

**“the tongue is for
mentioning what
is good”**

Compilation on Backbiting

Definition

"As regards backbiting, i.e. discussing the faults of others in their absence, the teachings are very emphatic. ... Even if what is said against another person be true, the mentioning of his faults to others still comes under the category of backbiting, and is forbidden."

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, February 11, 1925 - Lights of Guidance, p. 88)

"It is obvious that if we listen to those who complain to us about the faults of others we are guilty of complicity in their backbiting.

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, February 11, 1925)

There is a clear distinction between, on the one hand, the prohibition of backbiting, which would include adverse comments about individuals or institutions made to other individuals privately or publicly, and, on the other hand, the encouragement to unburden oneself of one's concerns to a Spiritual Assembly, Local or National (or now, also, to confide in a Counsellor or Auxiliary Board member).

(The Universal House of Justice, 1992 Dec 10)

Quotations on Backbiting

Ye have been forbidden to commit murder or adultery, or to engage in backbiting or calumny; shun ye, then, what hath been prohibited in the holy Books and Tablets.

(Baha'u'llah, The Kitab-i-Aqdas, p. 26)

That seeker should, also, regard backbiting as grievous error, and keep himself aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting quenqueth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul.

(Baha'u'llah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 265)

O SON OF BEING!

How couldst thou forget thine own faults and busy thyself with the faults of others? Whoso doeth this is accursed of Me.

(Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words no. 26)

O SON OF MAN!

Breathe not the sins of others so long as thou art thyself a sinner. Shouldst thou transgress this command, accursed wouldst thou be, and to this I bear witness.

(Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words no. 27)

O SON OF BEING!

Ascribe not to any soul that which thou wouldst not have ascribed to thee, and say not that which thou doest not. This is My command unto thee, do thou observe it.

(Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words no. 29)

O COMPANION OF MY THRONE!

Hear no evil, and see no evil, abase not thyself, neither sigh and weep. Speak no evil, that thou mayest not hear it spoken unto thee, and magnify not the faults of others that thine own faults may not appear great; and wish not the abasement of anyone, that thine own abasement be not exposed. Live then the days of thy life, that are less than a fleeting moment, with thy mind stainless, thy heart unsullied, thy thoughts pure, and thy nature sanctified, so that, free and content, thou mayest put away this mortal frame, and repair unto the mystic paradise and abide in the eternal kingdom for evermore.

(Baha'u'llah, The Persian Hidden Words no. 44)

O EMIGRANTS!

The tongue I have designed for the mention of Me, defile it not with detraction. If the fire of self overcome you, remember your own faults and not the faults of My creatures, inasmuch as every one of you knoweth his own self better than he knoweth others.

(Baha'u'llah, The Persian Hidden Words no. 66)

He should consider backbiting as error, and never step into that court, for backbiting extinguishes the brilliant light of the heart and numbs the life of the soul.

(Compilations, Baha'i Scriptures, p. 49)

The purpose of the tongue

That seeker must, at all times, put his trust in God, must renounce the peoples of the earth, must detach himself from the world of dust, and cleave unto Him Who is the Lord of Lords. He must never seek to exalt himself above any one, must wash away from the tablet of his heart every trace of pride and vain-glory, must cling unto patience and resignation, observe silence and refrain from idle talk. For the tongue is a smoldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison. Material fire consumeth the body, whereas the fire of the tongue devoureth both heart and soul. The force of the former lasteth but for a time, whilst the effects of the latter endureth a century.

(Baha'u'llah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 264)

O people of Baha! Ye are the dawning-places of the love of God and the daysprings of His loving-kindness. Defile not your tongues with the cursing and reviling of any soul, and guard your eyes against that which is not seemly. Set forth that which ye possess. If it be favourably received, your end is attained; if not, to protest is vain. Leave that soul to himself and turn unto the Lord, the Protector, the Self-Subsisting. Be not the cause of grief, much less of discord and strife. The hope is cherished that ye may obtain true education in the shelter of the tree of His tender mercies and act in accordance with that which God desireth. Ye are all the leaves of one tree and the drops of one ocean.

