in candidacy for the degree of doctor of philosophy, Department of Old Testament Literature and Interpretation, The University of Chicago, Beirut (Syria): The American Press, 1933, pp. 51-77. The dissertation contains the original text, translation and commentary by Scherer with a great many footnotes, a translation of Ghazali's "The Wonders of the Heart" and a bibliography. In what follows I attach only a very limited number of Scherer's footnotes. [Available at UT in the PCL: 061 C4360 V.1] A more recent bilingual edition is Tobias Mayer, *Al-Ghazali: Letter to a Disciple*, Islamic Texts Society, 2005, 130pp. Another version of the book is on-line at: <http://members.tripod.com/sufism/sufism/ghazali/rightword-8.htm>

** al-Ghazali (450-505AH/1058-1111CE), born and died in Tus, in the Khorasan province of northern Persia.

¹ Abu Hurairah says, "The second (person to receive sentence on the day of the resurrection), a man who shall have obtained knowledge and instructed other, and read the Koran. He will be brought into the presence of God, be sensible of and confess: and God will say, "What didst thou do in gratitude therefore?" He will reply, 'I learned knowledge and taught others and I read the Koran to please thee.' Then God will say, 'Thou liest, but thou studieth that people might call thee learned, and thou didst read the Koran for the name of the thing.' Then God will order him to be dragged upon his face, and precipitated into hell." Quoted in Mishcat, v. I, p.56. . . .

peace, and the training of your character, and breaking the soul commanding to evil, then blessed are you and again blessed.

X. O youth, knowledge without work is insanity and work without knowledge is vanity (lit., cannot be).

XV. O youth, the substance of knowledge is to learn what are obedience and worship. Know that obedience and worship are conforming to the law in commands and prohibitions in word and deed—that is, whatever you say and do and omit in word and deed must be in emulation of the law-giver.

XVI. . . . And know that certain of your questions which you asked me cannot be answered in writing and in speech; if you attain that state you will know what they are; and if not, knowing them is impossible; for they are known by experience, and whatever is known by experience cannot be described in words, as the sweetness of the sweet or the bitterness of the bitter cannot be known except by experience. As it is said that an impotent man wrote to a friend. "Tell me about the delight of sexual intercourse, how it is." And he wrote in answer, "Oh N. N., I have accounted you only impotent, but now I know that you are both impotent and foolish; assuredly this delight is known by experience; if you attain it you will know it, and if not, it cannot be described in writing or speech."

XVII. . . . It is told that Shibli, the mercy of Allah, upon him, said : "I served four hundred professors and read four thousand traditions; then I selected from them a single tradition by which I worked, and left off the others; for I meditated and found my salvation and safety in it, and all the knowledge of the ancients and the moderns was included in it, and I was content with it. . . .

XIX. . . . Know that it is indispensable for the traveler to have a shaykh as guide and tutor, to expel from him the evil qualities by his training and to replace them with an excellent character; and the meaning of training resembles {[the act of]} the plowman who digs out the thorns and removes the wild plants [from among the sown] to stimulate its growth and make it thrive perfectly . . . And the sign of the shaykh who is fitted to be the substitute for the Prophet, upon him be blessing and peace, is that he be learned—not that every learned one is fitted for it; and I will show you certain indications in a general way so that not every one shall pretend he is a learned guide. And we say, one who removes himself far from love of the world and love of rank, and has succeeded a discerning person who traces his success to the Lord of the apostles, and has excelled in disciplining himself in scarcity of food and sleep and speech and in abundance of prayer and alms and fasting, and who, in following the discerning shaykh, is making the good qualities of character his way of life, such as endurance and thanksgiving and trustfulness and conviction and generosity and contentment and tranquility of soul and moderation and humility and knowledge and veracity and modesty and trustworthiness and gravity and quietness and staidness and similar traits; and then he is light from the lights of the Prophet, upon him be blessing and' peace, and he is worthy to be imitated; but the presence of such as he is rare, more precious than red sulphur. . And whomever fortune aids to find a shaykh such as we have mentioned, and the shaykh accepts him, he must honor him outwardly and inwardly.

Now outward honor is that he should not dispute with him and not labor in argumentation with him [in every question even if he knows his (the shaykh's) mistake, . . .

But inner honor is that all he hears and accepts from him outwardly he should not deny inwardly, neither in deed nor in word, lest he be branded with hypocrisy; and if this be

not possible, that he should desert his companionship until his inner life agrees with his outer; . . .

