

Letter 53

What follows is a letter he wrote to al-Ashtar al-Nakha'ī when he installed him [as governor] over Egypt and the surrounding lands as the government of its ruler, Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr—may God have mercy on him—was faltering. This is the longest letter he wrote, and it comprises the most gems.

In the Name of God, the All-Beneficent, the Ever-Merciful.

This is what the servant of God¹ and Commander of the Faithful 'Alī hereby charges Mālik ibn al-Ḥārith al-Ashtar² [to do] in his instructions to him, having assigned him to Egypt to collect the land

¹ *Servitude to God means freedom from servitude to any other than God. It is at once the ultimate expression of one's devotion and obedience to God and a source of the ultimate dignity and honor that God grants to his servants. The Qur'ān refers to the Prophets as "servants of God." It says, "Immaculate is he who made his servant journey by night..." (Qur'ān 17:1). It describes Noah, Abraham, Moses, Aaron, and Ilyās as being "among our believing servants" (Qur'ān 37:81, 37:111, 37:122, 37:132). It tells us that Jesus and the greatest of God's angels concede to God's servitude willingly (Qur'ān 4:172). Likewise, Imām 'Alī, in the first utterances of his address to his deputy, reminds himself and his audience that he is first and foremost a servant of God. At once, he demonstrates his humility, his loyalty, and his total lack of ulterior motive in all that he wishes to say.*

² *Mālik ibn al-Ḥārith al-Ashtar was arguably the most valuable of Imām 'Alī's companions. He was an exemplar of knowledge, faith, piety, courage, political savvy, eloquence, and moral excellence. Imām 'Alī said, "One never need fear that he will be weak or fail or act slowly where haste is needed nor act in haste where deliberation is needed." The following story demonstrates his character:*

Mālik passed through the market of Kūfah one day. As was the habit of poor people, he wore a tattered piece of canvas on his head in place of a turban. One merchant saw him and, in disdain, threw some vegetables at him. Mālik magnanimously controlled himself and did not even look at the man. A friend of the merchant's, who had recognized Mālik scolded his friend and asked if he hadn't recognized Mālik al-Ashtar, confidante of the Commander of the Faithful. The merchant was aghast at what he had done. He ran after Mālik to apologize to him. He finally caught up with him in the mosque. Mālik was praying, so the man waited on the side. As soon as Mālik finished his prayer, the merchant said, "Salām" and threw himself at Mālik's feet. Mālik lifted him up and asked him what he was doing. He replied, "I beg you to forgive me for a great sin I have committed." Mālik replied, "You are responsible for no sin against me, for I came to the mosque specifically to beg God to forgive you." (Muntahā al-Āmāl vol.1 p.340)

In 38 AH, after the battle of Šiffīn, Imām 'Alī had installed his step-son Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr as governor of Egypt. Muḥammad, who was born during the Prophet's last Hajj in 10 AH, was 28 years old. Mu'āwiyah sent 'Amr ibn al-Āṣ, Mu'āwiyah ibn Khudayj, and Abū al-A'war al-Sulamī to Egypt to ruin Muḥammad. As things worsened in Egypt, Imām 'Alī sent word to Mālik who was on assignment in Naṣībīn in the province of al-Jazīrah in northern Iraq near modern day Sinjār. His letter read:

You are among those whose support I seek to uphold the religion, with whom I break the airs of the sinners, with whom I fortify breaches from whence I fear [enemy infiltration]. I had installed Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr in Egypt, but some rebels have revolted and he is but a young boy, with little experience in war or in anything. So come to me so that we may consider what must be done. Install in your stead someone who is trustworthy and well-wishing. Wa al-salām. (al-Ghārāt vol.1 p.164)

In the meantime, the rebels succeeded in capturing Muḥammad; they slit his throat, and then stuffed his body into the carcass of an ass, and burned him. When news of his brutal murder reached Medīna, his step-sister 'Ā'ishah, was overwhelmed with grief. She swore to curse his murderers after every prayer. Imām 'Alī was also stricken with grief. He wrote the following letter to his governor in Baṣrah, 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abbās (who was also Muḥammad's maternal cousin):

Egypt has been sacked, and Muḥammad ibn Abī Bakr—may God have mercy on him—has been martyred. Let us seek our reward for his loss from God, for he was a well-wishing son, a tireless worker, a razor-sharp sword, and a cornerstone in the defense [of truth]. I urged the people to join with him, I ordered them to aid him before he was killed, and I called on them in secret and in public, [and that too] repeatedly. After all that, some came forth begrudgingly, others offered false excuses, and yet others held back and deserted him. I beg God to free me of them soon. I swear, if it were not for my desire for martyrdom when I meet my enemy and my readiness for death, I would have loved to live not a day longer with them or to ever meet them again. (Nahj al-balāghah sermon 35)

Imām 'Alī dispatched Mālik immediately telling him, "No one can handle Egypt except you." He wrote Letter 53 from Nahj al-balāghah replete with advice to his new governor. He also wrote the following letter to the people of Egypt and sent it ahead of Mālik:

tax, to war against its enemies, to improve the condition of its people and to engender prosperity in the region.³