(Baha'u'llah, Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 27)

Strife and conflict befit the beasts of the wild. It was through the grace of God and with the aid of seemly words and praiseworthy deeds that the unsheathed swords of the Bábí community were returned to their scabbards. Indeed through the power of good words, the righteous have always succeeded in winning command over the meads of the hearts of men. Say, O ye loved ones! Do not forsake prudence. Incline your hearts to the counsels given by the Most Exalted Pen and beware lest your hands or tongues cause harm unto anyone among mankind.

(Baha'u'llah, Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 84)

O people of Baha! Ye are the dawning-places of the love of God and the daysprings of His loving-kindness. Defile not your tongues with the cursing and reviling of any soul, and guard your eyes against that which is not seemly. Set forth that which ye possess. If it be favourably received, your end is attained; if not, to protest is vain. Leave that soul to himself and turn unto the Lord, the Protector, the Self-Subsisting. Be not the cause of grief, much less of discord and strife. The hope is cherished that ye may obtain true education in the shelter of the tree of His tender mercies and act in accordance with that which God desireth. Ye are all the leaves of one tree and the drops of one ocean.

(Baha'u'llah, Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 129)

We exhort you, O peoples of the world, to observe that which will elevate your station. Hold fast to the fear of God and firmly adhere to what is right. Verily I say, the tongue is for mentioning what is good, defile it not with unseemly talk. God hath forgiven what is past. Henceforward everyone should utter that which is meet and seemly, and should refrain from slander, abuse and whatever causeth sadness in men. Lofty is the station of man!

(Baha'u'llah, Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 219)

The effects of Backbiting

That seeker should, also, regard backbiting as grievous error, and keep himself aloof from its dominion, inasmuch as backbiting quencheth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul.

(Baha' u'llah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha' u'llah, p. 265)

"... If any soul speak ill of an absent one, the only result will clearly be this: he will dampen the zeal of the friends and tend to make them indifferent. For backbiting is divisive, it is the leading cause among the friends of a disposition to withdraw. ... On the contrary, it would make the dust to settle so thickly on the heart that the ears would hear no more, and the eyes would not longer behold the light of truth."

If, however, a person setteth about speaking well of another, opening his lips to praise another, he will touch an answering chord in his hearers and they will be stirred up by the breathings of God. Their hearts and souls will rejoice to know that, God be thanked, here is a soul in the Faith who is a focus of human perfections, a very embodiment of the bounties of the Lord, one whose tongue is eloquent, and whose face shineth, in whatever gathering he may be, one who hath victory upon his brow, and who is a being sustained by the sweet savours of God.

Now which is the better way? I swear this by the beauty of the Lord: whensoever I hear good of the friends, my heart filleth up with joy; but whensoever I find even a hint that they are on bad terms one with another, I am overwhelmed by grief. Such is the condition of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Then judge from this where your duty lieth.

('Abdu'l-Bahá: Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, pp. 230-231)

... Thou hast written regarding aims. How blessed are these aims, especially the prevention of backbiting! I hope that you may become confirmed therein, because the worst human quality and the most great sin is backbiting; more especially when it emanates from the tongues of the believers of God. If some means were devised so that the doors of backbiting could be shut eternally and each one of the believers of God unsealed his tongue in the praise of the other, then the teachings of His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh would be spread, the hearts illuminated, the spirits glorified and the human world would attain to everlasting felicity.

"I hope that the believers of God will shun completely backbiting, each one praising the other cordially and believe that backbiting is the cause of Divine Wrath, to such an extent that if a person backbites to the extent of one word, he may become dishonored among all the people, because the most hateful characteristic of man is fault-finding. One must expose the praiseworthy qualities of the souls and not their evil attributes. The

friends must overlook their shortcomings and faults and speak only of their virtues and not their defects."

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Tablet to Dr. M.G. Skinner, August 12, 1913: Star of the West, Vol. IV, No. 11, p. 192)

"... When a difficulty is brought out into the daylight and freely discussed by a duly authorized and responsible group of people who are sincerely desirous of finding the best solution and are free from prejudice or personal motive, then there is a good chance of overcoming it, but discussions of the faults of others, behind their backs by unauthorized people who have no authority to take action in the matter, is surely one of the most fertile causes - probably THE most fertile cause -- of disunity, and the importance of putting an end to this practice should be impressed on all Bahá'ís."

