

MUSLIM UNITY THROUGH THE PROPHETIC PATH OF SERVICE AND LOVE

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In the name of God (we begin), the universally and individually Merciful.

May God extol our noble lord, Muḥammad, his family, and his Companions and greet them with eternal peace.

Praise be to God who created the human being as special, and facilitated for him his means of livelihood, guided him to true faith as an act of sheer bounty, brought him out of the [many veils] of darkness by divine facilitation and taught him knowledge of that which he had not known. The bounty of God upon human beings is truly immense.

Extolations and greetings of perfect peace be upon our Prophet Muḥammad, the Chosen One, who was sent as a mercy to all the worlds and as a seal to all the Prophets and Messengers before him and upon his family and all of his Companions.

God says in His Glorious Book: ***(Strive with each other in [seeking] forgiveness of your Lord and a Garden the width of which is the heavens and the earth: prepared for the righteous)***, (Sura āli-‘Imrān, 3:122). To win this competition in faith which our Lord has commanded on us requires sound religious knowledge and practice in accord with it. It requires humility towards others and preferring them over ourselves. It means to be utterly truthful in our relation to God, the Real, while having good character towards His creation. All of this is represented in two great foundational pillars of Islam, the religion of truth; and they are **SERVICE and LOVE**.

The truthful believer races toward special forgiveness from his Lord by serving others and being sincere towards them with love so that he/she becomes more generous than the sea, more beneficial than the sun, and more humble than the earth beneath our feet.

The Messenger of God -may God extol him and greet him with perfect peace- said (in a *hadīth* authentically transmitted): *(Whoever lifts himself up in pride, God will put him down [in humiliation]. Whoever puts himself down in humility, God will lift him up [high]).* Muslim transmits to us that God, exalted be He, says: *(Pride is My upper garment, Glory is My lower garment. Whoever rivals Me regarding them, I will utterly destroy.)*.

Firm belief in God and knowledge of Him leaves us no room for pride or for regarding ourselves to be better than others. Rather, they continually remind the believer that he/she will ultimately be standing on the Day of Resurrection before his/her Lord. They make it obligatory for him/her to prepare for that day by good deeds. This knowledge calls us to approach God through service, preferring others over ourselves, and it fosters love which constitutes the foundation of the understanding (*fiqh*) in our religion. The least degree of the *faqīh* (one who has understanding of this religion) and who truly deserves this honourable title is not simply to memorize legal rulings but to know in one's heart with certainty that the Hereafter is better and more lasting than this world. When a person truly knows that the Hereafter is better than this world, his/her heart will be free of hypocrisy, show, and all other diseases of the spirit. When that happens, then he/she will derive true benefit from his/her intellect, and take on the characteristics of perfect manhood and womanhood and noble humanity. Then he/she will win the highest and most mindful degrees in this world and the next. Intellect will then command him/her to do what is most beneficial. Manhood/womanhood will command him/her to do what is most beautiful and becoming. Thus, he/she will strive on the path of service and love, following the footsteps of our Prophet Muḥammad, the noble Lord of the first and last generations, - may God extol him and greet him with perfect peace- .

This world is the abode of service. The next world is the abode of payment of that service. The Arabs say: (*The one who serves the people is [alone worthy of being] their lord*). The Messenger of God, may God extol him and greet him with perfect peace, was the greatest example of service and love both before receiving prophecy and afterwards. He did not ask to be paid or rewarded for what he did. He never commanded anyone to serve him as a king is served. For this reason, the truthful believer is content to be a servant – not one who is served. Al-Bukhārī and Muslim transmit to us that God's Messenger, peace be upon him, feared for himself when revelation first came to him in *Makkah* on the Mountain of Light. His wife *Khadījah* – may God be pleased with her - consoled him. She said: (*Never! [should you fear]. Have good tidings!. For by God, God will never ever humiliate you!*). Then she gave proof of this by her profound intellect citing the Prophet's sound character and high station, peace be upon him, by referring to his service and love of God's creation which were well-known and witnessed by all. She said: (*By God, you join the ties of kinship. You always speak the truth. You carry the heaviest burdens [in serving others]. You help the poor to earn what they need, and you give to them everything you possess. You welcome and honor the guest; you help [others] face the misfortunes that God, the Real, brings down upon them.*). The life of God's Messenger, may God extol him and greet him with perfect peace, constituted the highest example of service and love. This way of life became his *sunna* after the coming of prophecy. His devotion of service and love grew greater and never diminished.