He hereby charges him to fear God,⁴ to prefer obedience to him [over obedience to anyone else]; to follow whatever he has ordered in his Book⁵—both its obligations and recommendations⁶ <http://www.al-islam.org/anthology/2.htm - r4>—following which is the sole path to felicity⁷ and denying [or even]

I have dispatched to you one of God's servants who does not sleep when fear is rife, who does not cower before the enemy in times of terror. He is harsher with the sinner than the blazing fire. He is Mālik ibn al-Hārith, from the clan of Madhij. Listen to him and obey his commands if they accord with truth, for he is a sword among the swords of God whose blade never dulls... (Nahj al-balāghah sermon 38)

As Mālik set off for Egypt, Mu'āwiyah's spies informed him of his appointment. This distressed Mu'āwiyah, for he knew Mālik would be more difficult to handle than Muḥammad had been. So he sent word to the village head of a town called 'Arīsh who was one of his tax-collectors. He ordered him to poison Mālik on his way to Egypt. He offered his assassin tax exemption for 20 years in exchange. The village head presented Mālik with a gift of poisoned honey. He died almost immediately. His body was returned to Madīnah.

When news of his murder reached Imām 'Alī, he was stricken with grief. He mounted his pulpit and spoke:

To God do we belong and to him do we return. Praise is for God, Lord of all realms. O God, I seek my reward for his loss from you, for his death is one of the great calamities of our times. May God have mercy on Mālik, for he upheld his oath and fulfilled his pledge [to lay down his life for Islam] and now he has met his Lord... (Muntahā al-Āmāl vol.1 p.342)

He met with the elders from the tribe of Nakha' to convey his condolences. When they came to him, they found him grieving. He said, "May God bless Mālik. What can I say about Mālik? By God, if he had been a mountain, he would have been a towering peak. And if he had been a rock, he would have been solid. Not a horse would climb over him, and not a bird would soar over him" (Nahj al-balāghah saying 443). He said, "Mālik was for me what I was for the Messenger of God" (Tuhfat al-ahbāb p.428). One of the members of the tribe of Nakha' said that Imām 'Alī was so severely affected by Mālik's death, that "we almost thought we were the one's giving him our condolences" (Ā'yān al-shī'ah vol.9 p.39).

Imām 'Alī later said about Mālik's death, "In life, he vanquished the Syrians, and in death he vanquished the Kūfans" (Ā'yān al-shī'ah vol.9 p.39). He looked beseechingly at his remaining companions and said, "I wish there were even two among you like him; rather, I wish there was even one among you like him" (Tuhfat al-ahbāb p.428).

³ As governor, Mālik will have four main areas of responsibility. First, he must procure funding for his government by collecting regular taxes. Second, he must defend his people against their enemies through political and military means. Third, he must foster a healthy society based on law and order and sound moral principles. Lastly, he must work to foster agricultural and economic prosperity.

⁴ *Taqwā* is a state in which one is keenly aware of God's constant presence and perpetually concerned about displeasing him. It comes from the word *wiqāyah* meaning "to protect." This word is used in the *Qur'ān* in three ways: 1) to protect oneself from hellfire, sin, or the Day of Judgment. 2) to fear, or to be aware of, God. 3) to abstain from sin. Both the second and third meanings fit in this context; however, the third meaning is best since it is coupled with its counterpart: obedience to God's commandments.

⁵ We would expect Imām 'Alī to couple his exhortation to fear God with one to obey God's commandments. He does this, but with an added twist. He earmarks two vital aspects of obedience to God. First, we must obey only God, and never couple his obedience with obedience to anyone else, unless of course sanctioned by God himself. Second, our obedience to him and observance of his orders must be complete such that we obey the entirety of his commandments and not only those that appeal to our sensibilities or are easy for us.

⁶ The terms *farīdah* and *sunnah* take on different connotations in different contexts. Most often, *farīdah* refers to any of God's laws that are mentioned in the *Qur'ān*, whether obeying them be obligatory or simply recommended. Likewise, *sunnah* refers to any of God's laws that are mentioned in the traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad and the twelve Imams after him whether obeying them be obligatory or simply recommended (see *Islamic Texts Institute's* commentary on *al-Kāfi* 1.2.2.1). However, in the current context, *farīdah* and *sunnah* are both referring to laws mentioned in "his Book." Accordingly, *farīdah* must refer to what is obligatory and *sunnah* to what is recommended within the *Qur'ān*.