(Lights of Guidance, p. 89)

"You are quite correct in your understanding of the importance of avoiding backbiting; such conduct strikes at the very unity of the Bahá'í community. In a letter written to an individual believer on behalf of the Guardian it is stated: "If we are better, if we show love, patience, and understanding of the weakness of others, if we seek to never criticize but rather encourage, others will do likewise, and we can really help the Cause through our example and spiritual strength."

(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, August 13, 1980 - Lights of Guidance, p. 89)

Try to avoid others from backbiting

"It is obvious that if we listen to those who complain to us about the faults of others we are guilty of complicity in their backbiting. We should therefore, as tactfully as possible, but yet firmly, do our utmost to prevent others from making accusations or complaints against others in our presence.

(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, February 11, 1925 - Lights of Guidance, p. 94)

"... If any individual should speak ill of one who is absent, it is incumbent on his hearers, in a spiritual and friendly manner, to stop him, and say in effect: would this detraction serve any useful purpose? Would it please the Blessed Beauty, contribute to the lasting honour of the friends, promote the holy Faith, support the covenant, or be of any possible benefit to any soul? No, never! On the contrary, it would make the dust to settle so thickly on the heart that the ears would hear no more, and the eyes would not longer behold the light of truth."

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, pp. 230-231 - Lights of Guidance, p. 93)

Focus should be on our own imperfections

O ye Cohorts of God! Beware lest ye offend the feelings of anyone, or sadden the heart of any person, or move the tongue in reproach of and finding fault with anybody, whether he is friend or stranger, believer or enemy. Pray in behalf of all and entreat God for forgiveness and bounty for all. Beware, beware that any soul take revenge or retaliate over another even if he be a bloodthirsty enemy. Beware, beware that any one rebuke or reproach a soul, though he may be an ill-wisher and an ill-doer. Do ye not look upon the creature, advance ye toward the Creator. Behold ye not the rebellious people, turn your faces toward the Lord of Hosts. Look ye not upon the ground, raise your eyes to the world-illuminating Sun, which hath transformed every atom of the gloomy soil into bright and luminous substance.

(Abdu’l-Baha, Tablets of Abdu’l-Baha v1, p. 44)

It is my hope that you may consider this matter, that you may search out your own imperfections and not think of the imperfections of anybody else. Strive with all your power to be free from imperfections. Heedless souls are always seeking faults in others. What can the hypocrite know of others' faults when he is blind to his own? This is the meaning of the words in the Seven Valleys. It is a guide for human conduct. As long as a man does not find his own faults, he can never become perfect. Nothing is more fruitful for man than the knowledge of his own shortcomings. The Blessed Perfection says, "I wonder at the man who does not find his own imperfections."

(Abdu’l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 244)

One must see in every human being only that which is worthy of praise. When this is done, one can be a friend to the whole human race. If, however, we look at people from the standpoint of their faults, then being a friend to them is a formidable task.

It happened one day in the time of Christ - may the life of the world be a sacrifice unto Him - that He passed by the dead body of a dog, a carcass reeking, hideous, the limbs rotting away. One of those present said: 'How foul its stench!' And another said: 'How sickening! How loathsome!' To be brief, each one of them had something to add to the list.

But then Christ Himself spoke, and He told them: 'Look at that dog's teeth! How gleaming white!' The Messiah's sin-covering gaze did not for a moment dwell upon the repulsiveness of that carrion. The one element of that dead dog's carcass which was not abomination was the teeth: and Jesus looked upon their brightness.

Thus is it incumbent upon us, when we direct our gaze toward other people, to see where they excel, not where they fail. Praise be to God, thy goal is to promote the well-being of humankind and to help the souls to overcome their faults. This good intention will produce laudable results.

(Abdu'l-Baha, Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha, p. 168)

"As to backbiting, the House of Justice points out that learning not to concern oneself with the faults of others seems to be one of the most difficult lessons for people to master, and that failing in this is a fertile cause of disputes among Bahá'ís as it is among men and women in general. In 'Star of the West', Volume 8, No. 10, on page 138, there is a record of a reply given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in a private interview in Paris in 1913. He was asked 'How shall I overcome seeing the faults of others -- recognizing the wrong in others?', and He replied: 'I will tell you. Whenever you recognize the fault of another, think of yourself! What are my imperfections? -- and try to remove them. Do this whenever you are tried through the words or deeds of others. Thus you will grow, become more perfect. You will overcome self, you will not even have time to think of the faults of others...'

