

Letter 31

[The following is] one of his exhortations,¹ which he wrote to al-Hasan ibn ‘Alī² at Ḥādirayn as he returned from Şifḥīn:

From a father³ on the brink of extinction, who cedes [victory] to time,⁴ who has put a lifetime behind himself, who submits to [the vicissitudes of] time,⁵ who denigrates the temporal world,⁶ who dwells in the abode of the dead,⁷ and shall depart from it tomorrow.

To a son⁸ who hopes for what he shall never attain,⁹ who treads on the heels of those who have perished, who is a target for disease,¹⁰ a hostage of time, a target for tribulation, a

¹ The word *waṣīyyah* is sometimes used for a “testament” written by a dying person to advise his heirs what to do after his death. However, it is used here to mean an “exhortation” or “admonition.”

² Some phrases in the introduction to the exhortation seem inappropriate for an immaculate imam (in particular, “a bondman of the temporal world, a merchant [trading] in the [goods of] deception...who has been pinned down by desires”). Accordingly, some have argued that the exhortation is addressed to Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafīyyah not Imām al-Ḥasan, since in some transmissions, it is narrated as being addressed to the former. Others have argued that its being addressed to Imām al-Ḥasan evinces that the imams are not immaculate. The latter conclusion is obviously wrong. We have solid rational and textual proof of their infallibility that cannot be shaken by singular phrases in a tradition. Keeping this tenet firmly fixed in our hearts, we are faced with two solutions to this dilemma: either we must concede that the tradition is addressed to Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafīyyah, who, despite his greatness, was fallible; or we must admit that we have not understood these introductory attributes of Imām ‘Alī’s addressee. In any case, what is beyond a shred of doubt is that the exhortation is replete with invaluable wisdom. As one scholar put it, “If it were ever necessary to etch any words of wisdom in gold, it is this exhortation” (quoted in *Bihār al-anwār* vol. 74, p.196, tradition 1).

³ A counselor must possess two important qualifications: intimate experience and a sincere concern for his advisee’s best interests. It is to establish the first of these two qualifications that Imām ‘Alī introduces himself with these seven attributes, which portray him as one who has lived long, faced every trial, and understood his enemy intimately. He establishes his right to the second qualification in the third paragraph where he expresses his strong love and concern for his son. The result of all this is to increase the efficacy of his exhortation on his son, and as a consequence, on us.

⁴ As he is powerless to halt it or turn it back, he concedes to its incessant onslaught.

⁵ By submitting to time, he allows it to do with him as it wishes and to bring with it what death, sickness, and tribulation it may.

⁶ In saying number 131 of *Nahj al-balāghah*, upon hearing a man speak ill of the temporal world, Imām ‘Alī says, “You who denigrate the world, yet are fooled by its guiles and taken in by its false [promises]. Do you let yourself be fooled by the world and then proceed in denigrating it? Are you its accuser or is it your accuser?” It seems strange that he would attribute to himself the very attribute that he censured in that man. However, he did not censure the man for denigrating the temporal world, but for his hypocrisy in denigrating it in public while allowing himself to be taken in by its guiles. He was blaming the world for his own faults and not recognizing its many blessings. Imām ‘Alī, on the hand, denigrates the temporal world without submitting to its trickery and while recognizing and making the best of its blessings.

⁷ One who dwells in the abode of those who have died should expect to encounter a similar fate. The Qur’ān constantly calls on us to realize that the world we live in was inhabited by generations before and will soon pass to subsequent generations. Our stay in it is brief, so we must not put much stock in it. For instance, the Qur’ān says, “...and you dwell in the abodes of those who wronged themselves...” (Qur’ān 14:45).

⁸ One only takes admonition to heart if he is humble, willing to take criticism seriously. To foster this attitude in his son, Imām ‘Alī attributes to him these strong traits.

⁹ Young people are more imaginative and less aware of life’s limitations; accordingly, their hopes are more idealistic. This is a natural tendency fostered by youth, since hopes and aspirations are what drive us to grow and develop. However, when these hopes become far-fetched, they make us lose sight of the ephemeral nature of the temporal world, and make us forget about death and beyond. These are the hopes that are reprehensible.

bondman of the temporal world,¹¹ a merchant [trading] in the [goods of] deception,¹² who owes a debt to fate,¹³ who is a prisoner of death, a cohort for worries, a companion for grief, a target erected for plagues, who has been pinned down by desires, and is heir to the dead.¹⁴

Thereafter, I say: Among the things I have ascertained from the temporal world's retreat, the assault of [the vicissitudes of] time, and the advance of the hereafter, are realities that prevent me from thinking of anyone but myself and worrying about anything beyond my affairs. However, as I stand face to face with my worries—not the worries of others—and my mind speaks to me truthfully and diverts me from my desires, and the very core of my concerns becomes manifest and draws me into a state of seriousness untainted by jest, and honesty untainted by lies, I find you to be a part of me. Rather, I find that you are all of me, such that anything afflicting you would afflict me, as though if death visited you, it would be visiting me. Thus, your affairs concern me as my own affairs concern me, so I hereby write this letter and depend on it [to guide you] whether I remain or perish.

So I admonish you, my dear son, to fear God¹⁵ and abide by his commandments¹⁶ [by] filling your heart with his remembrance and holding fast to his lifeline. What bond can be more tenacious than the bond between you and God, if only you grab hold of it?

Enliven your heart with admonition, and kill it with abstemiousness.¹⁷ Fortify it with certainty, and enlighten it with wisdom.¹⁸ Tame it with the remembrance of death, and force it

¹⁰ Saying 191 of *Nahj al-balāghah* reads, “The state of man in this world is that of a target continually shot at by various kinds of death, and booty that afflictions rush to snatch up. With every sip he may gag; with every morsel he may choke...”

¹¹ A bondman or a slave is one who is bound to the will and command of his master. Against his own will, he must submit to his master's whim. Similarly, the lot of man in the temporal world is that of a slave, bound to the will of his worldly master. He must submit to its laws, and may not escape except through death.

¹² This is an allusion to the verse, “The temporal life is nothing but the goods of deception” (Qur'an 3:185). And since “the temporal world is a market” in which “some have profited and others have lost” (*Tuhaf al-'uqūl*, the last saying narrated from Imām al-Hādī), all who live therein are merchants dealing in its “goods of deception” that seem so lasting and appealing, but are actually fleeting.

¹³ That debt is his life, which he must give up when his time is over.

¹⁴ Regardless who the specific addressee of this letter is, it addresses all humankind insofar as we are human. What is striking about these introductory phrases is the pessimistic image that they draw of humankind. *Nahj al-balāghah* is filled with such characterizations as is the Qur'an. For instance, the latter says, “Man was created weak” (4:28). It also says, “Man has always been hasty” (17:11). It also says, “Man was created covetous: fretful when an ill befalls him, and selfish when good reaches him (70:19-21). It also says, “Man has been the most disputatious of creatures” (18:54). It also says, “As for man, whenever his Lord tests him and then honors and blesses him, he says, ‘My Lord has honored me.’ But when He tests him and then straitens his provision, he says, ‘My Lord has humiliated me’” (89:15-6). It also says, “Satan confirmed his conjecture about [humankind] since all of them followed him except for a group of the faithful” (34:20). These verses and traditions are meant to counter the haughtiness that man inevitably feels when he sees his own power, intelligence, and wealth. They remind him that he is nothing without God's guidance and grace and that he cannot attain the goals for which he was created without overcoming his inherent faults (see *Ma'ārife Qur'an* vol.1, p.367-372 and *Hikmat wa ma'ishat* vol.1, p.43-65 for more discussion).

¹⁵ *Taqwā* is a state in which one is keenly aware of God's constant presence and perpetually concerned about displeasing him. It comes for the word *wiqāyah* meaning “to protect.” This word is used in the Qur'an 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 meaning fit in this context; however, the third meaning is best since it is coupled it with its counterpart: abiding by God's commandments. Thus, the crux of these two sentences is, “Abstain from sin, and abide by God's commandments.”

¹⁶ Filling one's heart with God's remembrance and holding fast to his rope are Qur'anic commandments, for God says, “Remember God much in hopes that you attain success” (Qur'an 62:10) and “Hold fast altogether to God's lifeline, and do not divide” (3:103). Thus, acting on them is part and parcel of “abiding by his commandments.”

to concede [the] mortality [of all creation]. Show it the calamities of the temporal world,¹⁹ and warn it of the assault of time and the radical undulation of night and day.²⁰ Present to it the histories of those who have passed, and remind it what befell your predecessors.²¹ Walk among their houses and ruins, and examine what they did,²² from where they departed,²³ and where they have disembarked,²⁴ for you shall find that they departed [the company of] loved ones and disembarked in the abodes of estrangement, and it seems you shall shortly become like one of

¹⁷ The human being comprises three aspects: body, intellect, and emotion. Out of these three aspects, the intellect and emotion are attributed to the “heart” or *qalb*. For instance, the Qur’ān says, “There is in this admonition for one who has a heart or who listens attentively” (50:37), indicating that the heart refers to the faculty of intellect. In another place, he says, “In the remembrance of God do hearts find solace” (13:28), thereby indicating that the heart is the center of emotional stability or tumult. The present tradition uses the “heart” in this latter sense: to refer to man’s emotional center. The heart is the place from which man’s attraction, enmity, love, hate, desire, and repulsion issue. The heart is sometimes attracted to things godly and lofty, and other times to things mundane and lowly. Thus, when Imām ‘Alī says, “Enliven your heart” he wants us to stimulate it toward God and things godly. And when he says, “kill it,” he wants us to destroy its attraction to the mundane.

Listening to, or reading, admonition is the way to strengthen our attraction to God. We generally refer to this process as inspiration. We feel inspired by certain books, speeches, or experiences, to reform ourselves by acting in a way pleasing to God. Likewise, the way to destroy our attraction to the mundane is to reduce our contact with it by buying less, eating less, and looking less. Reducing our contact with the glitter of the world breaks the positive feedback loop between desire and contact. It also allows us more time and a freer conscience to contemplate our current circumstance: where we stand and where we want to go.

¹⁸ Just as the last sentence referred to the heart as the center of man’s emotional faculty, so this sentence refers to it as the center of his faculty of intellect where knowledge and beliefs lie. Inasmuch as the heart is a faculty, it can be strengthened by correct usage and weakened by misuse or by not being used at all. The way to strengthen it is to fill it with firmly rooted conviction (*yaqīn*) in those tenets of faith that lead to eternal happiness. Such conviction can be attained by studying and contemplating these beliefs; by tackling every doubt until we are satisfied with the answer; by discussing them with scholars who themselves are rock-solid in their faith. It can also be attained through acts of devotion: through prayer and supplication. If we strive to attain such certainty, our hearts will stay the course and not easily be misled by fallacy and doubt.

However, it is not enough to have a heart that stays the course if the course itself is wrong. While strength of heart is a virtue, hardness of heart is a vice. God tells the Israelites, “Despite all of this, your hearts became hardened, so they were like stone—rather harder (than stone), for there are some stones from which rivers gush forth. And there are some that split (letting) water issue from them. And there are some that fall out of fear of God” (Qur’ān 2:74). For this reason, the heart needs light to guide it to the course, and this light is wisdom (*hikmah*). Wisdom denotes any knowledge that leads one to righteous action. God says, “O you who have faith, fear God and have faith in his apostle, and he shall grant you a double share of his mercy and give you a light to walk by...” (Qur’ān 57:28).

¹⁹ It is notable that Imām ‘Alī commands us to “show” our heart the tragedies of life, as if it is insufficient to simply “tell it” or “inform it.” While reading and hearing about natural and unnatural disasters impacts us, nothing is like seeing them first hand. For this reason, the Qur’ān says “Say: ‘Travel on the earth and observe how the fate was of those who were before you’” (30:42).

²⁰ This phrase is an expression of the speed with which time passes us by.

²¹ According to the context of this paragraph, Imām ‘Alī is not referring to the historical outcome of those civilizations that rejected the calls of the prophets and drowned in moral decadence. Rather, he refers here to the realities of health and sickness, life and death, and a glorious rise to the apex of civilization followed by a catastrophic decline to the brink of extinction. He speaks of the natural disasters that, in an instant, brought seemingly invincible civilizations to their knees. In this sense, even the dominion of the Prophet Solomon—may God’s peace be upon him—and its eventual decline serve as an example of the transience of this abode.

²² i.e. what wealth they amassed, what power they wielded, what marvelous feats they accomplished.

²³ i.e. what palatial mansions, heavenly gardens, and treasuries of wealth that left behind.

²⁴ They have disembarked in their graves where they lie naked, alone with none of the pomp and circumstance they once held.

them. So build your [eternal] abode, and do not sell [your place in] the hereafter for [a place in] the temporal world.

Leave off speaking of what you do not know²⁵ and with which you have not been charged.²⁶ Refrain from treading a path if you fear losing your way on it, for halting before you are helplessly lost is better than plunging into [a path filled with] terror.²⁷

Enjoin²⁸ [others to do] good²⁹ and you shall be among the doers of good.³⁰ Forbid evil with your hand and your tongue, and distance yourself from its perpetrators with all your might.³¹ Fight for God in a way worthy of him,³² and do not let people's censure overwhelm

²⁵ People who speak without any knowledge upon which to base what they say most likely have one of the following problems: 1) They feel insecure with their ignorance and so they try to cover it up by speaking emphatically about nothing at all. 2) They long to make it seem they are wise by speaking as wise people do. 3) They wish to exercise authority over others, so they dole out senseless advice. The danger of speaking without knowledge is notable. If one speaks about religious matters without knowledge, one is liable to attribute falsehood to God. About such a person the Qur'an says, "Who is more unjust than he who lies about God?" (6:21). If one speaks about mundane matters without knowledge, one may lead others to great harm by offering them harmful advice. Or barring this, when one speaks one implies that one knows what one is talking about. If, in reality, one does not, then to speak is to lie. The best thing for such a person to do is to spend his time learning and asking questions, not expressing his baseless opinions and offering senseless advice.

²⁶ Time and energy are limited resources that must be used frugally. Speaking when it is not one's duty to speak is wasteful, even if one has the requisite knowledge to warrant speaking. For example, in mundane life, there is no need for a person to speak about matters to which he has no relation and about which he can do nothing. Similarly, in religious matters, there is no use teaching someone who does not care to learn. Worse yet is asking questions that are irrelevant to us, for we not only waste our own time but the time of the person from whom we seek our answer. Thus, as a general rule, he is advising us to refrain from speaking unless there is benefit in it. In one incident, Imām 'Alī passes a man speaking excessively, so he tells him, "You are dictating to your two angels a letter to your Lord, so speak of things that concern you and leave off speaking of what does not concern you" (*Amālī al-Ṣadūq*, the 9th session, tradition 4). In another tradition he says, "Do not say what you do not know. In fact, do not say *all* that you know. For God has prescribed certain obligations on your limbs by which he will argue against you on the Day of Resurrection (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 382).

²⁷ This sentence speaks of a general principle applicable to all walks of life—although in the context, it applies specifically to the issue of speaking without knowledge. We are not obliged to try everything. If there is any reason to suspect that an activity or experience may confuse us or tempt us to do something wrong, there is no reason to pursue it. In fact, it is better to avoid it altogether so as not to risk the danger to our soul. That is not to say that we should not be daring when it comes to uncertain experiences where there is no threat of "plunging into [a path filled with] terror." To this end Imām 'Alī has said, "If you are apprehensive of a thing, then throw yourself into it, for the severity of your fear is greater than that which you fear" (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 175).

²⁸ Up until here Imām 'Alī's exhortation has focused on the individual's duties to himself before God. In this and the next paragraph, he highlights our two most important societal duties: enjoining good and forbidding evil and waging war against God's enemies.

²⁹ When he tells us not to speak of that "with which [we] have not been charged," he does not want us to think he is relieving us of our duty to enjoin good and forbid evil. Rather, this is a duty with which we *have been* charged.