XX. O youth, the remainder of your questions—a portion are covered in my writings, so seek them there; and setting down others in writing is forbidden: work by what you know, there will be revealed to you what you do not know.²

XXIII. . . . *These you are to avoid* are, *first*, do not argue with any one in any matter, as far as you are able, for in this is great mischief, and its evil is greater than its benefit, since it is the source of every blameworthy quality: such as hypocrisy and envy and pride and malice and enmity and boasting and other such. Of course, if there arises a question between you and an individual or group and it is your purpose in it that the truth should appear and not be lost, discussion is permissible. But there are two signs of such a desire, first that it makes no difference whether the truth is revealed by your tongue or the tongue of another; and second, that discussion in private is preferred by you rather than in public.

And listen, for here I call your attention to a helpful point: know that the question about obscure points is the presenting of the disease of the heart to a physician, and its answer is the attempt to cure his disease. And know that the ignorant are diseased in their hearts and the learned are the doctors, and the partially learned cannot perfect the treatment; and the perfectly learned does not treat every sick person, but every one who will, he hopes, accept the treatment and the cure. And if the weakness is chronic or fatal, (and) incurable, then he will not labor to give medicine, for this is a waste of time.

Then know that the *sickness of ignorance is of four sorts*, one curable and the others incurable. Of these which cannot be cured, [the *first*] is one whose question or objection arises from envy and hate, [and envy cannot be cured for it is a chronic weakness] and every time you answer him with the best or clearest or plainest answer, that only increases his rage and envy. And the way is not to attempt an answer.

One hopes for the removal of every enmity
Except enmity arising from envy.

So you must depart from him and leave him with his disease. Allah the Exalted said, "Withdraw from whoever turns away from our warning and desires nothing except the present life." And the envious, both in all he says and in all he does, kindles [a fire] in the sowing of his deed: as the Prophet said, Allah bless him and grant him peace, "Envy eats up excellences as fire eats up wood."

The *second*, whose weakness arises from stupidity, and he also is incurable. As 'Isa³ said, upon him be peace, "Indeed I did not fail in bringing the dead to life, but I failed in curing the stupid." And he is the man who has busied himself in seeking knowledge a short time and has learned something of the sciences of the intellect and of the sacred law, and so he asks questions and raises objections in his stupidity before the very learned one who has spent his life in the sciences of the intellect and the sacred law, and so this very stupid fellow does not know, And thinks that what is obscure to him is also obscure to the highly learned; and since he does not think this much, his question arises from stupidity, and you must not attempt to answer him.

² When Dawud Ta'I had acquired learning and become a famous authority, he went to Abu Hanîfah and said to him: "What shall I do now?" Abu Hanîfah replied: "Practice what you have learned, for theory without practice is like a body without a spirit." Hujwiri's *Kashf al-Mahjûb*, p. 95.

³ The Moslem world knows Jesus under the name of 'Îsa. In the Qur'an he is called 'Îsa, 'Îsa son of Miriam, and the Messiah. He is also described as the Word of God (4:169), a Spirit of God (4:170; 19:31), Prophet (19:31), Illustrious in this World and the Next (3:40), and One of those who have near access to God (3:40).

And the *third* is one who is seeking guidance and whatever he does not understand of the speech of the great ones, he lays to the defects of his own understanding and his question is in order to seek benefit; but he is dull and cannot arrive at the truth of things. You must not attempt to answer him also, as the Prophet, Allah bless him and give him peace, said, "We, the company of the prophets have been commanded that we speak to the people according to their understanding."

But the sickness which is curable is that of the intelligent and understanding seeker of guidance, who is not overcome with envy and anger and the love of worldly vanities and wealth and honor, but is seeking the straight road; and his questions and objections do not arise from envy and a desire to cause trouble and to make trial. And he is curable, and it is permitted to attempt to answer him—nay, it is necessary.

And the *second thing to avoid* is to guard against and shun becoming a preacher and warner, since its mischief is much unless you practice what you preach first and then preach it to the people; and consider what was said to 'Isa, upon him be peace, "O Son of Miriam, preach to yourself, and when you have preached to yourself, then preach to others; and otherwise, be ashamed before your Lord." And if you are impelled to try this work, then guard against two conditions: the first is affectation in speech in explanations and allusions and vehement cries and versification and poetry because Allah the Exalted hates pretention, and the person pretentious beyond bounds gives evidence of inner confusion and a heedless heart. . . .

. . . if you read or study science, it must be a science which corrects your heart and purifies your soul; as if you knew that your life would not be prolonged more than a week, necessarily you would not busy yourself in it in the science of jurisprudence and argumentation and rudimentary principles and scholastic theology and such like, because you know these sciences would not enrich you, but you would busy yourself in guarding your heart and in apprehending the attribute of the soul, and removal from the entanglements of the world, and the purification of your soul from the blameworthy moral qualities, and you would busy yourself in the love of Allah the Exalted and his worship, and in being distinguished with good qualities; and not a single day or night passes upon the worshipper but that it is possible his death may occur in it.