This is how the life of God's Messenger, peace be upon him, was at the beginning of his mission. It was all service and love. It remained like this throughout his life, and it was still that way at the last moments of his earthly mission, which ended with the fragrance of musk. The closing verses of *Sūrat al-Tawba*, which were among the last to be revealed to God's Messenger -peace be upon him-, conclude his Prophetic mission

in the spirit of service, preference of the other over oneself, and love for all God's creation. God says in these verses by way of bidding farewell on behalf of His Messenger: ***(There has come to you a Messenger from yourselves. It weighs heavily upon him that you meet with misfortune. He is earnest in seeking good for you. With regard to the believers, he is compassionate and merciful.)*** The people addressed by God's words -exalted be He- ***(there has come to you)*** and the words immediately following it refer to all human beings who were called to Islam, both those who turned their backs on it and those who accepted it. This is understood by the special exception that is drawn at the end of the verse when God says: ***(With regard to the believers, he is compassionate and merciful)***. Thus, the Messenger of God -may God extol him and greet him with perfect peace- desired good for all people - not just for the believers. The opposition of those who rejected him and brought damnation upon themselves weighed heavily upon him. He did not take joy in their perdition. He was intent upon the guidance of them all, although there was special compassion, mercy and joy in his heart for those who believed and won salvation. These are among the fruits of the Prophet's -may God extol him and greet him with perfect peace- absolute truthfulness with God, the Real, and his good character toward all created things. All of this is among those refined characteristics that flowed naturally from the spirit of true belief, humility, preferring others over oneself, service, and love.

Among the broadest and most general Prophetic proofs urging us to serve all God's creation and show them good character is the statement of God's Messenger, peace be upon him, as related in Bukhārī and Muslim: *(There is a reward for [kindness] toward anything with a moist liver)*. That is, there is a reward for being good to every living thing even if in just giving water. In the authentically transmitted *hadīth* of Bukhārī and Muslim, God's Messenger said, may God extol him and greet him with perfect peace: *(Once while a dog was circling around a well about to die from thirst, an adulterous woman of the Children of Israel saw him. She took off her shoe [in order to fill it with water] and gave [the dog] water. All of her sins were forgiven because of [this act].)* Thus, God forgave the adulterous woman all her wrongs and set her life right because of an act of service she did for a dog. There is nothing in the various transmissions of the *hadīth* that indicate that she did this service out of belief in God or as an act of repentance, only that she did it out of compassion of this humble creature that God created.

True service is a sign of virtuous manhood and the perfection of humanity in men and women alike. It springs from deep knowledge of God and humility towards others. For that reason, it is said:

*If a man increases in knowledge, he increases in humility (towards others).
 If a man increases in ignorance, he increases in regarding himself better (than others).
 An illustration of this in the limb of a tree weighed down by the fruit it bears.
 If it is stripped of the weight of its fruits, it goes too high to be reached.*

God's Messenger, peace be upon him, said in a *hadīth* narrated by trustworthy transmitters: *(Verily, God -glorious and majestic be He- is generous and He loves high-*

minded matters, and He loathes lowly ones). “Lowly matters” are those which are unworthy and despicable. ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, the second rightly-guided caliph -may God be pleased with him- said: *(Do not let your aspirations be petty. For I have never seen people further removed from doing noble things than those whose aspirations are petty)*. Al-Aḥnaf ibn Qays, the lord of the tribe of Tamīm through whom many of them came to Islam, would say: *(Virtuous manhood is to refrain from asking of others and to have a profession (by which you earn a living))*. Thus, the noble servant who devotes himself to service should hold back from asking others to serve or help him, and he should guard his honor by relying on himself -not on others- by having a skill by which he earns a living and protects himself from the humiliation of begging from others. It is also one of the conditions of service to come to the aid of others. An essential part of this is to assist others by virtue of your personal prestige and social standing. To use your standing to intercede on behalf of others is one of the easiest yet most effective types of service a person may do. It may often be more beneficial than giving money. There is no excuse for the person who has been granted prestige to be avaricious in using it such that his condition might be worse than a person who is avaricious with money. How can a person be a true servant of God if he is not capable of serving people and the things that God has created?