³⁰ One of the personal benefits of enjoining good and forbidding evil is that it encourages the enjoiner and forbidder to be more conscientious about his duties to God. He would not want to be like the Israelites whom Allah chastised saying, "Do you enjoin the people to do good and forget [to enjoin] yourselves? (Qur'an 2:44).

³¹ Imām 'Alī says, "Among them is he who rejects evil with his hand, tongue, and heart. He has attained all the traits of goodness. And among them is he who rejects it with his tongue and heart, not his hand. He has attained two of the traits of goodness and forsaken one. And among them is he who rejects it with his heart, not his hand and tongue. He has forsaken the two greater of the three traits and laid hold of one. And among them is he who fails to reject it with his tongue, his heart, and his hand. He is a dead man walking. All good deeds, along with *jihad* for God's sake is but a drop of spittle in the vast ocean compared to enjoining good and forbidding evil. And enjoining good and forbidding evil does not bring death near, nor does it decrease sustenance. However, better than all that is a word of justice spoken before a tyrant" (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 374).

you while you fight for [the pleasure of] God.³³ Plunge into hardship for truth's sake wherever it may lie,³⁴ and become learned in the religion.³⁵ Accustom yourself to have patience through hardship, as patience for truth's sake is a marvelous trait.³⁶

In all matters concerning you, entrust yourself to God, and you will have entrusted yourself to a protected cave, an impregnable fortress.³⁷ Ask only of your Lord, for only he has

³² This phrase is an allusion to Qur'an 22:78. *Jihād* means to fight against all forces that stand against God. Warfare is one of the ways God's enemies must be fought. But *jihād* is not limited to warfare. Just as God's enemies are multifarious, so too are the types and tactics of *jihād*. The following tradition of the Prophet puts two types of *jihād* into perspective: "The Prophet deployed an army. When it returned, he said, 'Blessed are those who have performed the minor *jihād*, and have yet to perform the major one.' It was asked, 'What is the major *jihād*?' He replied, '*Jihād* with the self' (*al-Kāfi* 5.1.3.3). Perhaps one of the most important forms of *jihād* that must be waged in our times is an "educational *jihād*," since ignorance and the challenges of modernity are as formidable an enemy as any.

By admonishing us to fight "in a way worthy of God," he is earmarking the importance of ensuring that our intention behind waging *jihād*—whichever kind it may be—is godly and sincere, for only such a *jihād* is worthy of God. If, on the other hand, our intention is to gain fame, power, or praise, then we can expect to get no more than that, for God has said, "We shall give the reward of this world to him who desires it, and we shall give the reward of the hereafter to him who desires it" (Qur'an 3:145).

³³ This phrase is an allusion to Qur'an 5:54. The path of *jihād*—insofar as it is a path of reform and revolution—is lined with naysayers, who desire status quo. Those soldiers are valuable to the cause who are thick-skinned enough to persevere despite this censure. In this vein, Imām al-Bāqir told Jābir ibn Yazīd al-Ju'fi, "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).

³⁴ The path of *jihād* and commanding and forbidding is no doubt difficult. But we must be willing to plunge into any gambit for the sake of God's pleasure. Fāṭimah al-Zahrā' said the following about Imām 'Alī in her "Fadak Sermon," thereby characterizing him as one who plunged into hardship for truth's sake: "Everytime...Satan showed his might and a host of pagans bore their teeth, [the Messenger of Allah] threw his brother ['Alī] into the thick of it, and he never returned until he had crushed their ears under the soles of his feet [and vanquished them] and extinguished their flames with [the water of] his sword. [All the while] he exhausted himself for the sake of God and fought for his cause. [He was] close to the Messenger of God, the master of the friends of God. [He was] intense, sincere, serious, and hard-working while you were all living it up, in comfort, enjoyment, and safety..." (*Bihār al-anwār* vol. 29 p. 223 chapter 11, section 2).

³⁵ Harder than enjoining good, forbidding evil, and waging *jihād* is knowing how to do them effectively. At the confluence of the law and human behavior lies the delicate balance one must achieve to fulfill these obligations in such a way as to effect positive change in society. For instance, one must have a detailed awareness of all the conditions for forbidding evil and a keen empathy by which to anticipate the reaction it will evoke in others. To goad us to prepare ourselves for these challenges, Imām 'Alī admonishes us to become "learned in the religion" so we can know all that Islamic law and ethics say about these matters and so we can properly fulfill our duties.

³⁶ The word *ṣabr* is usually translated as "patience," which is a good equivalent for it if we return to its denotation. Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary defines one who is patient as "1) Bearing pains or trials calmly or without complaint. 2) Manifesting forbearance under provocation or strain. 3) Not hasty or impetuous. 4) Steadfast despite opposition, difficulty, or adversity." However, in usage, "patience" only connotes the third meaning which is *not* one of the Arabic meanings of *ṣabr*. Thus, I use the word "patience" in the original sense, not as it is used in vernacular English. Accordingly, we are told that patience is of three kinds: "patience in the face of hardship, patience to fulfill one's duty, and patience against sin" (*Bihār al-anwār* vol. 68 p. 95 chapter 72, tradition 57). Imām 'Alī's exhortation alludes to the second of these three.

Perseverance and self-restraint play a pivotal role in keeping us steadfast in the face of life's challenges. For this reason Imām 'Alī says, "Patience is to faith what the head is to the body: just as the body is no good without a head, so is faith without patience."

³⁷ When hardship strikes we reach out to those powers we believe can help us. Generally, we reach out first to other people, to medicine, to governments, and the like. Here, the Imām admonishes us to rely first and foremost on

the power to give and withhold.³⁸ Ask God often for the best.³⁹ Endeavor to comprehend my exhortation, and let it not completely pass you by,⁴⁰ for [it is highly beneficial, and] the best speech is that which benefits. Know that there is no good in knowledge that does not benefit. One cannot benefit from knowledge that it is not appropriate to learn.

My son, whereas I find myself having reached old-age, and I find myself increasingly feeble, I have sought to preempt with this exhortation [certain] events [beyond my control]⁴¹ among which are [the following]: that death may come to me before I am able to communicate to you what is in my soul; or that my mind may deteriorate as has my body; or that some overwhelming desire and trial of the temporal world may reach you before I do, such that you become like a recalcitrant, flighty steed.⁴² The heart of a child is like fallow ground: it takes whatever seed is cast thereupon.⁴³ So I have rushed to sow discipline in you before your heart hardens⁴⁴ and your mind is distracted,⁴⁵ that you may address with undivided attention

God, to have *tawakkul*. If our belief in him were strong enough, we would realize that only he can help us, and everything and everyone else is simply a means for *his* help to reach us. Thus, we should not wait until we have no where else to turn, and then look to him; rather, our eyes should be fixed on him from the outset. With this mindset, our use of all other means at our disposal takes on a purely monotheistic hue.

³⁸ The previous sentence spoke of reliance on God in times of hardship, when one is in need of sanctuary. This sentence on the other hand is broader in intent, for it speaks of asking only God for all one's needs, whether it be protection, sustenance, or any other kind of need.

³⁹ Imām 'Alī advises us here to do *istikhārah* often. *Istikhārah* has three meanings: 1) to seek the best by one's own means. 2) to seek the best by asking God 3) to use one of the methods of *istikhārah* popularly practiced by Muslims in decision making. The second meaning is intended in this exhortation. However, it is important to offer some insight into the practice mentioned in the third meaning. *Istikhārah*—in the sense of using a verse of the Qur'an or prayer beads to make a decision—is a legitimate means of overcoming a deadlock. However, it in no way takes the place of the natural effort one must make to find his best path through life. Rather, we must employ our reason, draw from past experience, and solicit the counsel of others. If occasionally we reach a deadlock when none of these means avail us, rather than throwing up our hands and losing all hope, we turn back to God and allow him to make the decision for us according to his infinite knowledge of what is best for us.

⁴⁰ According to another narration this sentence reads, “and do not heedlessly pass it up.”

⁴¹ Imām 'Alī rushed to compose this exhortation to Imām al-Ḥasan while he returned from the battle of Ṣiffin despite the turmoil by which he was undoubtedly surrounded. In his urgency is a lesson for us: we must not procrastinate with the assumption that we will see another day. Rather, we must hurry to do what is best and most important while life's circumstances permit. To remind us of the transience of life he says, “Many who greet a day do not bid it farewell; and many who are admired early in the night are surrounded by mourners by its end” (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 380).

⁴² That Imām 'Alī's mental capacity might deteriorate or that Imām Ḥasan might be overwhelmed by desire are, of course, not fitting attributes for an immaculate imam. These phrases strengthen the opinion that this exhortation was written with the fallible in mind. It is written from a father to a son, not from one immaculate imam to another.

⁴³ Some commentators have correctly noted that these lines hardly characterize Imām Ḥasan who was about 35 years old at this time. He was already a well recognized figure and it was commonly known that he would succeed his father as the next imam. Certainly, he had already been inculcated with discipline all his life, not that Imām 'Alī suddenly decided to start this process in the last years of his life. Thus, this line serves as another indication that this exhortation is either to another son, or it was written for the rest of us.

⁴⁴ A “hard heart” is an expression of one's unwillingness to accept admonition and thereby change one's behavior. Generally, as people grow older, unless they consciously train themselves to be humble in the face of admonition, they tend to maintain the status quo and are not willing to change for the better. However, young people tend to be impressionable and change according to what advice they receive.

⁴⁵ The phrase *ishtaghala* can either mean “to be distracted” or “to be filled.” Both meanings are appropriate in this context. One of the blessings of youth is freedom from the worries and weighty responsibilities with which adults are burdened. When children are at this age, parents and educators must take advantage of their situation and inculcate in them all the values that will carry them through life. When the specters of university, graduate school, professional life, and supporting a family show themselves, a person who is not conscientious of his priorities will

knowledge, of whose pursuit and [direct] experience those [wizened] with experience have sufficed you. In this way, you have been relieved of the burden of pursuit and of the need to directly experience [these matters], for from our vast experience, what [pearls of wisdom] we once found now come to you, and matters that may have been murky for us are now made lucid for you.

My son, although I have not lived the lives of [all] who have passed before me, I have examined their deeds, and pondered over their histories, and roamed among their ruins to such an extent that I have become like one of them. Rather, because of the news of them that has reached me, it is as though I have lived with the first to the last of them. Thus, I know what deeds of theirs were pure [and good] and what were murky [and bad]; what were beneficial and what were harmful.⁴⁶ And I have extracted for you the best of every deed, and earmarked for you the most beautiful, and [thereby] diverted from you what is unknown [by teaching you about it]. I thought it best—since your affairs worry me insofar as I am a father, and insofar as I have decided to teach you discipline—that I teach it to you while you yet have a lifetime ahead of you, an age before you, and you are with sound intention and untarnished soul;⁴⁷ and that I begin by teaching you the Book of God—almighty is he and sublime—and its meaning⁴⁸ and the law of Islam: what is sanctioned and what is prohibited, while not engaging you in anything beyond that [for the present].⁴⁹ Additionally, I feared that those issues over which people have bickered because of their desires and [baseless] opinions would confuse you as they confused them. Thus, clarifying these points of confusion—despite my qualms about making you aware of such issues—is more amenable to me than turning you over to a quandary in which I do not feel confident you will not perish.⁵⁰ I hope God will grant you the success to find guidance and guide you to the middle way.⁵¹ For these reasons, have I charged you with this exhortation.

Know, my son, that for me, the dearest things that you can take away from this exhortation are [the following:] to fear God and to suffice yourself with that with which God has charged you;⁵² and to lay hold on [the tenets and practices] according to which your

find himself *distracted* from self-improvement. The second meaning is also appropriate, for when a person is bombarded with all sorts of ideas, he becomes jaded and is no longer willing to entertain new ideas and explanations, even if they are the truth. For this reason, it is vital to teach a child the truth with the most rigorous explanations before his mind is *filled* with superstitions and myths.

⁴⁶ His knowledge of their good and bad, beneficial and harmful, is not a consequence of the news of past people reaching him, for this would hold true for many historians too. Rather, he gained these insights into their deeds because he examined, pondered, and roamed. Thus, he mentions two things he has to offer: first, increased wisdom because he has pondered the histories of past people; second, doubly increased wisdom because he has done this for all people and their civilizations.

⁴⁷ The terms “tabula rasa” comes to mind.

⁴⁸ The most important knowledge for man to learn and live by is in the Qur’ān. Would it make sense for God to send down a book to guide us, and take so much care in choosing and nurturing the best prophet to convey it, and expend so much effort in protecting it, only to have failed to include in it something that would have guided us better?

⁴⁹ As a teacher with discretion, he is careful to consider the level of his pupil, and not to present to him more than what he must have to ensure his salvation.

⁵⁰ It is not enough to teach someone all the affirmative information they need. We must also expose them to the pitfalls that lie ahead, so they do not fall prey to them.

⁵¹ Apparently “guidance” refers to issues of faith, while “the middle way” refers to issues of practice.

⁵² The first two clauses, “to fear God” and “to suffice yourself” comprise the most important lesson he hopes we will take away from his letter. These clauses are identical in intent to his early admonition: “to fear God and abide by his commandments.” “To fear God” implies abstaining from sin, while “to suffice yourself” implies fulfilling all duties God has charged us with. The implication here is not that we should be minimalists in our relationship

ancestors and the righteous from your family have lived,⁵³ for they never ceased to consider their best interests as you consider, and contemplate as you contemplate.⁵⁴ Then the end [result] of all that compelled them to take hold of what they had learned and to hold back from that with which they had not been charged. If [on the other hand] you refuse to accept their knowledge [at face value] without having learned as they learned, then let your pursuit be for understanding and knowledge, not to drown in doubts and excessive argumentation. Begin, before you [even] consider this path, by seeking your Lord's help and begging him to make you successful, and [by] abandoning every [character] blemish that could cast you into doubt or give you up to misguidance. When you are certain that your heart is purified and thus humbled, your mind has regrouped, and thus focused, and your resolve to learn is solid, then consider what I have explained to you. However, if you do not see in yourself what pleases you, like a mind free of worries and ready to think, then know that you will only stumble blindly and be enveloped by the darkness, and a seeker of the religion is not one who stumbles [thus] and is confused. So refraining from the pursuit [altogether] is better.

Endeavor, my son, to comprehend my exhortation. And know that the Master of death is also the Master of life; that the Creator is also the Destroyer; that the Destroyer is also the Renewer; and the one who brings affliction also brings relief.⁵⁵ Also [know that] the world could never be except as God has made it: with its blessings and afflictions and either recompense in the hereafter⁵⁶ or whatever God wishes⁵⁷ about which you do not know.⁵⁸

with God and suffice with the bare minimum to save ourselves from the fire. Rather, he wants us to make our duty to God a priority, so that all else comes after.

⁵³ It may seem strange that Imām 'Alī would encourage his son to follow the lead of his forefathers when the Qur'ān chastises the polytheists for following their forefathers when it says, "When they are told, 'Follow what God has sent down,' they say, 'We would rather follow what we have found our ancestors believing in.' What, even if we suppose that their ancestors comprehended nothing and did not avail themselves of guidance?" (2:170). The difference lies in who one's forefathers are. If you have forefathers like the prophet Muḥammad, 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, Ismael, and Abraham, then following them is exactly the same as following "what God has sent down." For this reason, we find Prophet Joseph telling his cell mates, "I follow the creed of my forefathers: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (Qur'ān 12:38).

⁵⁴ After earmarking *taqwā* and a sense of duty as the most fundamental lesson to be learned, Imām 'Alī outlines two paths that we can take toward learning these duties. The first is a path appropriate for the vast majority of people, for it requires less time and effort. It is the path of *taqlīd* or "imitation," where one takes at face value the conclusions of experts in a field, without delving—and inevitably drowning—in an ocean which one has not the stamina or the training to brave. I use the term *taqlīd* here in a more general sense than it is used in legal terminology just as I have used "duty" in a more general sense. By *taqlīd* I mean the act of following the lead of experts in any area of Islamic knowledge, whether it be tenets of faith, pillars of practice, or guidelines in ethics. The idea is that people who do not have the time or interest to apply themselves fully to religious learning, must live closely with a scholar who has done so, so that they can benefit from his vast learning without having to study themselves. The second path is mentioned a few sentences later.