(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, August 13, 1980 - Lights of Guidance, p. 89)

1272. If we Bahá'ís cannot attain to cordial unity among ourselves, then we fail to realize the main purpose for which the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh and the Beloved Master lived and suffered.

In order to achieve this cordial unity one of the first essentials insisted on by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá is that we resist the natural tendency to let our attention dwell on the faults and failings of others rather than on our own. Each of us is responsible for one life only, and that is our own. Each of us is immeasurably far from being "perfect as our heavenly father is perfect" and the task of perfecting our own life and character is one that requires all our attention, our will-power and energy. If we allow our attention and energy to be taken up in efforts to keep others right and remedy their faults, we are wasting precious time. We are like ploughmen each of whom has his team to manage and his plough to direct, and in order to keep his furrow straight he must keep his eye on his goal and concentrate on his own task. If he looks to this side and that to see how Tom and Harry are getting on and to criticize their ploughing, then his own furrow will assuredly become crooked.

On no subject are the Bahá'í teachings more emphatic than on the necessity to abstain from faultfinding and backbiting while being ever eager to discover and root out our own faults and overcome our own failings.

If we profess loyalty to Bahá'u'lláh, to our Beloved Master and our dear Guardian, then we must show our love by obedience to these explicit

teachings. Deeds not words are what they demand, and no amount of fervour in the use of expressions of loyalty and adulation will compensate for failure to live in the spirit of the teachings.

(From a letter dated 12 May 1925 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer - The Compilation of Compilations vol II, p. 3)

"You ask in your letter for guidance on the implications of the prohibitions on backbiting and more specifically whether, in moments of anger or depression, the believer is permitted to turn to his friends to unburden his soul and discuss his problem in human relations. Normally, it is possible to describe the situation surrounding a problem and seek help and advice in resolving it, without necessarily mentioning names. The individual believer should seek to do this, whether he is consulting a friend, Bahá'í or non-Bahá'í, or whether the friend is consulting him.

"Abdu'l-Bahá does not permit adverse criticism of individuals by name in discussion among the friends, even if the one criticizing believes that he is doing so to protect the interests of the Cause. If the situation is of such gravity as to endanger the interests of the Faith, the complaint, as your National Spiritual Assembly has indicated, should be submitted to the Local Spiritual Assembly, or as you state to a representative of the institution of the Counsellors, for consideration and action. In such cases, of course, the name of the person or persons involved will have to be mentioned.

"You also ask what one should do to 'handle depression and anger with someone' one feels 'very positively about'. The Universal House of Justice suggests that you call to mind the admonitions found in our writings on the need to overlook the shortcomings of others, to forgive and conceal their misdeeds, not to expose their bad qualities, but to search for and affirm their praiseworthy ones, and endeavour to be always forbearing, patient, and merciful.

(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, September 23, 1975 - Lights of Guidance, p. 90)

Sin-covering eye

We must look upon our enemies with a sin-covering eye and act with justice when confronted with any injustice whatsoever, forgive all, consider the whole of humanity as our own family, the whole earth as our own country, be sympathetic with all suffering, nurse the sick, offer a shelter to the exiled, help the poor and those in need, dress all wounds and share the happiness of each one. Be compassionate, so that your actions will shine like unto the light streaming forth from the lamp. If the whole world should arise to deny this cause, we must not fight. Our only role is to spread the teachings. If it be accepted, all is well; if not, leave the people to God.

(Abdu'l-Baha, Divine Philosophy, p. 41)

If ye become aware of a sin committed by another, conceal it, that God may conceal your own sin. He, verily, is the Concealer, the Lord of grace abounding.

(Baha'u'llah, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, p. 54)

The most important thing, as the Master pointed out over and over again, is love and unity among the believers. They must forget themselves, the faults and weaknesses they see in each other, and arise to spread this glorious Message in mankind's hour of greatest darkness and trial.

(Shoghi Effendi, Messages to the Indian Subcontinent, p. 262)

Related quotations

Know thou, moreover, that in this most hallowed and resplendent city thou shalt find the wayfarer to be lowly before all men and humble before all things. For naught doth he behold save that he perceiveth God therein. He beholdeth the effulgent glories of God in the lights of His Revelation that have encompassed the Sinai of creation. In this station the wayfarer must not claim the seat of honour in any gathering or walk before others in the desire to vaunt and exalt himself. Rather must he regard himself as standing at all times in the presence of his Lord. He must not wish for anyone that which he doth not wish for himself, nor speak that which he would not bear to hear spoken by another, nor yet desire for any soul that which he would not have desired for himself. It befitteth him, rather, to walk upon the earth with undeviating steps in the kingdom of His new creation.

