



Ostentation [*riyā*]

By Shaykh Muḥammad b. ‘Alawī al-Mālikī al-Ḥasanī¹ ﷺ

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The Messenger of Allah, the Salutations and Peace of Allah be upon him, named this ‘the small polytheism’ [*al-shirk al-asghar*]- that is, mild polytheism. Ostentation means to seek people’s respect, reverence and patronage through the performance of religious devotions such as praying, fasting, charity, *Hajj*, *Jihād*, the recitation of the Qur’ān and so forth. An ostentatious person’s deeds are rejected and his religious exertions are useless in the sight of Allah – even if he does not receive what he hopes for from other people.

Allah says: **“Whoever hopes for the meeting with his Lord, let him do righteous work, and, in the worship of his Lord, admit no one as a partner”².**

(And, He says): **“Whoever desires the harvest of the Hereafter, We give him increase in its harvest. And whoso desires the harvest of this world, we give him thereof, and he has no portion of the hereafter.”³**

(And, Allah says): **“Woe unto those who pray but who are heedless of their prayer. Who would be seen at prayer yet refuse (even) small kindnesses.”⁴**

¹ Shaykh Muḥammad b. ‘Alawī al-Mālikī al-Ḥasanī; *Qul: Hādhihi Sabīlī* [Eng. Say: This Is My Way]

² Qur’ān 18:110

³ Qur’ān 42:20

⁴ Qur’ān 107:4-7

The Prophet, the Salutations and Peace of Allah be upon him, said: “The Most Exalted said: ‘I am so self-sufficient that I am in no need of having an associate. Thus he who does an action for someone else's sake as well as Mine will have that action renounced by Me to him whom he associated with Me.’”⁵

And he, the Salutations and Peace of Allah be upon him, said “Whoever fasts to be seen has committed idolatry, whoever prays to be seen has committed idolatry, whoever gives in charity to be seen has committed idolatry.”⁶

And, “Whoever seeks the world through deeds of the next- Allah destroys his face, blots out his repute, and confirms his name for the Fire.”⁷

And he, the Salutations and Peace of Allah be upon him, said “Whoever likes people seeing him pray, and dislikes it when they are not present, has belittled his Lord, Most Blessed, Exalted.”⁸

Ostentation is a dangerous and destructive trait and one is obliged to take precautions against it. The worst type of ostentation is when the sole motive of a person's worship is to be seen and esteemed by other people. But there are also lesser types of ostentation. One may, through good deeds, hope to obtain nearness to Allah and the reward of the Hereafter but simultaneously seek praise and status because of them. This is an ugly trait that invalidates the reward for one's deeds. The heart of such a person is ugly, thwarted and imperilled. Such a person would be subject to punishment.

The believer must strive to combat every vestige of ostentation found in the self. The sole motive of one's religious performances should be attaining proximity to Allah and the reward of the hereafter. By having this as the only motive one will be purified of ostentation and be preserved from its evil, if Allah wills. Whenever one fears that one is acting ostentatiously, good deeds [done in public] should be lessened and be done in secret so as not to show the people. This is the more cautious and definitely better way. One should do them in secret until one does not fear acting ostentatiously in doing them in public. However, one should also make allowance for the perfectly sincere ones who display their good works in the hope that people will follow them. There are, of course, good deeds that people cannot do except in the open - such as participating in gatherings of knowledge, group prayer, *Hajj*, *Jihād* and so on. Whoever fears acting ostentatiously in carrying out such deeds should not

⁵ Narrated by Muslim, ibn Mājah and Mālik in the *Muwatta*.

⁶ Narrated by Imām Aḥmad.

⁷ Narrated by Daylamī, Ṭabarānī and Abu Nu'aym.

⁸ Related by Abul Ya'alā, 'Abdur Razzāq in the *Jāmi*' and by Bayhaqī in the *Shu'b*.

leave them- indeed he required to carry them out. But he must strive to combat the ostentation found in his self and seek Allah's help: He is an excellent Protector, an excellent Helper.

