

Prophetic Wisdom Series: THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS

تُعِينُ صَانِعًا أَوْ تَصْنَعُ لِأُخْرَقَ

Help the skilled laborers and serve the disabled.

Alternate translation: *Assist the one who is skilled, and do something for one who is not.*

[Bukhārī 2382, Muslim 250]ⁱ

From the Prophetic treasures for human society are these important moral instructions concerning public service. The Prophet instructed his followers to be forever in the service of others. It is a basic ethical value, recognized by all cultures and faith traditions. Yet, the genius of the Prophet of Islam lay not only in the advice, but in his choice of words and in his ability to diagnose and prescribe—in the most precise ways—the most effective solutions for the problems faced by people.

These particular instructions were given to Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, a devoted Companion, who was particularly interested in prioritizing his deeds and discovering those that were the most valuable and rewarding. Among the advice given to him was this lesson in public service. Those who were interested in maximizing their rewards and being the truest believers must serve others. There is no other way. For this reason, the Prophet stated on another occasion:

خَيْرُ النَّاسِ أَنْفَعُهُمْ لِلنَّاسِ

*The best of people are those who benefit others.*ⁱⁱ

The Prophet was teaching us that public service extends to all. Believers serve everyone, not just those who are overtly needy. And so, the Prophet mentioned first the skilled laborers. This may appear counter-intuitive. Why help those who are able to work? That was precisely his genius.

The disabled, handicapped and those obviously in need of help, definitely deserve our help. And we must help them. But at the same time, they are the ones who are most likely to be assisted and supported. For this reason, you'll find that people everywhere will go out of their way to open doors for those who are in wheelchairs or crutches. And you'll find them lending a hand to a mother carrying bags alongside babies in strollers, and cars stopping at green lights for senior citizens leisurely crossing the roads.

With all of that, an unfortunate reality is that the segments of the population that tend to get ignored are those who have some skills and might be able to some work. Why? Because they simply aren't overtly disabled. The brunt of charity, public assistance and governmental policies apply to the obviously poor, and in some countries, even to the very rich. The rest are left to fend for themselves.

It's for this reason that the issue of worker rights has been of historical interest in most modern societies. Because there has always existed a general neglect for the interests of the working class, with only sporadic interest in addressing this very real issue from politicians, this cause has periodically surfaced across the world over the past century or so. This same concern led to the rise of certain political movements that profoundly impacted the world stage—often in negative ways—such as communism and socialism. It is this issue that has kept unions and labor laws alive here in our country. And this issue took center stage in the political debate in the heated countdown to the 2012 US presidential election, as one example.

Global recessions drastically reduce welfare programs and the availability of benefits for all, and this generally adversely affects the working middle class in disproportionate ways. The overtly disabled and unemployed usually still qualify for something, which is—depending on your political or ideological affiliation—either too little or too much. The 2012 US presidential candidate Mitt Romney famously attacked the 47%—those who are generally out of work or work so little that they pay no income taxes at all—and this cost him the election. The very wealthy are also generally taken care of in most societies, in the form of bailouts, tax incentives and other forms of public assistance from the

reigning governments in many modern nations. In the United States, both mainstream parties heavily cater to the wealthy and corporate class, with the Democratic president in the aftermath of the recession of the late 2000s, bailing out major banks and corporations that were in trouble, and the contending Republicans promising even more tax breaks. In this approach, “middle America”—the majority of the population that chose to work and make a living—were left to fend for themselves.

There is a growing recognition of the relative poverty of these people who are employed, or perhaps even under-employed. So while many politicians falsely take pride in the number of people at work in America, at the same time, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Most of the 10 largest occupations in May 2011 were relatively low-paying occupations, such as retail salespersons, cashiers, and general office clerks.”

The Prophet reminded us that everyone deserves our help and assistance, those who have trade skills as well as those who don't; those who happen to be employed as well as those who are not. But helping those who have some skills takes precedence over the disabled and unskilled for the simple reason that the overtly disabled are more likely to receive help, whereas the laborers are usually overlooked to their detriment.

One of the commentators of the Prophetic traditions makes this astute observation:

“This ḥadīth indicates that helping the skilled takes precedence over the unskilled, because the disabled and unskilled are understood to be in need of assistance and thus more likely to be helped, whereas the skilled laborers who are generally known for their trade skills tend to be ignored, and assisting them would be like the charity given to those whose poverty or need is hidden.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Additionally, these Prophetic words implicitly encourage the fostering of skills in others, as in the age-old adage “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, whereas if you *teach* him to fish, you feed him for a lifetime.” Those who have abilities and aptitudes should be augmented and facilitated in their skills, and those who have *potential* abilities should be assisted to realize them. This is the clear moral priority. In the end, however, those who simply don't have any abilities, i.e. are disabled, should be served completely, rather than helped. That is why it was said to *assist* the skilled and *serve* (i.e. *do things for*) those who don't possess any ability to help themselves.

Help everyone around us, ignoring no one. That is our moral obligation. Anything less would be a betrayal of the Prophetic legacy.

ⁱ Related from Abu Dharr in Bukhārī, Muslim and others. The full text of the ḥadīth is as follows:

Abu Dharr Jundub ibn Junādah said, “I asked, ‘Messenger of God, which action is the best?’ He replied, ‘Belief in God and struggling in His way.’ I said, ‘What is the best kind of setting free?’ He replied, ‘That of the person most valued in the eyes of his people and the one with the highest price.’ I asked, ‘What if I cannot do that?’ He replied, ‘Help the skilled laborers and serve those who cannot do anything for themselves.’ I said, ‘Messenger of God, what about someone who is too weak to do anything?’ He said, ‘Then withhold your evil from other people, and that would be charity on your behalf.’”

ⁱⁱ From a larger ḥadīth of Jābir b. ‘Abdullah related by al-Ṭabarānī in *al-Muʿjam al-Awsaṭ* #5937 and authenticated by al-Albānī as ḥasan as well as by al-Suyūṭī.

ⁱⁱⁱ Statement of Ibn al-Munīr (d. 683AH) referenced by Ibn Ḥajar in *Fathḥ al-Bārī*. The statement in Arabic is:

وفي الحديث إشارة إلى أن إعانة الصانع أفضل من إعانة غير الصانع لأن غير الصانع مظنة الإعانة فكل أحد يعينه غالباً ، بخلاف الصانع فإنه لشهرته بصنعه يغفل عن إعانته ، فهي من جنس الصدقة على المستور