⁷ This phrase is an explicit rejection of pluralism. It also leaves no room for alternative forms of worship. God, more than anyone, wants us to attain eternal felicity. As our guide, it makes no sense for him to keep hidden from us anything that is vital for us to succeed. Thus, all that we need to attain salvation is found in the *Qur'ān*, and by extension, in the example of the Prophet and Imāms. Nothing else can serve this purpose, and is thus an innovation and prohibited.

forsaking which is the sole cause for wretchedness;⁸ to aid [the cause of] God—immaculate is he—with his hand, his heart, and his tongue,⁹ for he—majestic is his name—has guaranteed that he will aid whoever aids him¹⁰ and honor whoever honors him.¹¹ And he hereby charges him to restrain his carnal soul when its desires [are incensed] and to check it when it bolts [like a wild stallion], for one’s carnal soul incites one to evil, except when God has mercy.¹²

Mālik, you should know that I am sending you to lands over which governments, just and unjust alike, have ruled before you.¹³ People [there] will examine the same aspects of your affairs that you were wont to examine of the rulers before you, and they will speak about you just as you were wont to speak about them.¹⁴ And [you should pay heed to what they say because] the righteous are only discovered by that which God causes to be spoken in their favor by the tongues of his [righteous] servants.¹⁵ Thus,¹⁶

⁸ Denying the commandments of God obviously leads to wretchedness. In addition, Imām ‘Alī mentions, that merely “forsaking” the commandments, after having accepted them as divine, is also cause for wretchedness. This holds true, as his statement reveals, for God’s “obligations and recommendations.” That does not mean, that one must act on every recommendation in divine law, for then there would be no difference between obligations and recommendations. Rather, “forsaking” a recommended act would entail holding it in contempt, ignoring it as something trivial, and failing to act on it without any legitimate excuse.

⁹ God, who is self-sufficient and omnipotent, needs nothing, least of all the aid of men. Thus, aid to God is better understood as aid to his cause and his creatures. This aid can be executed by any of three human faculties: the heart, the tongue, and the hand. To aid God’s cause with our hearts we must align ourselves rationally and emotionally with his cause such that we love all that promotes his cause—foremost of which are faith and righteousness—and hate all that hinders it—foremost of which are disbelief and sin. To aid his creatures with our hearts, we must imbue ourselves with compassion for them and an eagerness to help them. To aid God’s cause with our tongue and hand we speak out and act in support of all that promotes his cause and against all that hinders it.

¹⁰ This phrase is an allusion to the verses, “God helps whoever helps him” (*Qur’ān* 22:40) and “If you help God, he shall help you and make your feet firm” (*Qur’ān* 22:78).

¹¹ This phrase is not a clear allusion to any particular verse of the *Qur’ān*, however, God has promised to recompense all goodness with goodness when he said, “Is there any recompense for goodness other than goodness?” (55:60).

¹² This clause is an allusion to 12:53.

¹³ To find an unjust government, we need not delve too far into Egypt’s history. ‘Amr ibn al-‘Ās, the conqueror of Egypt used his post as a front to amass a sizeable personal estate. Further back in time, we find the government of the Pharaoh of Moses whose government was the very embodiment of injustice. We are harder pressed to find a just government in Egypt’s history. Certainly, Imām ‘Alī is not referring to any of the governments of his predecessor ‘Uthmān. The one just government that we know existed in Egypt was the one in which Prophet Joseph participated and over which he possibly presided.

¹⁴ Imām ‘Alī provides Mālik with an excellent standard to evaluate himself as a ruler. He must hold himself to the same standards to which he held his predecessors and be as critical of himself as he was of them. Thus, he earmarks the virtue of introspection and the importance of maintaining a single standard for evaluation of the self and others.

¹⁵ In this exhortation, Imām ‘Alī provides Mālik with a second standard to evaluate himself as a ruler. He encourages him to heed the opinions of others as a standard of his own effectiveness or lack thereof. This statement seems to be in stark contrast to his advice to Imām al-Hasan where he said, “Do not let people’s censure overwhelm you while you fight for [the pleasure of] God” (*Nahj al-balāghah* letter 31), and to Imām al-Bāqir’s advice to Jābir ibn Yazīd al-Ju‘fī: “You must know that you cannot be our devotee until you are not saddened when everyone in your city colludes against you and says you are an evil man, and until you are not gladdened when they say you are a good man. Rather compare yourself to the book of God. If you are traveling in synch with it: you abstain when it says abstain, you seek when it says seek, and you fear what it says fear; then remain constant and receive glad tidings, for what is said about you cannot harm you” (*Bihār al-anwār* vol. 75 p. 162 chapter 22, tradition 1). In short, should we heed others’ opinion about us or not?

The secret to solving this conundrum is found in the pronoun “his” in the phrase “his servants.” While the opinion of common people, the lay masses has no bearing on one’s status before God, the opinion of God’s righteous servants does. They are righteous themselves, and they are aware of the correct standards for evaluating people, thus if they speak well of you it is an indication of your merit and if they speak critically of you, it is an indication of your failing.

¹⁶ i.e. Since you are going to be the object of great criticism both internally and from your subjects, do not act as your unjust predecessors have acted, and do not covet treasures of worldly wealth; rather, let the treasures...