⁵⁵ After encouraging us to seek knowledge if the conditions within us are ripe, he addresses one particular body of knowledge to which we do not have access: God's apportionment of death, life, sickness, and health. Since, our ignorance of these matters leads many people to despair, especially on a path as challenging as the pursuit of knowledge, Imām 'Alī provides us with an eye-opening perspective on them. Although we may not understand why things happen, we do know with certainty that they all happen under the auspices of God, the Wise. He is the giver of life and death, the dispenser of sickness and health. He makes us rich or poor and brings affliction and relief. Thus, there is no need to despair out of ignorance; rather we should place our trust in him and be content with what he has doled out to us. Accordingly, the attributes, creator, destroyer, and renewer refer to death and rebirth in the temporal world, not the resurrection of the hereafter, for that has no relation to God's apportionment.

⁵⁶ After advising us to trust in God's apportionment, Imam 'Alī wants us to know that the system by which God runs the world is not a flawed system in which we must patiently persevere. Rather, it is the best possible system

Thereafter, if ever any of that seems problematic,⁵⁹ blame it on your ignorance, for from the beginning, you were created ignorant; then you were taught. There is so much of which you are ignorant, in which your mind swims confusedly, and which your intellect is at a loss [to perceive], then, after that, you see it. So hold fast to the one who created you, provided for you, and fashioned you, and let your devotion and yearning be only for him, and fear only him.

Know, my son, that no one has told us about God as his Messenger has—may God shower him and his family with mercy.⁶⁰ So be content with him as a guide, as one who will lead you to salvation. [Heed my advice] for I have not fallen short in my goodwill to you. You shall never be as concerned for yourself—no matter how hard you may try—as I am for you.⁶¹ Know, my son, that if your Lord had a partner, his messengers would have reached you; you would have seen the signs of his dominion, and you would have [thereby] known his actions and attributes.⁶² Rather, he is one god, as he describes himself.⁶³ No one rivals him in his dominion.⁶⁴ He shall never perish and he has always been. [He was] the first before all things, yet he has no beginning. [He is] the last after all things, yet he has no end. He is exalted above having his lordship established by being encompassed by your mind or sight.⁶⁵ So when you [come to] know this, then act as the likes of you should act—with your insignificance, your little strength, your copious weakness, and your great need for your Lord by which you seek [his help in] serving him, in fearing his punishment, and fearing his displeasure⁶⁶—for he has only commanded you to do what is good and has only forbidden you to do what is evil.⁶⁷

that could be. It could not have been any other way. After all it is the vicissitudes of life—the tests and challenges that we face everyday—that provide the tests by which we can grow and develop or fail and flounder.

⁵⁷ The phrase, “or what God wishes” is a reference to God’s sovereignty in judgment. He may choose whether to mete out justice for our crimes or forgive us and whether to reward us in kind or redouble our reward out of his grace.

⁵⁸ This is an allusion to the Qur’ān’s description of the reward of paradise, “No one knows what comfort has been kept hidden for them as a reward for what they used to do” (Qur’ān 32:17).

⁵⁹ That is, if God’s decree is ever beyond your understanding, blame it on your ignorance rather than complaining that God has been unjust.

⁶⁰ After admonishing us to seek knowledge and warning us about those events beyond our control, Imām ‘Alī begins speaking about that knowledge that is most central and most important: knowledge of God and his attributes. To this end, he introduces us to the best teacher in the field: the Prophet Muhammad.

⁶¹ This parenthetical sentence is another of his many reminders written to capture our attention.

⁶² Imām ‘Alī argues God’s oneness through an exceptive syllogism. The argument is identical in form and intent to that used in 23:91, “God has not taken any offspring [as partners], neither is there any god beside him, for [if he had] then each god would carry off what he made... Thus, God is immaculate of what they attribute [to him].

⁶³ An allusion to 2:163 “Your god is one God.”

⁶⁴ This phrase is reminiscent of the tradition that speaks of the time when every creature’s soul will be taken, even that of the Angel of Death. Then “God will take the heavens and the earth in his hands and proclaim, ‘Where are those who used to attribute idols to me? Where are those who used to believe in other gods besides me?’” (*al-Kāfi* 3:3:95-25).

⁶⁵ We know God is our Lord and manager of our affairs, not because we can see him, nor because we comprehend him, because he is not limited to the physical that we should see him, nor is he finite that we should comprehend him. Rather, we know he is our Lord through innate knowledge of our connection to him and through acquired knowledge of some of his signs and attributes.

⁶⁶ As humans we are so weak and dependent on God that we must seek his help even when serving him. Neither can we know how best to serve him, nor can we muster the strength and motivation to do his work without his succor. In fact, our state is so pathetic that we cannot attain the requisite knowledge of God to fear him as he deserves to be feared without his help.

⁶⁷ A cornerstone of the Rationalist school of theology, of which the Imāmī Shī‘ah are a forerunner, is the belief that God’s law is based on real benefit and harm intrinsic to every act. If we are commanded to fast, it is because there is a real benefit for us in fasting; not that God has ordered us to fast to test our obedience without any

My son, I have informed you of the temporal world: its [current] state, its [eventual] demise, and its flight. And I have you informed of the hereafter and of what has been prepared therein for its denizens.⁶⁸ I now set forth for you a parable related to the two,⁶⁹ that you may learn from it and act accordingly. The parable of those who know the temporal world [for what it is] is like a host of travelers who are displeased with the barren destination [in which they find themselves], so they set out for a fertile destination with lush pasture and endure the toils of the road, the separation from friends, the harshness of travel, and the coarseness of food, to reach the comfort of their own home, their permanent destination. They feel no pain in any of that, and they do not consider what they have spent to be a loss. Nothing is dearer to them than that which brings them nearer to their destination. The parable of those who are deceived by the temporal world is like a host who has been in a fertile land [and is travelling] to a barren destination. Nothing is more detestable to them or frightful than their departure from where they have been [and their journey] to where they proceed and will end up.

My son, make yourself a standard for your relations with others:⁷⁰ Love for others what you love for yourself; and detest for them what you detest for yourself. Do not wrong others just as you would not like to be wronged; and do good [to them] just as you would like good to be done to you. Consider deplorable from yourself what you consider deplorable from others; and accept from people what you accept from yourself for them. Do not say what you do not know, even if what you know be little.⁷¹ And do not say what you do not wish to be said to you.⁷² Know that self-conceit is the enemy of good conduct and an [indication of an] affliction to the intellect.⁷³

concern for the intrinsic benefit or harm in the act. There are, of course, rare exceptions to this rule. God ordered Abraham to slaughter Ishmael simply to test his obedience, not because of some hidden benefit in his murder, as evinced by God's repeal of his command when he said, "This was a manifest test" (Qur'ān 37:106).

⁶⁸ This is apparently a reference to past conversations and admonitions about the nature of this world and the next.

⁶⁹ What follows is not exactly a parable of the temporal world and the hereafter; rather it is a parable of a person with a healthy perspective on them and another with a deviant perspective.

⁷⁰ This admonition has come to be called the Golden Rule, for it is the key to healthy relationships. It is mentioned in the New Testament: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you" (Matthew 7:12), and for that reason has become a common aphorism in English. It is important to note that the Golden Rule must be applied within the parameters of every relationship and does not overrule the rights and obligations that those relationships dictate. For instance, a father should treat his son with the respect and dignity that he himself expects, but he should also not ignore the fact that he is the father, and the position of fatherhood entails certain responsibilities that being a son does not entail. Likewise, so many hierarchical relationships require a certain respect be paid to the one higher up. The Golden Rule does not override these parameters, but rather lays down a principle for interaction within these parameters.

⁷¹ In this sentence, we are given an example of the Golden Rule that many fail to observe. Just as we expect others to tell us they do not know when they do not know, so should we be ready to admit our own ignorance to them.

⁷² This sentence gives us another example of the golden rule.

⁷³ The primary reason why so many of us fail to act on the Golden Rule is self-conceit (*'ujb*). We tend to be pleased with ourselves, blind to our faults. We feel that we are exceptional, and therefore entitled to certain concessions. We feel justified in expecting more from others than we are willing to give. Thus, if the Golden Rule is the key to healthy relations with all people, then self-conceit guarantees their ruin. Imām 'Alī continues by telling us that self-conceit is a result of a sick intellect. In another tradition he says, "Self-conceit is a sign of a weak intellect" (*al-Kāfi* 1.1.1.31). A weak intellect is not synonymous with weak intelligence or a lack of knowledge, for it is quite plausible that a person know the harm he is inflicting on himself and his relationships with people, yet continue to do so. Rather the intellect in this and many traditions refers to the strength to choose the best path and abstain from the worst after having understood the consequences of each. The way to eradicate this disease is to consider that every blessing we have is a loan from God placed in our care for a few days. It does not belong to us, we had

Endeavor in your struggle [to earn a living],⁷⁴ but do not [simply] store things for others.⁷⁵ If you are led to your goal, then be as humble as ever to your Lord. Know that before you lies a path of great length, filled with intense hardship,⁷⁶ and you have no choice but to seek [your sustenance] as best as you can and to procure enough provisions to get you to your destination. However, your back is weak, so do not load it with more than you can bear, lest its weight be a burden for you.⁷⁷ If you find among the destitute one to carry your provisions to the Day of Resurrection and deliver it to you tomorrow when you need it, then take advantage of him and load them on him.⁷⁸ In fact, load him with abundant supplies while you are able, for it could be that you [later] seek him out to no avail. And take advantage of him who seeks a loan from you while you have plenty because he will repay the debt to you on your day of hardship.⁷⁹ Also know that before you lies a treacherous pass;⁸⁰ he who travels lightly on it is better off than he who travels heavily;⁸¹ he who passes slowly across it is worse off than he who passes it swiftly.⁸² And [know] that you must necessarily alight from it either into a garden or a fire. So stock it with provisions before you arrive, and ready your destination before you alight,⁸³ for after death there is no second chance, no way to return to this world.

Know that he in whose hands lie the treasures of the heavens and the earth has permitted you to pray [to him],⁸⁴ and has taken it upon himself to answer [you]. He has

little if any role in acquiring it, and there is no guarantee it will remain. Then what cause do we have for exultation.

⁷⁴ This is an allusion to 84:6 where God says, “O humankind, you are struggling intensely toward your Lord, and then you shall meet him.” Whether we like it or not, we are engaged in a struggle to survive and thrive in this world. Here, the Imam encourages us to work hard to make a living and earn the money we need to live. Then he quickly preempts our human tendency to selfishly hoard what we have earned.

⁷⁵ In another tradition Imām ‘Alī has said, “O Son of Adam, in whatever you earn over and above your subsistence, you are a treasurer for someone else” (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 192). The Messenger of God has said, “Any money that you fail to give in charity or spend on yourself is the property of you heirs. Your money is what you spend for the sake of the hereafter” (*Biḥār al-anwār* vol. 13 p.138).

⁷⁶ This is a reference to the life of this world, not the journey from death to the Day of Judgment as some commentators have proposed.

⁷⁷ Imām ‘Alī lays out the parameters for our material life. On the one hand, we must procure enough sustenance for ourselves and those for whom we are responsible so that we can live and flourish in this life. On the other hand, we are limited by how much we can take with us—the baggage limit, if you will. All we can take with us is the obligations we fulfill and the good deeds that we do with the wealth we are given. All else must stay. Considering these parameters, the Imam advises us how to maximize our profits and skirt the baggage limit by getting others to carry our things for us.

⁷⁸ The first way to skirt the baggage limit is to give charity to the poor while you are able. Since you do not need your excess wealth, and he desperately needs it, give it to him. He will carry it and return it—rather the reward for your charity—to the hereafter and deliver it to you when you need it most.

⁷⁹ The second way to skirt the baggage limit is to give loans (*qard ḥasan*) to those who seek them. Whether they can repay you or not in this world, they will definitely deliver the great rewards for your loan in the hereafter.

⁸⁰ The mountain pass he refers to is death. Just like a mountain pass, it is a painful, treacherous route through which all must travel to get to the other side.

⁸¹ Most likely, travelling heavily through the pass of death is a reference to one who has strong attachments to the temporal world and many material possessions and cannot easily let go.

⁸² Most likely, travelling slowly across the pass of death is a reference to a slow and painful death.

⁸³ This sentence is the crux of the whole paragraph, for he wants us to take lighten our load in the temporal world through charity and lending so that we are not weighed down needlessly in life or death, and so that we can ensure that our paradise is full of divine blessings that result from our acts of kindness in this world.

⁸⁴ Compare God, the Creator and Lord of all things, to people in positions of power and responsibility. Such people generally do not allow easy access to themselves, either because they do not want contact with all kinds of people, or because they fear for their lives, or because they simply do not have the time for it. They employ bodyguards and security services to fend people off. They hire secretaries and agents through whom every

commanded you to ask him so that he may give and to seek his mercy so that he may show you mercy. He has not placed between you and him anyone to block your access to him, nor has he turned you over to anyone who must intercede with him on your behalf.⁸⁵ He has not prevented you from repenting despite your sins. He has not hastened your punishment, nor has he rebuked you when you repented, nor has he disgraced you [even] when disgrace was your due. He has not been a stickler in accepting your penance nor does he investigate the minutia of your crime [after you have repented].⁸⁶ He has not taken away your hope for his mercy, rather he treats your disinclination to sin as a good deed; he counts your sin as one and your good deeds as ten. He has opened for you the gates to repentance and a second chance.⁸⁷ Thus, when you cry out to him he hears your cry, and when you whisper to him, he knows what you whisper.⁸⁸ Accordingly, you communicate to him your needs and lay out for him what is in your heart. You complain to him about what worries you and express to him your hardships. You seek his help in your affairs, and you ask him from his treasuries of mercy what no other can give, like increased age, a healthy body, and abundant sustenance.

Moreover, he has placed in your hands the keys to his treasuries by permitting you to supplicate him.⁸⁹ Thus, whenever you wish, you may open with supplication the gates to his blessings, and invoke a shower of divine mercy.⁹⁰ Then, let a delay in his answer not strip you of your hope,⁹¹ since his bestowal is proportionate to [the purity of] your intention.⁹² Or

correspondence must filter. Even if you can get through to them, their time is so constrained that they will barely be able to hear what you are saying, much less make the effort to fulfill your needs. God, on the other hand, despite the immensity of his dominion, has allowed each and every person unlimited access to himself. Not only that, but he has even commanded us to bring our needs to his attention. He has no guards or walls to fend anyone off, nor has he stationed intermediaries through whom we must approach him. We can speak directly to him, at any time, day or night, for as long as we want; and he himself has taken personal responsibility to fulfill our every need. This is an immense blessing, like so many other blessings, of which most of us are completely heedless.

⁸⁵ That is not to say that there are no intercessors between God and us. Intercession is a reality mentioned abundantly in the Qur'an and traditions. Rather, Imām 'Alī is negating a system in which access to God is *limited* to intercession—where there is no direct contact. In the Islamic worldview, every person has direct access to God, whether to worship him or to ask of him. However, there are some to whom God listens more attentively because of their exceptional virtue and good deeds. He appoints these people as intercessors for others. Nevertheless, there are prerequisites for benefiting from their intercession, foremost of which is correct belief. In reality, the institution of intercession simply magnifies the effect of faith and the few good deeds of the believers so that they can be admitted to paradise despite their many sins. It gives hope to the faithful and at the same time brings them closer to the prophets, imams, and other intercessors.

⁸⁶ The message of the preceding sentences is that God's grace is vast: it encompasses every penitent soul. A good way to understand the immensity of his grace is to compare each of God's interactions with the sinner to our own interaction with those who have wronged us.

⁸⁷ The message of the preceding sentences is that God is not only gracious with the penitent sinner, he is also generous beyond imagination.