As for love, some of the righteous believers of past generations have said: (Whoever loves God and loves for God’s sake, his/her state of sainthood has been brought to completion.) The sign of loving for the sake of God is that we love those who are good to us and those who are not. Love is among the most majestic of the spiritual stations of certainty in belief. And service is one of the products of love, because love implies that you desire for others what you desire for yourself and that you strive to be beneficial to them. The person who truly has the quality of love exerts himself/herself to bring benefit to the one he/she loves and to keep harm from them. The love of God is that you make the entirety of yourself a gift for the one you love. Thus, nothing remains of yourself for yourself. This means that you freely give to the one you love your will-power, your determination, your deeds, yourself, your wealth, and your time. Thus, love in this true sense of the word is the ultimate form of preferring others over oneself and it is the fullest example of service. It is said that servanthood (to God) is wrapped up in love to the degree that if there is no love, there is no servanthood. Thus, love is the spirit of true belief, upright deeds, spiritual stations and states, such that when the believer lacks love, he/she is like a dead body that lacks a spirit. Love is the reality of religious sincerity (*ikhlas*). Thus, it is the essence of Islam because Islam means to submit oneself to God in utter humility, obedience, and love... Indeed, love is the ultimate reality of our testimony of faith: (There is no god -no object worthy of worship- but God).

God -exalted be He- says in the Qur’ān: ***(Verily those who believe and do good deeds, God Most-Merciful will make for them a special love)***. That is, God will put a special type of love in their hearts. This love will be a proof of the truthfulness of their faith and the sincerity of their deeds and the validity of their knowledge of God, exalted be He. Bukhārī and Muslim transmit from the Messenger of God, peace be upon him, that he said: *(None of you believe until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.)*. It is stated in the commentary of this *hadīth* that what is meant by reference to “the

brother” -which in Arabic is a word that includes “the sister” as well- is general Adamic or human brotherhood. It is not just the brotherhood of Islam. This meaning is given explicitly in another transmission of the same *hadīth* with an excellent chain of transmitters: *(None of you believe until he loves for the people (or humankind) what he loves for himself)*. As was stated just a little earlier, love here is not just an abstract emotion of kindness in the heart. Rather it is the active will to bring benefit to those we love, divert harm from them, and exert ourselves in the dynamic pursuit of this goal.

Muslim transmits that God’s Messenger, may God extol him and greet him with perfect peace, said to ‘Ā’isha, the Mother of the believers, may God be pleased with her: *(‘Ā’isha, God is kind. He loves kindness. He gives [rewards] for kindness that He does not give for roughness and that He does not give for anything else)*. Such kindness is one of the courtesies of love. It pertains to the ways that virtuous manliness, wisdom, and truthful work for God express themselves.

The Messenger of God, peace be upon him, said: *(You shall not enter the Garden until you believe, and you will not [truly] believe until you love one another)*. When love for each other appears in human hearts, they are cured of all the diseases of the hearts such as envy, rancor, and regarding themselves to be better than others. From this standpoint of spiritual health and true sanity grow all other excellent qualities of good character, which are the keys to good and the locks that lock down evil.

The way of service and love is the very essence of the Path of the Hereafter. Whoever takes on these moral qualities has removed from his/her heart every spiritual obstacle. Shaykh ‘Abd al Qādir al-Jīlānī would say, may God be pleased with him: *(I did not arrive at [the knowledge of] God -exalted be He- through standing at in prayer, fasting by day, and studying religious knowledge. Rather, I arrived at [the knowledge of] God through generosity, humility toward others, and a sound heart [free of ill feeling toward others])*.

It is well-known that Shaykh ‘Abd al Qādir’s habit was, however, to stand at night in prayer and fast by day just as he was one of the most learned people of his time in all fields of Islamic knowledge to the extent that his contemporaries called him the Shaykh of Islam. But his words show that generosity is the foundation of the Path to success in the Hereafter. With humility towards others, this precious plant is brought to its fruition. When these two qualities are fully realized, the heart is sound and free of all ill will and ill feeling, and every harmful attachment that holds it back from God is removed. Service and love belong to the category of generosity, humility and a sound heart. They reflect absolute seriousness in taking the path of the Hereafter. It is said: “Whoever is truly serious [in seeking the truth] will find it.” When the tree of service and love is planted in our hearts and watered by the water of sincerity and the desire to follow God’s beloved, the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, it produces the most amazing types of fruit and it bears those fruits at all the times and in all seasons by the permission of its Lord. Its top root is deeply secured in the foundation of our hearts, and its towering branches are connected to the furthest Lote Tree in the seventh heaven.