[since your every action will be scrutinized] let the treasures you covet most be treasures of good deeds.¹⁷ In particular, control your carnal desires and be stingy with yourself in giving it what is not lawful for it.¹⁸ [To do so is good] because being stingy with yourself is tantamount to being moderate with what you like and dislike.¹⁹

Infuse your heart with mercy, love, and kindness for your subjects. Do not be a voracious predator stalking them, seeking an opportunity to devour them, for they are in [one of] two categories: they are either your brothers in Islam or [God's] creatures like you.²⁰ Sometimes they slip, sometimes they are weak, and they perpetrate things intentionally and by mistake. So grant them your pardon and forgiveness just as you would like God to grant you his pardon and forgiveness.²¹ For you [have power]

¹⁷ Those who have passed before used their power to amass treasures of material wealth. You must also use your power to amass treasures, but let your coffers be filled with good deeds, not ill gotten material wealth.

¹⁸ The foremost of the good deeds that Mālik should amass in his treasury of good deeds is self-restraint, such that he does not let his desires overpower his intellect.

¹⁹ Imām 'Alī used a harsh phrase in the previous sentence: "be stingy with yourself." Upon hearing this phrase, we might come away with the feeling that the Imām is advocating an extreme form of self-denial in which we must refuse ourselves every pleasure. To preempt such a wrong understanding, he clarifies his intent by mentioning a variation of the golden rule of moderation. By exhorting us to refrain from all that is illicit, he is not advocating extremism, but rather moderation. Our carnal souls like many things and dislike many things. They like delicious foods and fine clothing and sensual pleasures, and dislike foul foods and drab clothing and pain and discomfort. Among these things that we like and dislike, some are *ḥalāl* (permissible) and others are *ḥarām* (illicit). To be extreme would be to indulge in all that we like or deny ourselves all that we like without regard for their legal ruling. To do so would be foolhardy, since our likes and dislikes have little bearing on what is harmful and beneficial for us. As God says, "It is likely that you dislike something when it is better for you; and it is likely that you like something when it is worse for you" (*Qur'ān* 2:216). Here the Imām informs us that the preferred path is one of moderation, where we do some of the things that we like and refrain from others. As for the standard for which to do and which to avoid, he advises us to use the legal ruling. Thus, while stinginess with oneself may sound like extremism, it is in reality the path of moderation.

²⁰ This sentence is often misconstrued as an affirmation of equal, inalienable rights for all human beings regardless of belief and action. Neither the context in which it occurs nor Islamic teachings in general confirm such an interpretation. In the Islamic worldview, no rights are inalienable. God has created us and only he has inalienable rights. His creatures only have rights to the extent that he has granted them rights (*Miṣbāh Yazdī, Nazariyyeh-ye huqūq-e islām* p.276-302). The context of this statement of Imām 'Alī, insofar as he is admonishing Mālik with regard to his subjects, confirms only that the subjects of an Islamic state have equal standing before the law, not that all human beings have inalienable rights. Whether a person is a Muslim, a *dhimmī* (a Christian or Jew who has agreed to abide by certain laws and pay a tax called the *jizyah*), or a *mu'āhad* (any other person who has a legally binding agreement with the Islamic state that entitles him to live in peace in its borders), insofar as he is a citizen of the state, is entitled to the rights of citizenship: due process in a court of law, protection of life and property, and dignity, to name a few. These rights must be guarded equally for all citizens. For instance, an Islamic state does not have the right to rule in favor of Muslims when all evidence points in favor of a *dhimmī*. Imām 'Alī himself, was an exemplar of such equality. It is narrated that he once lost a piece of armor and then saw it in the possession of a Christian. He took the Christian to court and presented his case to the judge. The judge correctly determined that Imām 'Alī was the plaintiff and must accordingly present evidence to incriminate the defendant. Imām 'Alī said that he had no evidence to support his claim. Accordingly the judge dismissed the case and ruled in favor of the Christian. Later, the Christian came to Imām 'Alī and praised his government for being so just as to put a Christian on equal footing with the caliph himself. He admitted that the armor was not his own, returned it to the Imām, and declared that he would become Muslim (*Muṭabbarī, Dāstān-e Rāstān* vol.1 p.34). In another instance, Imām 'Alī took a Jew to court during the caliphate of 'Umar. When 'Umar addressed Imām 'Alī with the epithet "Abū al-Ḥasan" out of respect, but addressed the Jew by his ordinary name, Imām 'Alī became angry at 'Umar for having failed to maintain strict equality between both parties. (*Miṣbāh Yazdī, Nazariyyeh-ye huqūq-e islām* p.299).