⁸⁸ Notice how he subtly changes from "hearing" to "knowing" when the object changes from "crying" to "whispering." Since a whisper is not heard, he knows of what you whisper.

⁸⁹ In the previous paragraph we were told that God has allowed us access to his treasuries. Here, however, we are told he has given us the keys to these treasuries, so that we may access them whenever we want without getting renewed permission.

⁹⁰ It is significant that God always keeps his gates open from his side. The keys have been handed over to us, so that we may access his treasuries whenever we wish. Thus, there is no excuse for our failure to pray to him other than our own unwillingness or laziness and such. In this vein, God says, "When my servants ask you about me, then [tell them that] I am near. I answer the supplicant's call when he calls me." (Qur'an 2:186)

⁹¹ A mere delay in God's answer must not make us lose hope. Rather, the Prophet says, "Supplicate God with certainty that he will answer you" (*Biḥār al-anwār* vol. 90 p. 321 chapter 17, tradition 31). Imām al-Ṣādiq says,

perhaps his answer is delayed to increase your reward and to redouble his bestowal upon you.⁹³ Perhaps you asked for something, and it was not given to you but you were given something better in this world or the hereafter. Or [perhaps you asked for something, and] it was kept from you for your own good, for many a thing you ask for would destroy your faith were it granted.⁹⁴ Thus, let your supplication be for that whose beauty shall remain and whose blight is kept far off, for wealth shall not remain for you, nor shall you remain for it.⁹⁵

Know, my son, that you have only been created for the hereafter, not for the temporal world; to perish, not to last; to die, not to live [forever];⁹⁶ and that you are in a state of transience, in an abode that is a bridge and a path leading to the hereafter;⁹⁷ and that you are

“Between God’s statement, ‘Your prayer has been answered’ (Qur’ān 10:89) and the annihilation of Pharaoh, forty years passed” (*Al-Kāfi* 2.2.19.5).

⁹² Many people lose hope when they feel that their prayers are not answered. Those who lack faith construe this as evidence that God does not exist and that religion is little more than an opiate. Even the faithful could lose their sure footing, and begin to doubt. To preempt such thoughts, Imām ‘Alī mentions four reasons why prayers are not answered right away. This exhortation is meant to bring hope, and for this reason he says these things may “delay” God’s answer; he does not say they will “prevent” God from answering. The first reason is mentioned in this sentence: a weakness in the supplicant’s sincerity. His lack of sincerity could be caused by his lack of sufficient knowledge about God, so that he prays to a concept of God far from reality. For instance, Imām al-Ṣādiq says in answer to people who complain that their prayers are not being answered, “It is because you supplicate one whom you do not know” (*Bihār al-anwār* vol. 90 p. 368 chapter 24, tradition 4). His lack of sincerity could also stem from his unwillingness to uphold his end of his covenant with God. God says, “Fulfill my covenant (with you). Then I shall fulfill your covenant (with me)” (Qur’ān 2:40). Yet, people ask God for help, without fulfilling their obligations to him. The Prophet has said, “A supplicant without deeds is like an archer without a bowstring” (*Bihār al-anwār* vol. 10 p. 100 chapter 7, tradition 1). Others supplicate him without refraining from the illicit. The Prophet has said, “Make your earnings lawful and your prayers will be answered...” (*Makārim al-akhlāq*, Chapter 10, p. 275, section “On he whose prayers are answered”). His lack of sincerity could also issue from a lack of focus when supplicating. Imām al-Ṣādiq says, “God does not answer a prayer from an inattentive heart. So if you supplicate, focus your heart. Then you can be sure you will be answered” (*Al-Kāfi* 2.2.9.1).

⁹³ The other three reasons for a delayed response to a supplication stem, not from a shortcoming in the supplicant, but from God’s overarching wisdom. In one tradition Imām ‘Alī says, “God’s grace does not override his wisdom. For this reason, not every prayer is answered” (*Ghurar al-ḥikam* saying 3478). The second of these reasons is that he wishes to redouble his reward. Since supplication is the key to the treasuries of God’s reward, every time we use the key, we gain access to those treasuries and gain reward. When he delays his response, and we repeatedly beg like a persistent child, our reward increases. In this vein, Imām al-Ṣādiq says, “[When] some people pray, God says to his two angels, ‘I hereby answer his prayer, but let his need remain, for I love to hear his voice...’” (*Al-Kāfi* 2.2.19.3).

⁹⁴ God gives out of his grace. He wants nothing more than to give. All he wants is for us to humble ourselves before him and express to him our need. Then he will give us whatever is in our best interest. It could be that we ask for a good thing, but he gives us something better. And it could be that we ask for something that is to our detriment, so he withholds it and gives us something that will benefit us.

⁹⁵ That is not to say we should not seek wealth from God. In fact, many supplications transmitted from the Prophet and Imams seek wealth and the protection of wealth. However, since wealth is not an end, but a means, whether asking God for wealth is good or not depends on the ends for which it is the means. In this vein, it has been narrated that “a man told Abū ‘Abd Allāh [al-Ṣādiq], ‘We seek the material world and we love to receive it.’ So al-Ṣādiq asked him, ‘What do you like to do with it?’ He answered, ‘I spend it on myself and on my family; I use it to strengthen my ties with my kin; I give it in charity; I perform the Ḥajj and the ‘Umrah.’ Abū ‘Abd Allāh said, ‘That is not [called] “seeking the material world;” that is [called] “seeking the hereafter”’” (*Wasā’il al-shī‘ah* 17.1.7.3).

⁹⁶ When he says we are meant to perish and die, he speaks only of our state in the temporal world. The hereafter, on the other hand, is true life (Qur’ān 29:64). Those in paradise will never again taste death (Qur’ān 44:56). Even those in hell will be denied the luxury of death, however much they plead with Mālik, the guardian of hell, for an end to their misery (Qur’ān 43:77 and 35:36).

⁹⁷ Because the transience of the temporal world is so easy to forget, the Prophet and Imams continually remind us of it. The Messenger of God has said, “Live in this world as a foreigner or as a wayfarer, and count yourself among

the prey of death from which none who flees can escape⁹⁸ and which will no doubt catch him.⁹⁹ So be wary that death not catch you in a polluted state while you are thinking to yourself that you should repent only for death to prevent you from that, for then you will have destroyed yourself.¹⁰⁰ My son, remember death often, and remember often what you shall encounter after death, so that when it comes you will have taken the necessary precautions and prepared yourself for it. And do not let it surprise you lest it defeat you.¹⁰¹

Beware not to be fooled by what you see of the denizens of this temporal world clinging to it and falling upon it [like dogs],¹⁰² for God has informed you of it [’s transience], and [even] the world itself has announced to you its own [eventual] demise and revealed to you its evils.¹⁰³

the dead in their graves” (*Amāli al-Ṭūstī*). Imām ‘Alī has said, “It amazes me to see a person build up this world—an abode doomed to perish—when he is [destined] to settle in an abode that is everlasting” (*Bihār al-anwār*). Jesus has said, “Who builds his house on a wave in the ocean? That is [the reality of] this world, so do not think it to be permanent” (*Bihār al-anwār*). Gabriel once said to Noah, “You who have lived longer than any other prophet, how did you find this world?” He replied, “Like a house with two doors. I entered by one and exited through the other” (*Tanbih al-khawāṭir*).

⁹⁸ In *Nahj al-balāghah* there is an additional phrase that reads “and which none who seeks can miss.” I do not understand this phrase in the context of the image that has been painted of death as a predator and man as its prey, for prey does not usually seek out its predator. This phrase is appropriately absent from other transmissions of this tradition (see *Tuḥaf al-’uqūl* and *Ghurur al-ḥikam*). Accordingly, I have also left it out.

⁹⁹ The Qur’ān says, “Wherever you may be, death shall find you, even if you were in fortified towers” (4:78) and “Say: ‘The very death from which you flee shall meet you’” (62:8).

¹⁰⁰ In the precarious situation in which we find ourselves, it makes no sense to procrastinate in anything that could affect our state in the everlasting abode. Death may come at any time. How terrible would it be if it came as we perpetrated a sin and had not yet repented and made amends? Thus, we should make two efforts our priorities: to minimize sin by developing our *taqwā* (a constant awareness of God); to seek forgiveness immediately every time we fail. In this vein, God says, “...And those who, when they commit an evil act or wrong themselves, remember God and seek forgiveness for their sins—who forgives sin other than God—and they do not persist in what they did once they know [their mistake]” (Qur’ān 3:135).

¹⁰¹ That is not to say that if you prepare for death you may be able to prevent it. What he means by being defeated by death is to die without having reaped the benefits of this world and without preparing oneself sufficiently for the hereafter.

¹⁰² In one tradition, Imām ‘Alī saw Jābir ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī sigh. He asked him, “Jābir, for what do you sigh? For this temporal world?” Jābir replied, “Yes.” The Imam said, “Jābir, the pleasures of this world are seven: food, drink, clothing, sex, animals, perfume, and music. The most delicious food is honey, and it is the vomit of a honeybee. The most palatable drink is water, and it is a sufficient indication [of its ordinariness] that it flows freely on earth and is accessible to all. The best clothing is [made of] silk, and it is made from the spittle of a caterpillar. The best sex is with women...and the most beautiful feature of a woman (i.e. her face) is only sought out for the ugliest part of her (i.e. her genitals). The best of animals [for riding] is the horse, and it can be deadly. The most precious perfume is musk, and it is a fluid from the naval of an animal. The greatest music is singing, and it is a sin. And anything whose attributes are like this is not worth sighing for” (*Bihār al-anwār* vol. 74 p. 397 chapter 15, tradition 69).

¹⁰³ Ignorance of the nature of the temporal world is one of the primary factors that compels of us to scramble to attain it. We do not realize that the world is fleeting and cannot be counted on. We forget that it is but a means to an end. We do not know that having and not having access to the wealth of this world is simply a test. We do pay attention to the short-lived pleasures of this world that are always coupled with pain and hardship. The solution to our ignorance is education. God educates us directly by teaching us about the nature of the world in the Qur’ān in such verses as 29:64, 3:185, and 16:96. However, much of our education must be gained through observation of the world around us, for the world itself is full of lessons if only we open our eyes and hearts. One tradition highlights the positive role the temporal world plays in educating us of its reality. Upon hearing a man speak ill of the temporal world, Imām ‘Alī says, “You who denigrate the world, yet are fooled by its guiles and taken in by its false [promises]. Do you let yourself be fooled by the world and then proceed in denigrating it? Are you its accuser or is it your accuser?...The world has made of [the sick man who dies despite your efforts to cure him] an example of your disposition and of his death [an example of] your death. The temporal world is an honest abode for him

Those who live for this world are nothing but howling dogs and predatory beasts who growl at one another; the dominant eat the subordinate, the big subdue the small. [The rest are like] cattle. Some are tethered and others have been let loose having lost their tethers and taken up a path they do not know. [They are] sickly flocks in a treacherous valley without a shepherd to guide them or tend to them. [In place of a shepherd,] this world has led them on an aimless path and blocked their vision from the beacons of guidance.¹⁰⁴ Thus, they wander in bewilderment and drown in its amenities and [even] take it to be their Lord. In this way, it plays with them and they with it, and they forget what lies beyond.

Wait! First light drowns out the darkness. It seems the caravan has arrived. If you hurry you can join [me and watch them as they enter].¹⁰⁵ Know, my son, that he whose mount is day and night shall be carried along even if he stands still, and shall traverse the distance even if he remains at home and in comfort.¹⁰⁶ And know with certainty that you shall never attain your [far-fetched] hopes, and you shall never exceed your appointed term, for you are [travelling] on the heels of those who went before you.¹⁰⁷ Thus, be graceful in your efforts to seek [sustenance] and earn a living,¹⁰⁸ for many efforts to seek [sustenance] end in bankruptcy.¹⁰⁹ Not all who

who is honest with it; an abode of well-being for him who understands it; an abode of plenty for him who packs his provisions with its stores; and an abode full of good advice for him who will take it. ...So who can deprecate it when it has declared its mortality and announced its end and proclaimed its own death and the death of its inhabitants? It has, through its tribulations given them a sample of the tribulations [of the hereafter], and through its delights, enticed them to the delights [of paradise]..." (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 131)

¹⁰⁴ A second factor that compels people to lust for the temporal world is societal pressure. Those with weak intellects think that numbers correspond to rightness. The general air in a democratic society feeds into this fallacy. We reason that if so many people are working tirelessly to get ahead in this world, then it must be a sensible thing to do. Imām ‘Alī tries to show us that the vast numbers of people we are following are not worth following. Some are so aggressive in their pursuit that they are willing to trample on anyone who stands in their way. These are the wolves. Others are heedless of what God wants of them because they do not use their minds to educate themselves and strive for the goals for which this world has been created. They are like cattle. Some at least hold to the superficial aspects of the religion. They are tethered cattle. Others are so far gone, that they have no compunction and do not even observe superficial propriety. They are like sickly cattle that are so far gone that their shepherd no longer has hope for them and lets them go. They wander aimlessly and follow only the temptation of the world around them.

¹⁰⁵ He dramatically sets the scene for his next lesson. He supposes life as a journey whose final destination is death and the afterlife. He supposes himself an observer at the gateway to this city while a caravan carrying all humankind is due to arrive any moment. He calls on us to wait with him and keep watch, since the caravan is expected to arrive momentarily, indicating the all of life is nothing more than a few moments in reality. He encourages us to join him by telling us to hurry so we can wait with him.

¹⁰⁶ Unlike journeys in this world, the journey of life is conducted on the mount of time itself. It is not for us to choose whether or not to join this caravan. To live is to travel. Ever breath is one step closer to death.

¹⁰⁷ We all have aspirations for what we want to do and what we wish to become. Just as I mentioned at the beginning of this commentary, aspirations are not necessarily bad; in fact, they are a natural part of human development. However, when aspirations become tied and limited to this world, they blind us to the real goals that lie beyond. Our aspirations for this world ought to account for its temporality and view it as simply a means to an end. Assuming you maintain your far-fetched aspirations, you must know that you can never reach them, for you only have one life allotted to you. When that term is done, you must move on just as every single person before you has had to move on.

¹⁰⁸ After weakening the grip of the temporal world over us, he tells us how we ought to seek our sustenance. Seek it with grace and moderation. Know that your life here is limited, so take only what you need. Know that you will be held accountable for what you earn tomorrow, so observe the laws and ethics of today. Know that your sustenance is provided by one who values your honor, so do not trash your honor to gain sustenance and do not bow to anyone except him.

seek are given, and not all who are graceful [in seeking] are deprived. Honor yourself above everything lowly even if it leads you to your desires, for you shall not be compensated for your lost honor. Do not be a slave to anyone when God has created you free. What good is there in something that can be attained only through evil or in ease that can be attained only through hardship?

I warn you not to let covetousness sweep you off your feet, lest it cast you into the watering holes of destruction [in hellfire].¹¹⁰

If you can forgo placing between you and God any [mediator] who fulfills your needs, then do so, for you shall [unfailingly] reach and procure what has been apportioned for you, and a little from God—sublime is he—is greater and more honorable than much from any creature of his, though [in the end] it is all from him.¹¹¹

Compensating for what has passed you up because of your silence is easier than compensating for what has passed you up because of your talking. Guard the contents of the water skin by tying its spout.¹¹²

Guarding what you have in hand is more pleasing to me than seeking what others have in hand.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ There is no law that says that the more frantically you work for wealth the more wealth you will get. You could work a lifetime and amass a fortune only to lose it in an instant. Of course, you must work hard to attain what has been ordained for you. But everything must be done with balance.

¹¹⁰ Covetousness (*al-tama'*) leaves one in a perpetual state of malcontent with one's current possessions. Nothing one has seems good enough, and everything others have seems vitally necessary. It gives rise to greed, jealousy, and depression. It creates a thirst that cannot, and will not, be quenched by anything except the scorching watering holes of hell to which they inevitably drive their victim. As the Qur'an says, "What a terrible water place that will be" (11:98).