Al-Tabarānī and Ibn Ḥabbān relate in an authentic transmission that certain people came to the Prophet -peace be upon him- and asked: *(Who are the most beloved of God's servants to God?) the Prophet, peace be upon him, answered: (The best of them in character).* Service and love are the rich soil where such good character is grown, and they are among those attributes that are most far removed from pride. Muslim transmits that God's Messenger -may God extol him and greet him with perfect peace- said: *(No one shall enter the Garden who has in his heart an atom's weight of pride).* In this same *hadīth* the Prophet defined pride as a quality that is opposite to service and love. He said, peace be upon him: (Verily, God is beautiful and loves beauty), indicating that pride is not in dressing nicely. The text closes by saying: (but pride is denial of what is right and looking down on people). "Denial of what is right" or what is people's right means to reject their rights out of arrogance and haughtiness. Looking down on people means to despise them and regard oneself as better than they.

Shaykh 'Abd al Qādir al-Jīlānī would say -may God be please with him- *(Whoever claims he has special weight, has no weight at all. Whoever claims to have a special station, has no station at all).* The great Successor of the Companions, 'Abd-Allāh ibn al-Mubārak was asked, may God be pleased with him: *(Who are the lowliest of all people?) He answered: (Those who devour and acquire this world by using their religious claims).* Even more lowly are those people who acquire and devour this world by laying claim to the lineage and honourable lives of their forefathers in serving this religion. The people of service and love are sheltered from such error and are among the people most far removed from the inroads of pride and the false claims of those who use their religion to devour the world.

Service and love are among the attributes of *futūwa* -Islamic chivalry-. *Futūwa* is an illustrious station. It means that you strive to fulfil the needs of the other. You do not see yourself as having any degree of special excellence, and you do not regard yourself as having any right over others. Part of *futūwa* -Islamic chivalry- is that you pardon the shortcomings of others. For this reason, the person who has the quality of *futūwa* is a person who is not in dispute against anyone because of the perfection of his/her praiseworthy moral qualities and his/her distance from blameworthy qualities. On the contrary, the person of *futūwa* is only in dispute against himself/herself for the sake of his/her Lord. Thus, they check themselves from inclination toward indulgence in passions. They hold themselves back from laziness and all things that are a waste of time. They urge themselves to be upright. Part of *futūwa* is that you demand that you be just to others, but you do not demand that others be just to you. You give everyone their right over you, but you do not demand your right over them.

These are moral traits that build society on the foundation of harmony and unity and facilitate working together to solve every problem. The Messenger of God -may God extol him and greet him with perfect peace- was a servant. He never asked to be served. His noble Companions -may God be content with them- followed his example. They too were servants - not people who demanded to be served. This was the pattern of behavior of the great Muslims of the first generations and the upright men and women of this *umma* over the generations. If we too strive to be like that and to be

servants -not people who demand to be served- then the qualities of virtuous manhood/womanhood (*murūʿa*), Islamic chivalry (*futūwa*), and human perfection will dominate personally and our society. No problem will appear before us but that we can work together to solve it, and every obstacle will be removed that stands in the way of the oneness of our hearts. But when each one of us desires to be served and not to be a servant, then no problem shall appear before us -no matter how small- but that we will find ourselves incapable of solving it. Every obstacle will obstruct us from unity and the social bonds that tie us together will come apart, which is the case that we find in many Muslims societies today.

As we have seen, love is not just an abstract feeling or emotion. Rather it is an active and engaged inclination toward what suits and benefits the one you love. It relates to things like bringing benefits and warding off harms. The lives and wealth of persons filled with love do not belong to themselves. Rather they belong to others. God -exalted be He- says in His glorious Qur'an: ***(Verily God has purchased from the believers their lives and their property in return for which the Garden shall be theirs)***, (Sura Tawba, 9:111). This love based in faith is the foundation stone of a sound and healthy society. Love and justice are two of the essential elements that bring order to human affairs and create functional societies. But love is the most fundamental of such qualities. If people loved each other and worked with each other on the basis of love -as their Lord has commanded them to do- they would have no need of administrative justice. For this reason, it has been said: (Justice is the caliph [successor] of love.). It is made use of wherever love is not to be found. Any people who love each other, will be tied to each other. Any people who are tied to each other, will work together. Any people who work together will produce great works. When they produce great works, they will bring the world around them to life [and create a civilization]. When they bring the world around them to life, they too will be given long lives and great blessing will be bestowed upon them.