²¹ A ruler's clemency must not infringe upon his justice. In general, where a wrong is committed against the ruler himself such as a personal insult or a breach of personal trust, he has the prerogative to forgive the perpetrator. However, if the wrong threatens the integrity of his government or if it is committed against another entity, it is the ruler's duty to bring the perpetrator to justice.

over them, and he who rules over you [has power] over you, and God [has power] over him who installed you.²² He has asked you to fulfill their needs [through good governance], and he is testing you through them. And do not set yourself up to war against God [by acting harshly toward them], for neither do you have the power to withstand his vengeance, nor are you in a position to forgo his pardon and mercy.²³ Never feel remorse for having pardoned [your subjects for their mistakes] or exult at having punished [them albeit justly].²⁴

Do not hasten [on an angry impulse] to an act for which you can find an alternative.²⁵

Never say, “I am vested with authority, when I give orders I shall be obeyed,” for surely that will corrupt your heart, enfeeble your faith, and bring about changes [in your fate].²⁶ When²⁷ the position of authority in which you find yourself engenders in you arrogance or self-conceit,²⁸ then look to the magnitude of God’s dominion who[se authority] is above yours and to his power over affairs of yours over which you yourself have no power,²⁹ for this will subdue some of your haughtiness, restrain some of

²² This sentence serves as a reminder to Mālik that his fate lies in the hands of one who is concerned with the fate of his people. If he is merciful, loving, and kind to them, he will be merciful, loving, and kind to him. And if he is harsh and severe, then he should expect no less harshness and severity from God.

²³ This sentence is a continuation of his previous admonishment to be merciful with his subjects. If Mālik is severe and harsh with his subjects, then he is setting himself up for war with God himself, for God is the protector of the weak and the avenger of the oppressed. If he oppresses his subjects, God will do two things: he will take revenge on him on their behalf, and he will withhold his mercy and forgiveness, and Mālik is in no position to withstand the former or forgo the latter.

²⁴ Assuming Mālik has acted on the Imām’s advice, he will have pardoned many of his subjects for their mistakes and shortcomings out of mercy for them. He will also have carried out punishments against those who deserved it for their actions. Of the former subjects, it is likely that some did not learn their lesson and have repeated the same mistakes. However, this should not concern Mālik, since the greatest beneficiary of pardoning is the pardoner himself, for each act of forgiveness gives him greater strength to subjugate his own anger. Thus, he has not lost, and so he should not feel regret. As for those whom Mālik has justly punished, he should not exult and gloat, for then he will be feeding the flames of personal revenge rather than justice.

²⁵ I have not found any clear connection between this admonishment and what comes before and after it. However, in and of itself, it is powerful advice for a leader to practice forbearance. One with little intellect acts impulsively on his anger. Categorically, if we practice forbearance, and restrain ourselves until we can examine the situation clearly we will find alternatives that yield a more productive result than our original hasty inclination.

²⁶ The cancer of government is for a ruler to see himself as the ultimate authority, to believe that he must be obeyed unconditionally. Even the Prophet has no such inherent authority to rule. His authority only lasts as long as he remains loyal to God’s cause. For this reason, God threatens the Prophet saying, “Had he falsely attributed any teachings to us, we would have seized him in our right hand and then severed his jugular vein, and none of you could have staved us off from him.” (Qur’ān 69:44-48).

When a ruler falls into this trap, he faces three consequences: first, he corrupts his own heart by imbibing his ego with the euphoria of power; second, to the extent that his ego grows, his willingness to serve God and religion decreases; third, as he begins to fancy himself as a rival to God, God strips him of his blessings and lays the groundwork for his demise.

²⁷ It is notable that Imām ‘Alī uses the subordinating conjunction “when” rather than the conditional “if.” It is as though he knows that Mālik, and every other ruler, will inevitably face these challenges.

²⁸ There is a subtle difference between arrogance (*ubbahab* or *kibr*) and self-conceit (*makhīlah* or *‘ujb*). In self-conceit we feel content, even pleased with ourselves, and imagine that we have achieved perfection, if only in a single quality or act. Most egregious of all, we feel that our perfection is wholly of our own doing as Qārūn famously said, “I have only been given [this vast wealth] because of knowledge I possess” (Qur’ān 28:78). Arrogance is similar to self-conceit. The main difference is that in arrogance we compare ourselves to others and feel that, because of our perfection, we are better than they. Both are carnal sins, and both are spiritually fatal.

²⁹ Looking to “the magnitude of God’s dominion” helps us to focus on God’s general lordship over all of his creation. Looking to “his power over your affairs” helps us to focus on his Lordship over us as individuals. These two levels of signs are reminiscent of the verses, “And on earth are signs for those who seek certainty, and within yourselves, so will you not look?” (Qur’ān 51:20-21).

your rage, and restore within you your intellect, which had [temporarily] abandoned you.³⁰ Beware of vying with God for greatness, which is solely his, and likening yourself to him in power over others, which is solely his, for God abases all who [falsely] assert power and humiliates all who are arrogant.³¹

Be fair to God [by repaying him for his blessings with obedience].³² And be fair to people [by giving them their due even if it means taking] from yourself or your close relatives or any among your subjects for whom you have affection.³³ For if you do not, you will have wronged [them]. And if you wrong God's creatures, then God himself will prosecute you on their behalf. And if God prosecutes you, he will silence your argument [and accept no excuse], and you will be at war with God unless you desist and repent.³⁴ Nothing alters the course of God's blessings or hastens his vengeance like incessant injustice, for God hears the cry of the oppressed, and lies in wait for the oppressor.³⁵

Let the policies dearest to you be those most moderate in [accomplishing what is] right,³⁶ that serve justice for the most people,³⁷ and that most completely procure the approval of your [common]

³⁰ After warning him of the pitfalls of power, Imām 'Alī provides him with a path to cure himself whenever he feels a bout of megalomania coming on. Only one who is blind can delude himself into believing he is independent of God in power. Even the greatest human power pales before God's omnipotence. Thus, the panacea for arrogance and self-conceit is to reflect on God's infinity and perfection, for then we see how insignificant we, our abilities, and all our qualities truly are.