¹¹¹ If we find that all doors to an honorable income are closed and we must solicit and accept charity from others, we must be sure that we do not compromise our honor in any way. We must be like those poor people whom others think are well off because of their unfailing dignity and who beg from no one (see Qur'an 2:273). Barring such extenuating circumstances, Imām 'Alī advises us to seek monetary help from no one, and to rely solely on the provisions God has ordained for us. He provides two reasons for choosing this path of contentment. First, we shall reach, one way or another, whatever provision God has ordained for us as long as we make our effort. We can either procure those provisions while preserving our dignity or procure those provisions after having sacrificed our dignity. Human intellect will obviously choose the former. Second, if what God has apportioned for us seems too little, then we must know that what comes directly from God will compensate qualitatively for it seems to lack quantitatively, for there is *barakah* or blessing in it. It will buy more and lead to greater profit and happiness than any other provisions. And we need not sacrifice our honor to partake in God's bounty. After this admonition he reminds us that whichever path we choose: the path of contentment and dignity or the path of greed and dishonor, whatever provision we get is from God, either directly or indirectly.

¹¹² This sentence can be interpreted in two ways. It could be a reiteration of a common admonition of the Prophet and Imams: speaking little is better than speaking much. Of course, we should ideally evaluate every situation to see whether our duty is to speak or to remain silent. However, in instances where we cannot determine our duty, we should err on the side of precautionary silence, for though we may have thereby failed in our duty, this failure is generally easier to correct than erring on the side of speaking when our duty was silence. According to this interpretation, the "contents of the water skin" refers to whatever we have to say and are in doubt as to whether we should say it or not.

Alternatively this paragraph may refer to the virtue of keeping secrets. Whether they are political secrets or personal ones, our own secrets or those that others have entrusted to us, we are repeatedly commanded to safeguard them. It is true that you will sometimes keep the secret from the wrong person, but the harm done is minimal and can be repaired easily. However, once the secret is told, the harm done is irreparable, for "any secret that goes beyond [one's] two [lips] is common knowledge" (*al-Kāfi* 2.1.98.9).

¹¹³ At first glance, this sentence seems to be comparing apples and oranges. Upon further inspection, it is comparing a thing to the corollary of its opposite. Accordingly, it would read, "Guarding what you have in hand is more pleasing to me than wasting what you have in hand, since wasting what you have will compel you to seek

The bitterness of despondency [in the help of others] is better than seeking from people.¹¹⁴

Drudgery with chastity is better than wealth with sin.¹¹⁵

A person is the best keeper of his own secret.¹¹⁶

Many strive to their own detriment.¹¹⁷

He who speaks much speaks nonsense.

He who contemplates sees [reality].¹¹⁸

Associate with the righteous, and you shall be one of them. Dissociate from the wrongdoers, and you shall exclude yourself from them.¹¹⁹

The worst food is illicit food.¹²⁰

To wrong the defenseless is the most heinous kind of wrong.¹²¹

When kindness does the work of harshness, harshness will do the work of kindness.¹²²

It could be that a medicine causes sickness and sickness acts like a medicine.¹²³

what others have.” Through this admonition, Imām ‘Alī seeks to foster frugality, so that we spend according to our needs, not according to our impulsive desires. He wants us to tread the middle ground between being miserly and spendthrift. He wants us to act on the Qur’anic injunction, “Do not give to fools the money that God gave you for your upkeep” (4:5).

¹¹⁴ *Ya’s* or “despondency” usually connotes one of two human traits: one is among the worst of sins; the other is among the greatest of virtues. The one that is a sin is to lose hope in the mercy of God. The Qur’ān says, “Nobody loses hope in the mercy of God except non-believers” (12:87). The one that is a virtue is to give up hope in the aid of people. This is part and parcel of *tawakkul* of “reliance on God.” Of course, one will incur some bitterness and hardship when renouncing one’s hope in people’s aid, but this bitterness is insignificant when compared to the honor one must sacrifice to solicit their help. Imām ‘Alī says, “It is easier to leave a need unfulfilled than to seek its fulfillment from those unworthy” (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 66).

¹¹⁵ It is no matter if one must live in poverty and toil to eke out a living, if only he maintains chastity and refrains from sin. The peace of mind and the station such a person has before God more than compensate for the drudgery of his life. On the other hand, one who lives a life of luxury, but falls readily into sin, shall taste punishment in the hereafter that will make him forget his short-lived pleasure in this world.

¹¹⁶ Imām al-Ṣādiq has said, “any secret that goes beyond [one’s] two [lips] is common knowledge” (*al-Kāfi* 2.1.98.9).

¹¹⁷ Because our knowledge of what brings us benefit and harm is limited, many times we strive toward a goal only to find that that goal was to our detriment.

¹¹⁸ In traditions, the word “contemplation” (*al-tafakkur*) does not connote just any type of thinking. Rather, it refers to contemplation of the transience of the temporal world and its pleasures and the permanence of the hereafter and its pleasures such that one feels indifferent to the former and passionately desirous of the latter.

¹¹⁹ The people we choose to associate with have a powerful effect on our character. By interacting with righteous people, their behavior is likely to rub off on us, and they are likely to pull us in a positive direction. It is equally important to keep aloof of bad people for fear of their negative influence over us.

¹²⁰ God only makes illicit what is harmful. Some foods are illicit inherently such as pork, shellfish, and predatory animals. Some foods are illicit because they were not slaughtered correctly such as beef or chicken slaughtered by a non-Muslim. Some foods are illicit because they are procured illegally such as food that is stolen, or food that is bought with money earned illegally or from which religious taxes have not been paid.

¹²¹ The defenseless include children and wives, the elderly and indigent. Often men who are weak outside of the home seek to affirm their power at home by tormenting their wives and children. Individuals and companies who cannot make an honest living take undue advantage of the elderly and indigent by duping them.

¹²² This sentence is challenging to understanding, both because of its riddle-like style and because the message counters western Christian-based ethics. There is a place for kindness and a place for harshness. There are instances when kindness serves no purpose but to encourage bad behavior. In an obvious example, if murderers were categorically pardoned, their would be nothing to check them from continuing their murder streak and the security of society would be compromised. In such cases, kindness would carry the same negative consequences that harshness does in most other cases. Therefore, it is in the criminal’s best interest and the society’s best interest to take a hard line with him to check his evil and perhaps bring him into line.

It may be that one whom you do not consider a well-wisher wishes you well, and that he whom you consider a well-wisher wishes you ill.¹²⁴

Beware of living for far-fetched dreams for they are the stuff of fools.¹²⁵

To have intellect is to remember your past experience.¹²⁶ The best experience is what admonishes you.¹²⁷

Avail yourself of opportunities before they turn to regrets.¹²⁸

Not every seeker finds, and not all that is lost returns.¹²⁹

¹²³ This sentence can be interpreted in two ways. It could be a statement of man's ignorance with regard to his own benefit and harm. Because of our ignorance we often think there is benefit in what ends up being harmful, and vice versa. In this sense it is a reiteration of the Qur'ānic verse, "It may be that you loathe something when it is good for you. And it may be that you love something when it is bad for you. God knows and you do not know" (2:216). Alternatively, it could be an exhortation to people not to assume a role unless they are sufficiently qualified for that role. If a layperson tries to play doctor by putting forth his own diagnosis and prescribing medicines, his "cures" may bring more sickness. Likewise, out of ignorance, he may construe some symptoms as a sickness when in fact they are the means of regaining health. For instance, he may consider a fever to be harmful when in fact the body's raised temperature is its defensive mechanism against illness. Or he may consider diarrhea or vomiting to be a sickness when in fact they are the body's means of expelling harmful substances. Similarly, if one who is ignorant of religion attempts to cure spiritual or ethical maladies, he may do more harm than good. For instance, if one ignorant of the law attempts to enjoin good and forbid evil, he does little more than promote ignorance and drive people away from the righteousness.

¹²⁴ We expect friends and family to be our well-wishers, and usually they are. However, it could be that their goodwill ends for some unforeseen reason. Likewise, you may sometimes find that one whom you did not count among your allies is in fact your well-wisher. Thus, Imām 'Alī wishes us to be cautious when listening to advice from the first group by considering "what is said, not who said it" (*Ghurar al-hikmah* saying 612). Conversely, he wishes us to be open-minded enough to recognize the goodwill of even the unlikeliest of people.

¹²⁵ Only a fool would spend his time and energy pursuing a mirage. If he had sense, he would seek what provides everlasting pleasure. This is not to say that we should not aim high in life and make great plans. But our plans should be realistic and should be focused on goals that are worth spending a lifetime to attain.

¹²⁶ Counter to what many commentators have said, *tajārib* here does not refer specifically to scientific knowledge about the natural world, but rather to one's experiences in life that can benefit one in future situations in this life. A fool may experience the sour consequences of a particular decision and then, having forgotten the incident, proceed to make the mistake again. However, one who uses his intellect will remember that experience and "not allow himself to be bitten from the same hole twice" (*Al-Kāfi* 2.1.99.38).

¹²⁷ Modern humanistic trends encourage us to experience everything. All experiences are considered positive. Even if the experience is immoral or bears no tangible fruit, it is still chalked up as a positive experience. Imām 'Alī gives us a standard by which to differentiate between experiences. Those experiences, he says, are most beneficial that prepare the grounds for you to learn a lesson that will strengthen your character or lead you to a greater understanding of the world in which you live. A sightseeing trip, for instance, that leads you to appreciate God's creation, or strengthens your conviction in the certainty of death and the inevitable demise of every civilization is much more valuable than a mere vacation for the sake a pleasure and relaxation.

¹²⁸ In another statement he has said, "Opportunity passes like a fleeting cloud; therefore, avail yourself of every opportunity" (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 21).

¹²⁹ These two statements apply only to the temporal world, for it is a world where people's desires and efforts often clash, a world where injustice and oppression are permitted to exist. Because of this, no matter how hard we may try, there is always a chance that we shall not attain what we seek. You may endeavor to start a business and do everything in your power to ensure success, but an unforeseen economic recession might force you into bankruptcy. Or rival corporations might collude to drive you out of business. Or the government might justly or unjustly close you down. Similarly, you may lose a valuable possession in a burglary or an important physical faculty in an accident. No matter how much you may try to recover these losses, there is no guarantee that they will return. All this is because of the nature of the temporal world. The hereafter, on the other hand, is a world ruled only by justice, in which no natural limitations exist on anything. Thus if I seek something in the hereafter such as paradise or God's pleasure, assuming I fulfill all necessary requirements, I shall attain what I seek. The following verses shows the difference between what is sought of this world and what is sought of the hereafter: "If anyone desires this transitory life, we expedite it therein for whom we wish as we wish...And if anyone desires the

It is depravity to squander one's provisions and [thereby] ruin one's afterlife.¹³⁰
Everything has an outcome.¹³¹
What is apportioned for you shall come to you.¹³²
Merchants are at risk.¹³³

hereafter and endeavors to attain it as is its due and is a believer, then such people's endeavor shall be appreciated" (17:18-19). Similarly, things that are "lost," if they are lost for the pleasure of God and in lieu of the compensation in the hereafter, then God has guaranteed that he shall return them or replace them. For instance, he says, "Whatever you spend (in charity), he shall replenish" (Qur'an 34:39). Even life itself, if given or lost for the sake of God, shall be replenished, for God says, "Do not consider those killed in the way of God to be dead. Rather they are alive in their Lord's proximity and sustained" (Qur'an 3:169). Thus, Imām 'Alī's goal in writing these sentences is to prevent us from having high expectations in the returns of this world. As God says, "[we tell you this] so you do not fret over what has passed you or exult over what God has given you" (57:23).

¹³⁰ The word *zād* means "provisions." It is used specifically for the provisions one takes on a journey. Appropriately, this image is frequently used as a metaphor for the provisions of firm conviction, good acts, and strong character that will carry us on the treacherous journey to the hereafter. For instance, the Qur'an tells us, "Pack your provisions; the best provision is the fear of God" (2:197). In one of his supplications, Imām 'Alī is reported to have said, "Ah, how bare are my provisions, and how long the road ahead. How long the journey, and how formidable the destination" (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 77). In a powerful exhortation, Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī stood near the Ka'bah and proclaimed, "If one of you were to go on a journey, he would pack provisions to hold him in good stead in his travels. So pack your provisions for the journey to Judgment Day. After all, do you not want to have what will hold you in good stead on that day?...Fast for one hot day for the gathering. Perform one Ḥajj for your great sins. Pray two *rak'ah* (cycles) in the dead of night for the solicitude of the grave. [Let it be] a good word that you speak, a bad word at which you hold your tongue, or charity that you give to the poor, for perhaps you will attain salvation through it. O you who shall be poor on that hard day!" (*Tabdhīb al-aḥkām* 2.3.32.2456). Clearly it is of vital importance to do all in our power to gather these provisions. And the worst thing we can do is to squander what little provisions we may gather by committing sin. The Messenger of God asked, "Do you know who is bankrupt?" The answer came, "Amongst us, one is bankrupt who has neither a dirham nor any goods [to sell]." The Messenger said, "The bankrupt of my nation is he who brings to the Judgment his prayers, fasts, and charity after having denigrated and slandered one man and embezzled the funds of another, having spilled the blood of one man and hit another. So this man and that man shall be given from the good deeds of this person. And if his good deeds run out before he has made up for all that he owes, their sins will be taken from them and thrown upon him, and then he will be thrown in the fire" (*Biḥār al-anwār* 38.94.3).

¹³¹ There are two narrations of this sentence. The one I have translated here contains the word *kull amr* meaning "everything." According to this narration, the sentence indicates that everything must end up being either bad or good. A sensible person will realize this, and do what he can to ensure that things end up in the best way possible, not throw up his hands and leave things to chance. The other narration reads *kull imri'* meaning "every person." In favor of this second narration is another tradition that reads, "Every person has an outcome: either sweet or bitter" (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 151), although without the phrase "either sweet or bitter," the focus of the sentence lies in the existence of an outcome, not what qualities that outcome may have. Accordingly, the purport of the sentence is to remind us to think of the judgment and what lies beyond. For the sinner, it contains a warning to cease sinning, repent, and do good, since he will eventually be called to judgment. For the oppressed, it contains hope, since it reminds them that their oppressors shall be called forth for judgment to face punishment for their oppression.

¹³² We know that God apportions everything according to the dictates of his wisdom. He apportions enough sustenance for us to do what is expected of us; he apportions enough years for us to be tested thoroughly; he apportions sickness and health and all the circumstance of life that are beyond our control to fulfill his goals for creation. Furthermore, he is omnipotent, so nothing can stop him from delivering to us what he has apportioned for us. Considering all this, there is no sense in being greedy for more than what has been apportioned for us, since he has apportioned exactly what we need, and what has been apportioned will undoubtedly reach us.

¹³³ This sentence has two possible meanings. It could be construed as a reminder that business, by its very nature, entails risk. A sensible person will realize this and diversify his investments so that he is not hit too hard by any one failure. Alternatively, this sentence may speak of the spiritual risk to which every merchant is subject if he is not punctilious in learning and abiding by the divine laws of trade. It is as Imām 'Alī said, "O merchants, learn

Sometimes less is more profitable than more.¹³⁴

There is no good in the assistance of the lowly,¹³⁵ or in a suspect friend.¹³⁶

Go easy with time as long as its mount serves you. And do not risk a thing in seeking more.¹³⁷

Beware you are not swept off your feet by the steed of recalcitrance.¹³⁸

the law, then engage in trade...[for] merchants are criminals, and all criminals are hell-bound, except those who take only their due and give what they must” (*al-Kāfi* 5.2.54.1).