There must be political governance and administrative justice in society. But outward rule and the implementation of justice alone cannot build a society if the bonds of harmony and cooperation are totally missing between its members. The foundations of these essential bonds are rooted in mutual respect and love.

One of the upright believers of the past said: *(God has special servants who, whenever darkness prevails in its intensity among the people, their light grows even stronger)*. Another upright believer said along the same lines: *(God has special servants in the times of tribulations whom the tribulations [around them] cause no harm, just like the angels who overlook the Fire [of Hell] are not harmed by the Fire)*. Among these great believers who are delivered from harm and granted security in times of darkness and tribulations are the people of truthfulness with God, the Real, and good character toward creation who have attained through sound spiritual development the characteristics of service and love. If this issue of service and love were to be lost, then all the stations of *īmān* (true faith) and *ih̄sān* (moral perfection) would also be lost. All of the resting points in our travels toward the knowledge of God -exalted be He- and His contentment, would come to nothing. For this matter of service and love constitute the spirit that breathes life into every spiritual station, resting points of the journey,

and into every good deed. Service and love are the nourishment of our hearts, the sustenance of our spirits, and the pleasure that cools our tired eyes. They constitute that spiritual life which, whoever is deprived of it, may be counted among the spiritually dead. They bring that light which, whoever loses it, is drowned in the seas of darkness. They bring about that cure, which whoever is deprived of it, exposes his/her heart to being overwhelmed by every spiritual disease. They constitute the supreme secret pleasure which, whoever does not attain it, his/her life is nothing but anxieties, worries and lasting pains.

As we have indicated, service and love were the customary practice of God's Messenger -peace be upon him- his Companions and the upright men and women of Islam's first and greatest generations. Service and love constitute the essential spirit of the path of Shaykh 'Abd al Qādir al-Jīlānī and are embodied in his life example. One of his famous students said of him: *(These two eyes of mine have never seen a person of greater moral character, a more open-minded attitude, a more noble disposition, a more compassionate heart, a more careful diligence in keeping promises and agreements than Shaykh 'Abd al Qādir. Yet, despite his majestic stature, lofty status, and the vastness of his knowledge, he would stand by the side of the young boy. He would honor the elderly man. He would be the first to give greetings. He would sit side by side with the weak. And he would be humble in the presence of the poor).* Shaykh 'Abd al Qādir al-Jīlānī commanded his students to practice the path of service and love in order to unify Muslim ranks. He said: *(Look upon Muslims with great respect. Do not despise any of them in view of the faith and wisdom that have been deposited in them).* On this basis of humility towards others -preferring others over oneself- Shaykh 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani expended all his efforts and those of his students to reform the Islamic *umma* on the basis of the Qur'ān and *sunna*. He brought forth and gave spiritual guidance to the generation of Nūr al-Dīn Zangī and Salāh al-Dīn al-Ayyūbī. He guided the Muslims of his age to achieve the greatest revival Muslims have ever known since the rightly-guided caliphate. This great revival has gone down in history as the Great Sunni Revival.

God, teach us what will benefit us. God give us the ultimate facilitation and success to put in practice what He -Exalted be He- has taught us.

Practice requires knowledge. Knowledge requires *tawfīq* (the ultimate facilitation and success) to practice what we know.

A little bit of *adab* (good behavior) is better than a great deal of knowledge.

It has been transmitted from the upright *salaf* [first generations of the believers]: *(Whoever puts into practice the knowledge he has, God will give him as an inheritance, knowledge of what he did not know and will give him the ultimate facilitation and success in the practice he does so that he deserves the Garden. Whoever does not put into practice the knowledge that he has, will wander aimlessly in the knowledge he does have. He will not be given the ultimate facilitation and success in the practice he does so that he deserves the Fire.)*

For this reason, it has been said: *(Knowledge never leaves alone the person who has it. It will either destroy him with eternal perdition if he does not put it into practice, or it will give him the eternal life of felicity if he puts it into practice.)*

Among the best ways to live by knowledge and practice is devotion to service and love according to the way of God's Messenger, may God extol him and greet him with eternal peace.