³¹ In case his gentle approach was ineffective, the Imām resorts to a harsher approach. He warns us that if we do not realize our insignificance and weakness through reflection, God will make us realize through force, for he has no patience for arrogant slaves.

³² Here the Imām admonishes Mālik to adopt a comprehensive policy of justice in dealing with God and his creatures. It may seem odd to use the phrase, "be just or fair with God." We usually think of "justice" as the thing that those who have power do to those under them. We say "he is a just king," "he ruled with justice," etc. However, justice or fairness can be applied more broadly than that. We can be fair to our equals or to those above us just as easily as we can be fair to those below us.

Fairness is a concept that the intellect deems laudable even without any guidance from God. To be fair is inherently good. At first glance, being fair to God seems to be simple enough. If he has done something for us, in all fairness, we should do something for him. Perhaps it is the elegance of this proposition that compelled the Imām to use it, for the human intellect swiftly, naturally accepts it as true. In particular, he has bestowed certain favors on us, and in return expects that we obey his commandments.

Upon further contemplation, we see that being fair with God is not so simple. Repaying him for every favor is wholly impossible, for we cannot even fathom the extent of his favor. We realize what he has already told us: "If you count the blessings of God, you shall not be able to count them all" (Qur'ān 16:18). Thus, fairness with God is tantamount to complete indebtedness. No matter how much we obey him and serve him, we cannot begin to be fair to God. Nevertheless, our intellect compels us to try.

³³ The bane of anyone in power is self-interest. All too often a ruler places his self-interest and the interest of his family and friends above the interests of his subjects. He may turn a blind eye to crimes committed by them, or he may favor them with wealth and posts. The Imām urges Mālik to disregard his own self-interest as governor, to treat his subjects fairly, and to be willing to do justice even if that means ruling against himself, close relatives, or other close subjects. This is the call of the Qur'ān too: "when you speak, be fair, even if he (i.e. the person against whom you are speaking) is a relative" (6:152).

³⁴ Desisting from the wrongs committed implies righting those wrongs. For as long as the wrongs have not been righted, one is still a wrongdoer even if one does not commit any new wrongs.

³⁵ This is not to say that God will immediately depose and destroy every oppressor. It may be that an oppressor or oppressive government remains in power for years or generations. This is the result of the divine precedent of *imbāl* and *istidrāj*. In *imbāl*, God leaves wrongdoers to work their evil so they can realize their full potential of evil. In *istidrāj* he uses blessings as lures to lead them further and further down a path to their ultimate destruction.

³⁶ This phrase refers to the ruler's duty to look out for the common good by weighing benefit against cost. He might deem it necessary to build a bridge or a road to facilitate transportation. He must weigh this benefit against the possible harm to the environment through pollution and destruction of habitat. After weighing both sides, he should assume the path that is "most moderate" in that it maximizes benefit while inflicting the least harm.

³⁷ This phrase refers to the ruler's duty to settle conflicts among his subjects. Inevitably, societal life brings people's lives into close contact and their rights are mutually compromised. My right to talk may infringe on my neighbors right to enjoy

subjects, for the discontent of the common people overshadows the contentment of the elite, whereas the discontent of the elite is excusable with the contentment of the common people.³⁸ None of a ruler's subjects is more demanding upon him in [his times of] ease,³⁹ less helpful to him in [his times of] hardship,⁴⁰ more adverse to [the deliverance of] justice, more importunate in its demands, more ungrateful when indulged, slower to pardon when refused, and more deficient in its patience during the calamities of time than the elite. Whereas the bulwark of the religion, the [mainstay of] Muslim solidarity, and the reserves with which to face the enemy lie only with the common people of your community, so let your inclination be toward them and with them.

Let the most estranged and despised of your subjects be he who most avidly seeks out people's faults. For [inevitably] people have faults, and the ruler ought to be the first person to conceal them.⁴¹ Thus, do not [seek to] expose those faults which are hidden from you, for your duty is only to cleanse what is apparent to you.⁴² [It is] God [who] will judge what is hidden from you.⁴³ So conceal faults as much as you can and God will conceal what faults of yours you would like concealed from your subjects.⁴⁴

relative quiet. Her right to dress as she wants may infringe on my right to look around without being tempted by someone dressed indecently. In instances where rights infringe upon one another, it is the ruler's duty to adopt policies that best serve justice to the most people so that the most people can enjoy the most rights.