¹³⁴ The particle *rubba* can be translated alternatively as “many” or as “some” depending on the context. Here it conveys the meaning of “some.” Generally, if we compare a lot and a little of the same thing, a lot is more profitable. A lot of capital is more profitable than a little. A lot of land is more profitable than a little. If, on the other hand, we compare a lot of one thing to a little of another, we may find the converse to be true. For instance, one tradition reads, “A little that suffices you is better than a lot that drives you to excess.” Another reads, “A little that saves you is better than a lot that destroys you.” Yet another reads, “A little attained through ease is better than a lot whose burden is heavy” (*Ghurar al-ḥikam* traditions 8260, 8259, and 8257). Likewise, in terms of profit, a small investment transacted with money that has been legally attained through a transaction in which God’s law has been obeyed will bring more profit than a large transaction with illicit money in which God’s law is flaunted. Of course, the increased profit may not always manifest itself in numbers; but we are guaranteed to see those profits either in this world or, preferably, in the hereafter.

¹³⁵ People need each other. God has planted this mutual need in all people as one of the bonds that bring people together. To fulfill these needs, we are encouraged to seek out suitable people and avoid those with lowly and uncouth character. A generous person is more likely to give than a miser. An honorable person is more likely to preserve our honor in our time of need than a wretch. A magnanimous person is less likely to remind us of his favor and gloat over us than a petty person. The following tradition reflects this teaching: “Imām ‘Alī prayed, ‘O God, do not make me needy of any of your creatures.’ The Messenger of God said, ‘Alī, do not say that, for every person is in need of [other] people.’ ‘Alī said, ‘O Messenger of God, what should I pray?’ He said, ‘Say, ‘O God, do not make me needy of the worst of your creatures.’” ‘Alī said, ‘O Messenger of God, who are the worst of God’s creatures?’ He replied, ‘Those who give and then remind of their favor, and those who deny and then reprimand’” (*Mizān al-ḥikmah* vol.2 p.704). In another tradition, Imām ‘Alī says, “A need left unfulfilled is a lighter burden to bear than seeking it from those unworthy” (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 66). Accordingly, the present exhortation advises us not to seek help from those of base character, for they are likely to turn us away, hold their favor over us, or disclose our need to others.

¹³⁶ The word *zanīn* could be translated as the passive participle meaning “suspect”. Alternatively, it could be construed as an active participle meaning “suspicious.” According to the first meaning, it is risky to befriend a person of ill repute because it is possible that people’s suspicions are true, and we would not want to naively open ourselves up to the harm such a friend can cause. According to the second meaning, a suspicious person makes for a miserable friend, since he always assumes the worst of us. If we befriend such a person, we will endlessly find ourselves trying to defend our most benign actions and comments against his oversensitive presumptions.

¹³⁷ These two sentences seem to fit together to convey a single message. First, Imām ‘Alī encourages us to be content with what time—i.e. life in this world—doles out to us by way of worldly amenities. As long as we have what we need, he asks us not to rock the boat by making huge risky leaps to change our worldly circumstances. Then, in the second sentence, he gives a specific example of the kind of thing we ought to avoid. We ought not to enter risky ventures that could wipe us out completely if they fail. That is not to say that we should never be willing to enter a risky business deal. Here he is speaking of risking the very assets we need to survive, without which we will fall into poverty. If on the other hand, someone is fortunate enough to have assets that are non-vital to survival, he is encouraged to invest it and expand his financial worth. For instance, Imām ‘Alī advises, “Venture to do business, for it will suffice you of the wealth of others. God loves one who is skilled [in business] and trustworthy” (*Mizān al-ḥikmah* vol.1 p.324 tradition 2023).

¹³⁸ Recalcitrance is to be so blindly insistent on a position that we stand by it even when we understand it to be wrong. It is a quality closely linked with pride. Having taken a position on an issue, it is often seen as an affront to our sense of pride to rescind that position or to admit fault and apologize. This is especially true as we get older or rise in the social order. As the stakes increase, it becomes harder and harder to stand down. The best prophylactic measure to avoid stubbornness is to speak and act thoughtfully. If we are able to reduce the number and severity of our mistakes through thoughtfulness, we will reduce the number of times we must break our ego and apologize. For this reason, Imām ‘Alī says, “There is more honor in not needing an excuse than in offering a truthful one”

Compel yourself, when your brother [in faith]¹³⁹ severs ties, to reconnect; when he turns away, to be gentle and speak kindly with him; when he is tightfisted, to give generously to him; when he distances himself, to draw near to him; when he is harsh, to be gentle with him; and when he is wrong, to excuse him. [Do this] to such an extent that it seems you are his slave and he is your benefactor. Beware, however, of doing this in the wrong circumstances or to those unworthy.¹⁴⁰

(*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 329). Despite such a policy of thoughtfulness, as fallible beings, we will inevitably find ourselves in the wrong at times. At these junctures, our commitment to truth must prevail over our need for self-preservation, and we must swallow our pride and admit fault. In this admonishment, Imām ‘Alī refers to stubbornness as a steed waiting to carry us away. Like a bucking bronco, stubbornness threatens everyone in its path. Once we open the door to stubbornness by taking an irrefragable stance, we bind ourselves so closely with that position that to compromise the position is to compromise our honor. It is wiser to bind ourselves to the truth, such that even the greatest compromise of position—since done for truth’s sake—brings honor instead of shame.

¹³⁹ This and the following exhortations specifically mention one’s “brother in faith,” and “friend.” This is not to say that the advice he gives is only relevant to relationships with other believers and that we should deal vengefully with non-believers. Rather, these policies are applicable to non-Muslims too, as long as they are not malicious and ill-willing.

¹⁴⁰ The Prophet Muḥammad said in a sermon, “Shall I not inform you of the most virtuous trait for this life and the hereafter? [It is] to forgive him who has wronged you, to reconnect with him who has severed ties with you, to be good to him who has been bad to you, and to give to him who has denied you” (*Mustadrak al-wasā’il* 9.1.95.1). Such exhortations are common in the traditions and supplications of the Prophet and Imams. Imām ‘Alī says, “When you gain an advantage over your enemy, show gratitude for your advantage by being clement to him” (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 11). Perhaps most famously, Imām al-Sajjād has said the following in his “Supplication for Noble Virtues”: “O God, bless Muḥammad and his family. Grant me success to repel him who deceives me with good wishes, to repay him who abandons me with kindness, to reward him who denies me with generosity, to counter him who severs ties with me by reconnecting, and to oppose him who slanders me with high praise” (*al-Ṣaḥīfah al-sajjādiyyah* supplication 20 stanza 9). Such traditions stem, in reality, from the Qur’ānic exhortations found in the following phrases: “To forgive is closer to the fear of God” (Qur’ān 2:237); and “adopt [a policy of] excusing [people’s faults], enjoin good, and turn away from the foolish” (Qur’ān 7:199); “they must excuse and forbear. Would you not love for God to forgive you?” (Qur’ān 24:22).

This message of unsolicited forgiveness also resonates well with modern principles of conflict resolution and self-development. It is tempting to equate these exhortations with the Christian teaching of “turning the other cheek.” Jesus is quoted as saying, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ But now I tell you: do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, let him slap your left cheek too. And if someone takes you to court to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well. And if one of the occupation troops forces you to carry his pack one mile, carry it two miles. When someone asks you for something, give it to him; when someone wants to borrow something, lend it to him. You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your friends, hate your enemies.’ But now I tell you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may become the sons of your Father in heaven. For he makes his sun to shine on bad and good people alike, and gives rain to those who do good and to those who do evil. Why should God reward you if you love only the people who love you? Even the tax collectors do that! And if you speak only to your friends, have you done anything out of the ordinary? Even the pagans do that!” (*Matthew* 5:38-47, TEV). Indeed, the words attributed to Jesus in this passage resonate with the aforementioned teachings of the Qur’ān and *sunnah*.

The difficulty, though, is that many verses, traditions, and supplications permit just requital. The following verses express this permission clearly: “The requital of evil is a similar evil. But whoever forgives and conciliates, his reward lies with Allah” (Qur’ān 42:40); and “And if you retaliate, retaliate with the like of what you have been made to suffer, but if you are patient, that is better for you” (Qur’ān 16:126).

The solution to this conundrum is not so simple as to say that while retaliation is permitted, forgiveness is always better. This simple dichotomy is confounded by indications that, in certain circumstances, retaliation is actually better, or even the only right path. The last sentence of the paragraph we are currently studying is a case in point. Imām ‘Alī warns us not to be forgiving “in the wrong circumstances or to those unworthy.” In “Kumayl’s Supplication” we find the sentence, “O God intend [evil] for him who intends evil for me, and trick him who tricks me.” In “Alqamah’s Supplication” we recite, “O God intend [evil] for him who intends evil for me, and

Do not make friends with your friend's enemy or you will antagonize your friend.¹⁴¹ Desire for your brother only what is best, whether it be good [in his eyes] or bad.¹⁴² Swallow your anger for I do not think there is a drink with a sweeter and more savory aftertaste.¹⁴³ Be

trick him who tricks me...O God, keep him at bay from me through poverty that shall never be eased, with affliction that shall never be concealed...with sickness that shall never be cured...and take from him on my behalf his ability to hear, to see, to speak, his hands, his legs, his heart, and all his limbs, and afflict them all with sickness you shall not cure with such intensity that you keep him at bay from me through it..." In the "Supplication of *al-Nudbah*," we refer to Imām al-Mahdī as "the avenger of the blood of him who was killed at Karbalā'." Even one of the names of God is *al-Muntaqim*, "The Avenger," for the divine punishment of the sinful in this world and in hellfire, is nothing more than God's retaliation against those acts too evil to forgive. Certainly, if forgiveness were always better than vengeance, God in his perfection, would have demonstrated this through his own actions. That God, his prophets, and imams take revenge under certain circumstances, and that they advise us to follow suit, shows that there is a place for vengeance. The challenge is to determine what that place is.

Broadly speaking, the standard by which to judge a circumstance and determine where along the spectrum of forgiveness to retaliation we want to place ourselves is to see how we can gain the greatest good for ourselves and for the person who has committed the wrong. To do this, we must first differentiate between friends and well-wishing individuals on one hand and disinterested strangers and malevolent individuals on the other. Where a friend is concerned, forgiveness is the rule, for it is safe to assume that a friend generally has good intentions, even if he errs at times and wrongs us. With him, vengeance will only destroy the friendship, while forgiveness maintains the friendship and brings the greatest good for both parties. In dealing with the wrongs of a stranger or a malevolent individual, we must also judge the situation based on the abovementioned criteria. If the person has clearly made a mistake and is penitent for what he has done, we ought to be forgiving and accepting. The philosophy behind such magnanimity is expressed in the verse, "Repel [evil] with what is better. [If you do so,] behold, he with whom you have mutual feelings of enmity will be as a warm friend" (Qur'ān 41:34). If, on the other hand, he shows no compunction for the wrong he has inflicted, we should try to decipher whether we may make headway in befriending him by "turning the other cheek" or not. In many cases, people who are callous at first, can be softened and befriended through skilled magnanimity. The Prophet and Imams were particularly good at doing this as evinced by many traditions. However, doing this is extremely challenging. Accordingly, Islam has left open the door of just retaliation for dealing with such people, for many people feel such anger at being wronged that they need to see justice carried out before they can rest easy. Qur'ān 42:40 and 16:126 allow them requital while encouraging them to take the higher path. Occasionally, we encounter people, so hopelessly malignant that even the greatest act of benevolence cannot crack them. Such people may actually exploit our kindness to cause further harm. These are the unscrupulous criminals of the world who repeat their offense if shown clemency by a judge, who are unmoved by kindness, who persist unstopably in their evil. It is with these anomalies that we must never show mercy, with whom turning the other cheek is foolhardy, for whom Islam ordains retribution and even death (see *Riyāḍ al-sālikīn* vol. 3, p.330; *Jāmi' al-sa'ādāt* vol. 1, p. 288-91; and *Pand-e Javeed* vol.1, p.168-172).

¹⁴¹ In another tradition, Imām 'Alī says "...Your enemies are three...your own enemy, your friend's enemy, and your enemy's friend" (*Nahj al-Balāghah* saying 295). This principle applies equally to social friendships, political alliances, and religious and spiritual friendships. Thus, we must consider the consequences of befriending the political enemies of our Muslim brethren, and the enemies of God, his prophet, and his imams.

¹⁴² A true friend is selfless in his devotion to his friend. He keeps his friends best interests at heart. This devotion may manifest itself in different ways depending on the circumstances. If his friend is acting righteously and rationally he will support him. And if he is acting wrongly and senselessly, he will advise, admonish, and even chastise him. It does not matter whether the chosen line of action seems good or bad to his friend, as long as this goal is attained. In this vein, the Prophet Muḥammad has said, "A Muslim has thirty rights on his brother...that he aid him whether he wrongs [others] or is wronged. He aids him when he wrongs [others] by preventing him from wronging [them]. And he aids him when he is wronged by helping him fight for his rights" (*Wasā'il al-shī'ah* 12.2.122.24).

¹⁴³ There are two stages in the process of bringing negative anger under control. In the first stage, when we feel angry, we are encouraged to suppress actions and words that stem from anger. This is referred to as *kazm al-ghayz* or suppression of anger. The traditions say that the result of diligently practicing anger suppression eventually allows us to eliminate the feeling of anger altogether so that we can calmly face the inconsiderate, frustrating, and even offensive acts of others without reacting unthinkingly. This stage is called *ḥilm* or forbearance, and it is

gentle with him who is harsh with you, for [in return] it is likely that he will be gentle with you.¹⁴⁴ Forestall your enemy with grace, for that is the sweeter of the two victories.¹⁴⁵ If you wish to sever ties with your brother [in faith], leave for him a path [to your heart] by which he may return if, one day, it occurs to him to do so.¹⁴⁶

If someone thinks well of you, confirm his thoughts.¹⁴⁷ Do not violate your brother's rights relying upon what [fraternity] exists between you and him, for he whose rights you violate will not [long] remain your brother.¹⁴⁸ Let your family not be the most wretched of [God's] creatures because of you.¹⁴⁹ Do not seek [friendship with] him who is indifferent to

considered one of the greatest virtues after knowledge itself. Imām 'Alī says, "If you are not forbearing then act as though you are, for it is rare that one acts like a people without becoming one of them" (*Nahj al-balāghah* 207).

¹⁴⁴ This exhortation is in the same spirit as the verse, "Repel [evil] with what is better. [If you do so,] behold, he with whom you have mutual feelings of enmity will be as a warm friend" (Qur'ān 41:34).

¹⁴⁵ We can stop our enemies with brute force and harshness, or we can stop them by acting graceful and magnanimous. Both paths lead to victory, but the latter is sweeter for it forestalls him and builds a relationship with him at once, whereas the former forestalls him and burns all bridges as a consequence.

¹⁴⁶ As much as we might like to believe that friendship lasts forever, there are problems that may arise between friends that make a continued relationship unbearable or even unwise. For instance, one friend may become a negative influence on the other such that he fears he may fall into immorality or worse. This particular exhortation admonishes moderation in enmity, but moderation in friendship is just as prudent. Both are indicated by another tradition of Imām 'Alī. He says, "Love your friend moderately, for he may one day become our enemy. And hate your enemy moderately, for he may one day become your friend" (*Nahj al-balāghah* 268).

It is important to note that the assumption in this exhortation is that we have cut ties with this friend only because of some incorrigible trait or behavior in him that we fear will negatively influence us. It is not that he is the same today as he has always been, and that we have had a change of heart. It is for this reason that he entertains the possibility that "he may return," and does not mention anything about us returning to him. In reality, we are not leaving him willingly. We are only leaving him for self-preservation because he has left us no choice but to cut ties. However, we are not going to burn our bridges behind us so that he may save face and reinstitute the friendship easily whenever he decides to.

¹⁴⁷ In this sentence, Imām 'Alī earmarks one of God's great blessings and admonishes us to take full advantage of it. God, in his wisdom, has deemed it fitting to keep many of the Muslims' faults hidden from others' view. When our faults are hidden, we are able to confess and repent while saving face before people. We are able to maintain our honor in the eyes of others and foster a general sense of optimism in humankind. As a result, we often find that people hold us in far greater esteem than our failings and sins would warrant. They honestly think we are better than we are. Far from asking us to burst this bubble and reveal our secrets, the Imām is telling us to recognize this invaluable blessing of God. Furthermore, he wants us to use people's esteem as a launching board for real self-improvement. He challenges us to rise to the standards others believe we have already reached, to prove them right.