(Baha'u'llah, Gems of Divine Mysteries, p. 61)

I beg of Thee by the Most Great Infallibility which Thou hast chosen to be the dayspring of Thy Revelation, and by Thy most sublime Word through whose potency Thou didst call the creation into being and didst reveal Thy Cause, and by this Name which hath caused all other names to groan aloud and the limbs of the sages to quake, I beg of Thee to make me detached from all else save Thee, in such wise that I may move not but in conformity with the good-pleasure of Thy Will, and speak not except at the bidding of Thy Purpose, and hear naught save the words of Thy praise and Thy glorification.

(Baha'u'llah, Tablets of Baha'u'llah, p. 116)

2. O SON OF SPIRIT!

The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the

eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.

(Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words)

68. O CHILDREN OF MEN!

Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light! Heed ye this counsel that ye may obtain the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous glory.

(Baha'u'llah, The Arabic Hidden Words)

And now, added to all these tribulations, these miseries, these enemy attacks, there hath arisen a dust cloud of ill will amongst the believers themselves. This in spite of the fact that the Cause of the Ancient Beauty is the very essence of love, the very channel of oneness, existing only that all may become the waves of one sea, and bright stars of the same endless sky, and pearls within the shell of singleness, and gleaming jewels quarried from the mines of unity; that they may become servants one to another, adore one another, bless one another, praise one another; that each one may loose his tongue and extol the rest without exception, each one voice his gratitude to all the rest; that all should lift up their eyes to the horizon of glory, and remember that they are linked to the Holy Threshold; that they should see nothing but good in one another, hear nothing but praise of one another, and speak no word of one another save only to praise.

(Abdu'l-Baha, Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha, p. 229)

Discussion on Backbiting

Is it ok ...

1. Is it ok to say negative things about a person when he/she is not there?
2. Is it ok if the things said are true and can be verified by those present?
3. Is it ok to just listen when someone else is saying something negative about a person that is not present?
4. Is it ok to just listen but not liking it, feeling uncomfortable, when someone else is saying negative things about someone who is not there?
5. Is it ok to try not to listen when in a company where someone is saying negative things about someone who is not there?
6. If someone has hurt you, is it ok to talk about it with someone else?
7. If someone has hurt you, is it ok to talk about it with a very close friend that you trust will not say it to anyone?
8. Is it ok if I state a fact (e.g. a person did this) and it's not meant as bad from my side but it then is interpreted as negative?
9. Is it ok to say negative things and comments about celebrities that we do not know personally?
10. Is it ok to listen to someone who is making negative comments about a celebrity?
11. Is it ok to watch a reality show where the participants are saying negative comments about each other?
12. If one is a member of an assembly and during a meeting is consulting about a certain person who is considered for an appointment or responsibility, is it ok to say things that are not favorable for the person in question?
13. Is it ok to think negative things about others in our own minds but not tell anyone about it?
14. Is it ok to excessively praise someone who is not present?

Advanced questions ...

15. When one is in a company and someone starts to backbite, what should one do?

16. What are the consequences for the community when backbiting occurs?
17. What are the consequences for me when I backbite?
18. What are the consequences for me when I listen to backbiting?
19. How can I say what is on my heart during a consultation (at assembly meeting) without it being backbiting?
20. What kind of negative comments are considered backbiting (comments on character such as selfish, comments on his/her physical appearance such as tall, limping, factual comments such as he/she did this and that)?
21. Are we responsible for how our comments are perceived and interpreted by others?
22. How can one overcome the habit of backbiting?

From backbiting to praises

1. When one backbites regularly and actively in an natural way
2. When one backbites but then becomes aware that this was backbiting
3. When one does not backbite but listens to other when they backbite
4. When one leaves the room when the others start backbiting
5. When one changes the subject when the others start backbiting
6. When one tries to, in a spiritual and loving way, make people aware of the necessity to discontinue backbiting
7. When one not even our own minds backbite or thing negative thoughts about others.
8. When one only focuses on and praises the good qualities of others.