³⁸ This paragraph has strong overtones of democracy, seemingly praising the common people and deprecating the elite. On the other hand, there are traditions from Imām 'Alī that seem to be deprecating the common people. For instance, he said, when a criminal was brought before him and with him came a madding crowd, "I extend no welcome to faces not seen except at shameful occurrences" (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 200). He has also said, "People are of three kinds: the Godly scholar, the student on the path to salvation, and [veritable] gnats, senseless masses, followers of every shepherd; they sway with every breeze; neither have they been enlightened with the light of knowledge [like the scholar], nor have they leaned on a sturdy column [like the student]" (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 147). Even the *Qur'ān* tells us, "If you obey the majority of those on earth, they will lead you away from the way of God. They follow nothing but conjectures, and they do nothing but surmise." (*Qur'ān* 6:116). At first glance, it seems Imām 'Alī holds two contradictory sentiments toward the "masses." However, upon further scrutiny, we find that there is no contradiction at all. Where he deprecates them, it is because of their ignorance and foolish tendencies. Mobs tend to act on pure emotional fury. People who are not actively engaged in religious learning are ignorant of the teachings of Islam, and they follow anyone who strikes their fancy without attention to standards of truth and falsehood. In letter 53, on the other hand, he divides people based not on a standard of knowledge and ignorance, but on a standard of special interests and the common man. Presumably, religious scholars and others actively engaged in Islamic learning would be included among the common man, not the special interests. It is the job of government to fulfill the greatest good for the most people, not to satisfy the appetites of the elite and deprive the masses. That is not to say, that the government should pay heed to the whims and fancies of the masses, for they are fickle and baseless. However, it must serve their real interests if it is to succeed in fulfilling its role.

³⁹ They are fair weather friends who want to milk the ruler while he still has milk to give.

⁴⁰ When the ruler needs help most, the elite will not sacrifice their own interests to aid him. More likely, they will abandon him and throw their support behind the next ruler.

⁴¹ Inevitably, human beings have faults. These faults could range from minor character flaws to major sins. Out of his mercy, God keeps the overwhelming majority of these faults hidden from the view of others. This is one of his divine precedents, which has given rise to his name, *sattār al-'ayūb*, "The Concealer of Faults." God has chosen to treat us so graciously to allow us to save face and correct ourselves without losing our honor and dignity in the eyes of others. We are enjoined through traditions such as this to emulate this divine precedent, to conceal the faults of others by refraining from seeking them out, by turning a blind eye to them if we learn of them, and by refraining from informing others of them. These are duties incumbent upon all people. However, a ruler ought to take the lead in this matter since his precedent will set the course for how his subjects treat the faults of others.

⁴² You might wonder what is to become of the institution of enjoining good and forbidding evil if we are to conceal each other's faults. If I am to forbid you from committing an evil act, must I not first determine that you have committed the act and then confront you over it? Then how can I conceal it and pretend it never happened. Imām 'Alī hints at the answer in this sentence. We are forbidden to seek out hidden faults by spying and delving into others' affairs. God says, "And do not

*Untie the knots of rancor in [the hearts of] people, and cut the fetters of rancor from your own [heart].*⁴⁵

*Remain aloof of all matters that are not clear to you.*⁴⁶

*Do not hasten to believe an informer, for an informer is ill-willed even if he seems to be well-wishing.*⁴⁷

*Do not bring into your counsel a miser who steers you away from [the] virtue [of generosity] and threatens you with [forebodings of] poverty; or a coward who enfeebles you in all [your] affairs; or a coveter who makes voracity for injustice seem appealing. [I warn you about these three,] for miserliness, cowardice, and covetousness are three different temperaments that all stem from cynicism toward God.*⁴⁸

spy” (49:12). However, if a person’s faults are exposed because he has committed his sin in public, for instance, then we must evaluate the situation more carefully. If the person is penitent and embarrassed by his fault, then we should do what we can to help him save face. We should avoid letting him know that we know. We should do what we can to cover for him and offer excuses for him so that he can maintain his dignity in his critical position. If on the other hand, the person is not penitent, and he persists in his fault, then it is our duty to help him. As a ruler, we may be compelled to punish him or simply reprimand him according to the circumstance. As a fellow Muslim, we would be compelled to forbid him from his evil assuming all the prerequisites for forbidding evil are fulfilled.

⁴³ While God is *sattār al-‘ayūb*, he is also *‘allām al-ghayūb*, “The Knower of the Unseen.” It is he who will judge the person for his faults and either forgive him or punish him based on his infinite knowledge and wisdom.