¹⁴⁸ Often the familiarity of friendship and blood relations makes us lax in fulfilling our duties. We may fail to appreciate our friends' favors or the kindness of a sibling. We may take our spouses' efforts for granted. We may fail to apologize to them for our mistakes. All the while we excuse ourselves saying, "they will understand." Here Imām 'Alī warns us not to be so presumptuous with those closest to us. We should rather make doubly sure that we fulfill our obligations to them in honor of our relationship with them.

¹⁴⁹ There are two interpretations for this sentence depending on how we understand the prepositional phrase "*bika*." We may take it to mean "because of you," and the sentence will read as I have translated it. Sometimes a man becomes heavily engaged in his work. He feels he has a mission to succeed in his work and he allows nothing to interfere with it. He may become so focused that he neglects his duties to his family, especially to his children. He may leave for work before they rise, and return home after they are asleep. He may neglect to spend time with them, to teach them, to love them. His family is wretched because of him. His wife is lonely and pressured by the stress of raising children and running a household single-handedly. His children are left without discipline, without love, with a sense of worth. All because of him. Thus, the Imām reminds us to fulfill our obligations to our family alongside our others work and duties so that we are not the cause of their wretchedness.

Alternatively, we may understand "*bika*" to mean "in your eyes," and the translation will read, "Let your family not be the most wretched of [God's] creatures in your eyes." We are encouraged to be kind to all people, most of

you. But [once you have built a friendship] let your brother not be more forceful in severing ties with you than you are in reconnecting with him.¹⁵⁰ Do not be more inclined to do bad than you are to do good.¹⁵¹ Let not the wrongs of him who has wronged you overwhelm you, for he works for his own detriment and your benefit; and the appropriate requital for him who causes you happiness is not to hurt him.

Know, my son, that sustenance is of two kinds: one that *you* seek out and one that seeks *you* out such that it comes to you even if you do not go to it.¹⁵² How ugly is it to degrade yourself when in need¹⁵³ and to scorn [the needy] when rich,¹⁵⁴ [for] only that is [truly] yours

all to our family. In a famous tradition, the Prophet Muḥammad said, “The best of you is the best to his family, and I am the best to my family” (*Man lā yaḥḍuruḥu al-faqīh* vol. 3, p. 555, tradition 4908). Some people may treat their families worse than they treat anyone else. Outside the home, they are cheerful and generous, but at home they are angry, harsh, and violent. Accordingly, Imām ‘Alī is admonishing us to be as the Prophet has taught us, not as this latter group.

¹⁵⁰ We must read this sentence and the previous sentence together to understand them correctly. The first sentence speaks of the situation before we have made friends with someone. If a person shows no interest in building a friendship, he advises us not to insist or make advances. Doing so would compromise your honor and yield no fruit. However, once a friendship has been kindled, we must do all in our power to nurture it and preserve it as long as the friendship is a positive force in our life.

¹⁵¹ It is true there are instances where harshness is justified, even favorable. However, as we have seen, these instances are very few. Our predominant and default policy should be kindness. Harshness should be kept in reserve to be used only where there is no path to kindness.

¹⁵² This same sentence surfaces again in *Nahj al-balāghah* saying 379.

When Imām ‘Alī divides sustenance into these two categories, he does not speak of the sustenance that actually reaches a person. Rather he speaks in general of the money, food, housing, and clothing that people spend much of their lives trying to procure. Accordingly, the sustenance “that *you* seek out” refers to the things that we desire from this world, while the sustenance “that seeks *you* out” refers to the things that God has ordained for us. The relationship between the things that most people desire and what God has ordained for them is often out of balance. They want much, and spend their time and energy pursuing things that are impossible for them to attain, while they are only guaranteed receipt of their ordained portion assuming they fulfill certain conditions.

It might seem such advice would inculcate in people a lethargic work ethic. It allows us to justify our laziness by saying, “whatever is ordained for me will come to me whether I go after it or not.” This is absolutely not the message to take away from this tradition. It is made clear in many other traditions that God’s apportionment is contingent upon human effort such that our sustenance is guaranteed only if we work hard. Additionally, according to the system of *badā’* (contingency in God’s apportionment), we can even play a role in changing God’s apportionment by praying for increased sustenance or by giving charity among other things. Thus, the purpose of this tradition is not to encourage laziness.

Rather, his message here is similar to his message earlier in this letter to “be graceful in your efforts to seek [sustenance] and earn a living, for many efforts to seek [sustenance] end in bankruptcy. Not all who seek are given, and not all who are graceful [in seeking] are deprived.” By informing us that sustenance is apportioned for us, he wants to transfer our trust and reliance from the feeble means at our disposal to the unlimited, omnipotent means at God’s disposal. He does not say, “do not work.” He says, “Work hard, and put your trust in God, for he is the one who dispenses and withholds.” As long as you fulfill your duty to him, he will take care of you.

The ramifications of this God-reliant world view are astounding. The Imām earmarks some of these in the following sentences. It injects hope into the hearts of the poor, for they realize they will not be abandoned by God for as long as they are meant to live. It makes the wealthy more generous, for they realize that all that they have is from God, and that charity does not decrease one’s sustenance. It allows people more time to fulfill their obligations to God, family, and community, for they realize that they are not going to make more money if they spend all their time working and neglect their obligations in the process.

¹⁵³ Dignity is one of the first casualties of poverty, and Imām ‘Alī wants to prevent this from happening. By telling us that our sustenance is decreed by God, he reassures the poor among us that our poverty is also decreed by God, for in his wisdom, he has determined that it is presently the best state for us. He also assures us that none other than God can lift us out of poverty. Thus, there is no sense in sacrificing our dignity to beg from others for they can do nothing for us except further our humiliation. In this vein, God describes an exemplary class of poor

from this world which you spend to improve your abode [in this world],¹⁵⁵ and if you are going to fret over what passes from your hands [through charity], then you should be fretting over all that never reached you[r hands to begin with].¹⁵⁶

Extrapolate what has not yet transpired from what has already transpired, for [the] events [of life] are similar.¹⁵⁷ And do not be among those who do not benefit from admonishment unless it causes them extreme pain, for those with intellect learn through discipline while beasts learn only by the lash.¹⁵⁸

Cast off your worries with resolute patience and unwavering conviction.¹⁵⁹

people saying, “The unaware suppose them to be well-off because of their reserve. You recognize them by their mark; they do not ask the people beseechingly” (Qur’ān 2:273).

¹⁵⁴ If the wealthy only realized that their wealth was from God, they would never scorn those who need it more than they. Rather they would fulfill their duty to God and to their fellow man and share with them the bounties over which God has given him a mandate.

¹⁵⁵ This clause conveys the same message as the prophetic tradition, “O Son of Adam, you do not truly possess your wealth unless you eat it and excrete it; wear it and make it threadbare; or give it in charity and thereby make it last forever” (*Sharḥ nahj al-balāghah* vol. 16 p.116). It provides a rationale for why we should be generous and not scornful with those in need, for the excess wealth that we possess does not truly belong to us. All that belongs to us is what we used according to our need. All else is a trust placed in our hands to test our righteousness. To pass this test, we must give this excess wealth in charity and be generous with those in need.

We can also construe this clause in another way: “Only that serves you from this world which improves your permanent abode.” Our wealth only benefits us if we spend it in a way that improves our state in the hereafter. Therefore, no matter how much money we may have, and no matter how well we may use it to our worldly advantage, if it does not serve us in the hereafter, then it is really not benefitting us at all. And what better way to ensure our status in the hereafter than to use our resources to help those in need.

¹⁵⁶ This clause complements the preceding rationale for being generous and not scornful with those in need. The preceding clause told us we should not hesitate to help others with our excess wealth because that wealth does not really belong to us. This clause says that it is absurd to fret over money “lost” to charity, since that money was never really ours anyway. In fact, it is just as absurd as fretting over all the wealth in this world that was never in our possession to begin with. In either case, we are fretting over losing what is not ours, and this is absurd.

¹⁵⁷ Most of the commentators have understood this sentence to be a continuation of the previous advice about sustenance. However, along with Fayz al-Islām, I believe the Imam is beginning a new thought. His message here is similar to what he said earlier in this letter: “My son, although I have not lived the lives of [all] who have passed before me, I have examined their deeds, and pondered over their histories, and roamed among their ruins to such an extent that I have become like one of them. Rather, because of the news of them that has reached me, it is as though I have lived with the first to the last of them. Thus, I know what deeds of theirs were pure [and good] and what were murky [and bad]; what were beneficial and what were harmful.” Rather, he is now advising his son to take advantage of history just as he took advantage of it, to learn from the lives of others just as he learned.

¹⁵⁸ He likens those who fail to use their intellect to learn the lessons of history to cattle who respond to nothing and cannot be trained except through physical training techniques.

¹⁵⁹ Worry and hardship go hand in hand with life in this world. People have different ways of handling these worries. Some collapse under the burden of worries and fall into depression or worse. Some escape them by going on vacation or distracting themselves with entertainment. Some drown their worries in alcohol and other intoxicants. In this sentence, Imām ‘Alī gives us two tools with which to handle our worries. First, he advises us to exercise patience. Patience does not imply apathy to the situation, but rather an inner strength that allows us to continue working to tackle our problems and fulfill our obligations despite the hardships we are facing. Second, he advises us to strengthen our conviction in God’s omnipotence and overarching wisdom. He wants us to examine the world around us and remind ourselves that God, the Creator, is also God, the Lord and manager of all affairs. His knowledge is infinite; his power is infinite; his love for his creatures is far-reaching; and everything that happens is under his direct control. He has ordained your current hardships because, in his wisdom, he knows that it is the best thing for you. Such conviction will also remind us that God, who causes our hardships, is the only one who can relieve us of them. Thus, our patience will give us fortitude to persist in finding a solution, while our conviction will keep us stay grounded in our belief that all that happens is under the auspices of God

He who abandons moderation falls into iniquity.¹⁶⁰
 A companion is [like] a blood relative.¹⁶¹
 A friend is he who is true in [your] absence.¹⁶²
 Carnal desire is a partner to blindness.¹⁶³
 Sometimes he who is unrelated is closer than a relative and a relative is more distant than he who is not related.¹⁶⁴
 A stranger is he who has no loved ones.¹⁶⁵
 If you transgress the truth, your journey will be difficult.¹⁶⁶

Almighty. With these two tools, no tribulations would be a match for us, and we would face them with the same grace as Prophet Job did.

¹⁶⁰ Moderation (*qaṣd*) is a virtue. The famous tradition reads, “The best of things is the middlemost” (*al-Kāfi* 6.9.2.18). This teaching has become the backbone of Islamic ethics, for every ethical virtue is seen as middle point between two extremes. Courage is a middle point between cowardice and rashness. Generosity is a middle point between stinginess and wastefulness. This teaching also holds true for actions and duties. The ideal is to spend a moderate amount of time and energy doing different types of activities so that we can best fulfill all our duties and satisfy all of our needs. The secret behind this truth is that our time and energy are limited while our needs and duties are various. Even acts such as worship, studying, and working, which are all virtuous activities, must be balanced. If we spend all of our time worshipping, we will have no time left for working or studying and vice versa. Accordingly, Imām ‘Alī cautions against veering from the middle way, for any deviation will lead to iniquity.

One challenge to implementing the golden rule of moderation is knowing what constitutes a balance. In some cases, experience and common sense dictate the limits. In other cases, we must rely on divine guidance to know what constitutes moderation. As a rule, the dictates of Islamic law (the *sharī‘ah*) already have the principle of moderation programmed into them. Thus, to be moderate in following the law is not to follow half of the laws or to follow them halfheartedly. Rather, to be moderate is to follow the law to a tee.

It is important to note that the golden rule of moderation does not hold true for such matters of the heart as belief and love. Moderation in belief is not desirable in the least. Rather, the ideal is to continuously strengthen our beliefs until they are rock solid. Similarly, moderation is not desirable in our love for God or his Prophet. Rather, the ideal is to know them so well that we love them in the extreme.

¹⁶¹ In societies where family relations are of utmost importance, there is a tendency to scorn those outside the family. Imām ‘Alī wishes us to extend our sense of responsibility and love to our companions and co-workers.

¹⁶² A friend is one who treats you in your presence as he treats you in your absence.

¹⁶³ By blindness, he means the blindness of the heart, not that of the eyes. The Qur’ān says, “it is not eyes that go blind, rather it is the hearts that lie in [people’s] breasts that go blind” (22:46). Certainly, the verse is not denying the existence of blindness of vision, but only explaining that blindness of the eyes is insignificant when compared to blindness of the heart. A person with a blind heart is one who refuses to see the truth however clear it may be. His blindness creates one barrier to the truth, since it does not allow him to see it or know it. His carnal desires create an additional barrier to the truth by attracting him to whatever his heart desires however immoral it may be. Thus, carnal desire is a partner and support for the blindness of the heart, leading the person further away from the truth and toward the endless pit of desire.

¹⁶⁴ Shared blood does not necessitate shared perspectives and goals. Sometimes we find that someone who shares nothing else in common shares our faith, our goals, and our vision, while close relatives and siblings have nothing more than blood in common. Apparently, the Imam’s message is for us to be aware of this truth so that we are not fooled by the façade of family ties on the one hand, and so we look for friendship and support even where we may least expect it.

¹⁶⁵ In another tradition, Imām ‘Alī says, “To lose one’s loved ones is like being a stranger in the land” (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 65). In both traditions, the Imam communicates the importance of friendship by likening one who loses his friends to a wayfarer who enters a city with no one to help him. Similarly, one without friends and alliances has no one to turn to and no one to solicit for help.

¹⁶⁶ This sentence is similar to a previous sentence: “He who abandons moderation falls into iniquity.” The path of truth is a straight, easy way. There are guides sent to lead us every step of the way and there are signs posted to mark the way. That is not to say there are no challenges on this path. The challenges arise, not from any difficulty on the path, but from the enemies of truth and the many temptations that try to pull us away. If it were not for

To limit yourself to what has been apportioned for you will sustain you better.¹⁶⁷
The most tenacious bond of which you will ever lay hold is the bond between you and God, the immaculate.¹⁶⁸
He who is ambivalent toward you is [also] your enemy.¹⁶⁹
Despair could lead to attainment when desire leads to destruction.¹⁷⁰
Not every weakness is exposed, and not every opportunity is [successfully] seized.¹⁷¹

these challenges, the path of truth would prove to be the most natural path in this world and the most rewarding in the hereafter. Accordingly, any deviation from the path of truth, while possibly providing short-lived pleasure, will only lead to difficulty in the long run.

¹⁶⁷ This sentence is a challenge to understand. I have translated it according to one of its possible meanings. According to this meaning the Imam is warning us against lusting after what is not apportioned for us. He wants us to be more concerned with fulfilling our duty than in ambitiously pursuing worldly possessions. Some people seem to think they can insure their own longevity and that of their legacy by tirelessly amassing things. In reality, the more they work and amass, the less time they leave themselves to pursue those things for which they have been given life. And in the end, they only attain what was apportioned for them anyway, so the excess effort was futile. This sentence is reminiscent of the supplication that is said after *'ishā'* prayer: "O God, therefore, bless Muḥammad and his family, and make my sustenance, O Lord, vast, its pursuit, easy, and its procurement, soon. And do not tire me by letting me pursue that in which you have not apportioned any sustenance for me. For you have no need for my fatigue and I am in dire need of your mercy" (*Mafāṭiḥ al-jinān*). It is also reminiscent of his previous statement: "Sustenance is of two kinds: one that *you* seek out and one that seeks *you* out such that it comes to you even if you do not go to it." The lesson of this sentence is that we should reduce the differential between what we desire and what we get, for our desire, no matter how great, will not change what we actually get. It is better to be moderate in our pursuit, enough to fulfill our duty and our responsibilities, and then spend the rest of our time and resources in pursuit of self-development and service to God and society.

¹⁶⁸ This sentence is similar to an admonishment he offered earlier in this letter: "[Hold] fast to his lifeline. What bond can be more tenacious than the bond between you and God, if only you grab hold of it?" Both admonishments advise us to rely only on God, for no other can support us as he can.

¹⁶⁹ Ibn Abi al-Ḥadīd and Jawād Mughniyyah have construed the phrase, "he who is ambivalent toward you ..." to mean that this person is simply indifferent to you. If we understand the phrase to mean indifference, it seems the Imam's advice is very strong indeed: everyone who is indifferent to you is your enemy, thus enmity is the default state for all people until they take a stance either for you or against you. Because this is obviously a wrong idea, they have decided that this sentence is addressed solely at Imām al-Ḥasan in so far as he is an imam and a political leader. They argue that this is the only way such a strong statement could be made since a political figure is known to all and each person is either for him or against him.

However, it is not necessary to construe this statement like that. We could alternatively construe the phrase, "he who is ambivalent toward you..." to mean that this person cares nothing for your rights and wellbeing. It is the same to him whether he observes your rights or not as long as he gets what he wants. Obviously, such a person is an enemy—perhaps not actively at the present moment—but he is potentially an enemy, and should be treated as such.

This sentence is valuable in that it makes us privy to an enemy we may not have otherwise identified. Not only is the person who is actively working against you your enemy. Even the person who does not care for your wellbeing is your enemy, for as soon as his interests conflict with yours he will not think twice about trampling you to attain his goal.

¹⁷⁰ We have limited knowledge of what is to our benefit and harm. In the supplication for *'Aṣr* prayer we read, "I beg him to turn [his attention] to me as one would turn to a slave...who has no control over what benefits him or harms him, nor [has he control over] his death, his life, or his resurrection" (*Mafāṭiḥ al-jinān*). For this reason, we often desire things that, if attained, would lead to our destruction. In these instances, we are fortunate if God inspires in us a sense of despair at ever attaining these things, for such despair will save us from destruction and allow us to attain salvation in this world and the next. We encountered a similar idea earlier in this letter where Imām 'Alī explained that our prayers are sometimes not answered because "[perhaps you asked for something, and] it was kept from you for your own good, for many a thing you ask for would destroy your faith were it granted."

¹⁷¹ This sentence cautions us to deal with our enemies with prudence. If we underestimate them and assume that they are weaker than us and will thus succumb to our superior strength, we may find ourselves dumbfounded

Sometimes one with keen sight misses his mark, and one who is blind hits it.¹⁷²
 Postpone your retribution, for you [can always] hasten it on [later] whenever you wish.¹⁷³
 Breaking ties with a fool is as beneficial as building them with one with intellect.¹⁷⁴
 The temporal world shall betray him who trusts it and belittle him who aggrandizes it.¹⁷⁵
 Not all who shoot hit [their targets].¹⁷⁶
 Times change with a changing of the guard.¹⁷⁷

when we see none of the weaknesses we supposed them to have or when we are unable to maneuver their weaknesses to our advantage. In this vein, Imām ‘Alī warns that not all our enemy’s weaknesses will necessarily be exposed. And even when they do and thereby provide us an opportunity to subdue them, we may find ourselves unable to avail ourselves of the opportunity.

¹⁷² Imām ‘Alī cautions us against relying on the self to the exclusion of the cause of all causes. No matter how skilled we may be, our success depends on many factors that are out of our hands, thus there is a chance we will miss our intended goal. Likewise, one who is blind, may be able to hit his mark because those factors out of his hand came together for him. The lesson to draw from this is not to throw up our hands and let things happen as they may. Rather, the lesson to take away is to place our reliance on God in whose hands all of those factors lie and then make our best effort with the skills he has given us. Once we have taken these steps, whether we miss our mark or hit it is inconsequential, for we will have successfully hit the real mark which is procuring the pleasure of God.

¹⁷³ If we rush to exacted retribution before we are certain that we are justified in doing so, we may find ourselves regretting our actions whenever we err. However, if we postpone retribution until we are certain, we can easily compensate for our error by exacting our retribution at that time. This statement is very similar in spirit to the advice Imām ‘Alī offered us earlier in this letter when he said, “Compensating for what has passed you up because of your silence is easier than compensating for what has passed you up because of your talking. Guard the contents of the water skin by tying its spout.”

¹⁷⁴ Earlier in this letter, the Imām exhorted us at great length to reconnect with believers who sever ties with us. Here he qualifies that exhortation and restricts his advice to those who use their intellect and act upon its dictates. An alliance with them is to our benefit. On the other hand, we are better off severing ties with the foolish—those who do not use their God-given intellect or do not act upon its dictates. Such a person is heedless of what benefits himself, so what can he possibly offer us? Acting on his forefather’s advice, Imām al-Riḍā once said the following about his uncle Muḥammad ibn Ja‘far ibn Muḥammad, otherwise known as “Dībājah,” “I have sworn to myself never to let a single roof cover him and me.” The transmitter of this tradition thought to himself, “This man exhorts us to be kind and to maintain ties, and then speaks like this about his own uncle?!” The thought had barely crossed his mind when Imām al-Riḍā looked at him and said, “[What I am saying] is [in a spirit of] kindness and maintaining ties. For whenever he comes to visit me and enters my company and then [leaves and] says something about me, people believe him. But if he does not enter my company and I do not enter his, nobody believes what he says” (*Uyūn akhbār al-riḍā* 2.47.1).

¹⁷⁵ I have translated the Arabic *zamān*, which literally means “time” as “temporal world.” In English too, we say, “*times* are good,” or “we live in terrible *times*” to the extent to which the temporal world has favored us with its blessings or stripped us thereof. This sentence and many just like it from the Prophet and Imams warns us that the blessings of this world are fleeting and fickle. Imām ‘Alī says, “When the material world bestows its favors on someone, it lends him the virtues of others. When it retracts its favors from him, it strips him of even his own virtues” (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 9). There is no sense in depending on them, for there is no guarantee they will continue for any length of time. Imām ‘Alī communicates his warning to us by personifying the temporal world, as though it betrays people and belittles them to spite them. Of course, this is not the case, for it is simply the nature of the world to fluctuate without regard for who is granted and who is denied. The message, however, is clear: since the nature of the temporal world is to be fickle, we must not rely upon it or give it more value than it is due. If we do so out of naïveté, sooner or later, we will realize that we were wrong when the tides turn. It is wiser to take his advice, put our trust in God, who is constant and unchanging, and treat the world as the mere tool and testing ground it was meant to be.

¹⁷⁶ The meaning and message of this sentence is identical to the previous sentence, “Sometimes one with keen sight misses his mark.”

Inquire about your travel companion before [choosing] a route, and your neighbors before [choosing] a home.¹⁷⁸

Be cautious of mentioning what causes people to laugh even if you simply quote it from someone else.¹⁷⁹

Be cautious of seeking the counsel of women, for their thinking is at best deficient and their resolve is at best indecisive.¹⁸⁰ Prevent them from being seen by [ensuring] they are

¹⁷⁷ This sentence literally reads, “When the king changes, the times change.” In this sentence, the Imam puts a finger on one of the causes for the fickleness of the temporal world: the fickleness of its rulers. This was most obvious in autocratic rulers of the past. But even in modern democratic governments, we find that the currents of public opinion can be just as fickle as the whims of a megalomaniac dictator.

¹⁷⁸ Whether we are planning a journey or planning to procure a residence, we will do well to choose carefully the people who are around us. In fact, the Imam advises to make this a priority even above choosing the route of our journey or the location of our residence. The reason for this advice is that the people with whom we surround ourselves have a great impact on our own personal development and choices in life.

¹⁷⁹ At first glance, this may seem like an injunction against telling jokes or even quoting humorous anecdotes. However, a comprehensive look at the traditions concerning the concepts of smiling (*al-tabassum*), laughing (*al-ḍiḥk*), joking (*al-muzāḥ*), and playfulness (*al-mudā‘abah*) reveal a very human side to the Prophet and Imams of which people are not always aware.

Smiling is definitely encouraged. We are told that the Prophet would smile whenever he spoke (*Makārim al-akblāq* p.21). Imām ‘Alī also tells us, “Cheerfulness is the snare of friendship” (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 6). As the intensity of a smile increases to a laugh, the traditions seek to restrain us slightly by encouraging us to laugh softly, not to laugh too much, not to laugh too loudly, and not to laugh without reason. Notwithstanding, laughing in moderation is still encouraged as we are told, “Jesus used to cry and laugh while John the Baptist used to cry and not laugh. What Jesus used to do was better” (*Bihār al-anwār* 73.1.106.11). Boisterous laughing or guffawing (*al-qahqahah*) is definitely looked down upon, since it shows a lack of control and makes one seem frivolous.

The traditions concerning joking (*al-muzāḥ*) also reveal a push toward moderation in the amount that we joke, the intention behind joking, and the content of our jokes. In general, joking is looked upon favorably. One tradition says, “A believer is playful, while a hypocrite is serious and stern” (*Tuḥaf al-‘uqūl* p.49). Many traditions relate jokes told by Prophet Muḥammad himself. In one, he told an old woman, “No old woman shall enter paradise.” When she was about to weep he said, “You shall not be old on that day, for God has said, ‘We have created them specially, and made them virgins, fond [of their mates], of a similar age as the people of the right hand’ (Qur‘ān 56:34-38).” In another, a woman named Umm Ayman came to him and said, “My husband is asking for you.” He asked, “Is he the one with some whiteness in his eyes?” (The implication was that his eyes were defective). She swore, “By God, he has no whiteness in his eyes!” He retorted, “Of course he has whiteness in his eyes.” Again she objected, “No, by God!” Then he said, “Everyone has some whiteness in his eyes.” (He meant the whiteness of the sclera). In another tradition, a woman asked the Prophet, “Please provide me with a camel.” He replied, “I shall provide you with the son of a camel.” She objected, “And what will I do with the son of a camel? It won’t support me.” So he said, “Every camel is after all the son of a camel.” And in another, he was eating dates with Imām ‘Alī. When he would finish a date, he would place the pit in front of ‘Alī, until a sizeable pile had collected in front of him. He told ‘Alī, “‘Alī, you are a glutton!” ‘Alī replied, “No, a glutton would eat the pits along with the dates!” (see *Al-Akblāq* of ‘Abd Allāh Shubbar p.134).

While the Prophet did joke with people, as we have seen, he placed certain limits on himself and on us. For instance, he said, “I joke, but I speak nothing but the truth” (*Bihār al-anwār* 16.1.6.1). Shaykh al-Narāqī has summed up these guidelines well when he writes, “Joking is only reprehensible if it is excessive or continuous or if it entails lying, backbiting or the like...As for moderate joking, which relaxes the mind and lightens the heart and does not entail annoying anyone or lying to anyone, that is not reprehensible” (*Jāmi‘ al-sa‘ādāt* vol.2 p.299).

Within the context of these teachings, the sentence currently under consideration is simply calling us to be cautious in telling jokes and trying to make people laugh, not to refrain from it altogether. For this reason I have translated the phrase *iyyāk* as “be cautious” rather than the more severe “beware.” It is warning us of the pitfalls of focusing on making people laugh, for if that is our goal, we may resort to any means possible to realize that goal, even if it be illegal and immoral. Furthermore, we might think that narrating a lie or a bit of gossip second hand may not be wrong as long as we are creating the tale ourselves. Here too he warns us to be cautious of what we relate so that we do not sacrifice our principles for a laugh.

[properly] covered, for strictly [enforcing their] covering guards them better, and [allowing them] to leave the house [uncovered, which is obviously depraved] is no worse than [allowing them to be seen without proper covering by] letting someone enter their quarters who is not trustworthy. [Furthermore,] if you can manage to prevent them from knowing any [man] other than yourself, then do it. Do not give a woman power over any affairs beyond her own, for a woman is a flower, not a advisor. Do not honor her more than she is due. Do not give her hopes of interceding [with you] on behalf of another. I warn you about [accusing your women of an insult to your] honor except where warranted, for that will push an upright woman into moral corruption and an innocent woman into one accused.

Assign to every person among your servants specific tasks for which you hold him accountable. For that will make it less likely that they shirk the responsibility of serving you.

¹⁸⁰ This paragraph is one of several statements in *Nahj al-balāghah* that have attracted the attention of Muslims and critics alike in the last century. As people's consciousness about the state of women has increased worldwide, attacks have been launched against Islam for allegedly maintaining a doctrine that is negatively disposed to women. It is not my purpose here to counter those attacks generally. Several works are available in English that brilliantly speak to these issues in general (see Muṭahhari, Murtaḍā, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, World Organization for Islamic Services, Tehran: 1998; Muṭahhari, Murtaza (sic), *The Islamic Modest Dress*, tr. Laleh Bakhtiar, ABJAD, Albuquerque: 1989; and Legenhausen, Muḥammad, "Islam vs. Feminism" published in *Contemporary Topics of Islamic Thought*, Al-Hoda, Tehran: 2000). My goal here is specifically to clarify the paragraph currently under consideration.

Muslim scholars generally take one of the following stances on traditions like this. Pre-modern scholars generally accepted them at face value and saw no need to justify them since the general attitude of people toward women was close to what these traditions seem to be saying (see the commentaries of Ibn Maytham, al-Rāwandī, al-Khū'ī, and al-Tustarī for instance). In modern times, there are scholars who are eager to dismiss these traditions under one of two pretexts: 1) They believe they contradict the Qur'an, other traditions, and the intellect (see Faḍl Allāh, Muḥammad Ḥusayn, *Dunyā-ye zan*, Suhrāwardī Research Institute, Tehran: 2003, p.58); 2) They believe Imām 'Alī spoke such statements with specific attention to 'Ā'ishah and did not intend to stereotype all women as such (Jawādī Āmūlī, 'Abd Allāh, *Zan dar āyineh-ye jalāl wa jamāl*, Isra Publication Center, Qum: 2003, p.370). This latter pretext has also been refuted strongly (Mughniyyah, Muḥammad Jawād, *Fī zilāl nahj al-balāghah*, vol.1, p. 374). A third stance that draws deeply on the long standing tradition of Islamic scholarship stands stoically by these traditions and does not waiver in the face of current trends and attacks. It seeks rather to understand these traditions for what they are in the larger context of Islamic teachings. Those who espouse this stance are loathe to dismiss a tradition because it contradicts modern sensibilities. They would rather humbly conclude that their own minds fall short of understanding the Imām's exact intent.

Let us pursue this third stance and view the current tradition. The Imām's advice against seeking the counsel of women stems from the weakness of their intellect. Many traditions indicate that women's intellect is weaker than men's (*Al-Kāfī* 5.3.2.1). This is not meant to be an insult to women or a compliment to men, rather a statement of fact, as if I were to say women are physically weaker than men. Intellect is the faculty by which human beings understand all things—among which are good and evil—and by which they differentiate among them. When a person possesses the critical level of intellect, he becomes accountable before God for his beliefs and actions. Below this critical level, he is not accountable; above this critical level, God's expectations of him are commensurate with his intellectual capacity, such that the obligations for which he is held responsible are concomitantly greater in number and more difficult.

To say that men have a stronger intellect than women does not necessarily mean that the intellect of every man is stronger than the intellect of every woman, rather it speaks more to the average. Additionally, there is a difference between having the faculty of intellect and using it. It is conceivable that a person have a stronger God-given faculty of intellect but still be weaker in intellect because he has failed to use what he has been given. For both these reasons, we will plausibly find women who have stronger intellects than most men either because they are exceptional women or because most men have failed to use their intellects.

Another important factor in comparing men's and women's intellect is emotion. In his wisdom, God has created a greater range of emotion in women than in men. Emotion, in turn, is counters the effect of the intellect, such that the intellect may determine a thing to be harmful, while one's emotions might coerce one to do it anyway.

Honor your relatives for they are like the wings with which you fly and the hands with which you launch your attack.

I entrust [your life in] this world and the hereafter to God. I ask him for the decree that is best for you in this world and the next. *Wa al-salām.*