⁴⁴ As added incentive, the Imām promises Mālik that God will reward him for concealing the faults of others by concealing his own faults—which he inevitably has—from them. Two traditions are worth noting here. It is transmitted that “a person will be brought forward on the Day of Judgment who is weeping. God will ask him, “Why do you weep?” He will reply, “I weep because my faults will soon be exposed before all people and angels.” God will tell him, “O servant, I never disgraced you in the temporal world by exposing your faults and sins while you sinned against me and then laughed. The why would I disgrace you today by exposing your faults and sins while you have sinned against me and now weep?” (*Jāmi’ al-sa’ādāt* vol.2 p.73 under the heading *Satr al-‘ayūb*). In another tradition, “The Messenger of God asks God on the Day of Judgment not to reckon his people in the presence of the angels, messengers, and other communities so that their faults are not exposed before all of them. Rather, he should reckon them in such a way that nobody except him and God know their sins. At this God will say, ‘O My Beloved, I am more compassionate to my servants than you are. While you dislike exposing their sins to other than yourself, I dislike exposing them to you too. Thus, I shall reckon them by myself such that no one other than myself comes to know of their faults’” (*ibid.*)

⁴⁵ The word *ḥiqd* refers to rancor or a grudge. It is deep-seated ill-will for past wrongs, real or imagined, left unresolved. Here Imām ‘Alī advises Mālik to address these grudges, and in so doing, to free his people and himself from the strangulating hold of these bad feelings. The resolution of this rancor could take on different forms. He may admonish his people on the harms of harboring rancor and the benefit of being free. Or he may bring warring factions together to promote dialogue and resolution.

⁴⁶ It is foolhardy to take a stance on issues before it is clear what is right and what is wrong. Especially, if taking a stance involves assigning blame or taking aggressive action. If a leader must act, he must be sure. If he cannot be sure, he is better off not acting.

⁴⁷ A *sā’ir* or “informer” is one who collects incriminating information about people and offers it to the government. Such people may appear to wish the best for the government, but they are really self-serving and opportunistic. They may offer you information today, but tomorrow they may offer information about you to your enemies.

⁴⁸ A miser is cynical about God’s provision. He does not trust that God will provide for him as he has promised to provide for every creature. So he feels he must stingily guard whatever he has in case tomorrow brings hard times. The coward is cynical about God’s aid and support. He fears that God will leave him out on a limb and abandon him. So he refuses to initiate anything, no matter how good it may be. The coveter is cynical about what God has given him. No matter how great God’s gifts, he thinks them few and insignificant, so he desires more and more and is never content with what he has.

The Prophet Muḥammad has uttered the following words about being optimistic with God (*ḥusn al-zann bi Allāh*): “By the one other than whom there is no god, if a believer thinks optimistically about God, God will be as he has thought him to be because God is kind and all goodness is in his hands. He would feel ashamed if his servant who believes in him were to

The worst of your ministers⁴⁹ is he who was a minister to the evil [rulers] who preceded you and was accomplice to their crimes. So do not take him as your intimate, for [such as] him are aides to criminals and brethren of the unjust. [Furthermore] you shall find replacements better than they from among those whose thinking and influence are like theirs but who do not bear their sins and crimes; who have not aided the unjust in their injustices or the criminals in their crimes. These [replacements] shall be less demanding of you, more helpful to you, more compassionate to you, and less intimate with anyone other than you.⁵⁰ Thus, take them as your intimates in your private and public gatherings. Then let the choicest of them be he who most readily tells you the bitter truth, and least supports you in activities that God dislikes of his friends; [and he does so] without regard for how it rubs you.⁵¹

Keep the company of those who have self-restraint and are truthful. Moreover, encourage them and habituate them not to praise you exorbitantly and not to flatter you baselessly for things you have not done;⁵² for exorbitant praise will give rise to haughtiness and bring [you] to the brink of exultance.⁵³

...[unfinished]

think optimistically of him, and he were to disappoint him in his optimism and hope. So be optimistic about God and love him” (Mizān al-hikmah v.4 p.1788).

⁴⁹ *It is interesting that Imam ‘Alī assumes that Mālik will assimilate the incumbent ministers into his government rather than immediately dissolve the old cadre of ministers and replace them with new ones. He provides Mālik with a short term plan of expediency: to keep his distance from evil ministers; and a long term plan: to replace them with those who have all their strengths and none of their criminal record.*

⁵⁰ *These two qualities imply loyalty.*

⁵¹ *It is a challenge for those in power to find advisors who are frank and sincere. Most people fear the backlash of delivering frank criticism, especially when the object of their criticism has the power to retaliate. Only a minister with exceptional courage and integrity will take up such a challenge. And only a ruler who is sincere in his desire to improve himself will tolerate and even encourage such a minister.*

⁵² *This phrase is reminiscent of the following verse: “Do not consider those who exult over their actions and love to be praised for what they have not done—do not consider them to have escaped from the punishment. For them is a painful punishment” (Qur’ān 3:188).*

⁵³ *Praising people in their presence, whether sincerely or in flattery, is highly deplorable. The Prophet Muḥammad forbade praise and said, “Cast dirt in the face of those who praise” (Man lā yaḥḍuruhu al-faḡīḥ vol.4 p.11). It is reported that both al-Miqdād ibn al-Aswad and Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī acted on this tradition when they respectively heard a person praising ‘Uthmān to his face (see Mizān al-hikmah and Bahj al-ṣabāḡḡah vol.6 p.295). Imam ‘Alī once said to a person who praised another to his face, “You have killed the man, may God kill you” (Bahj al-ṣabāḡḡah vol.6 p.295).*

The reason for this strong condemnation of praise is that it fosters pride and conceit in the one who is praised, combatting which is one of the most difficult battles a person must fight.