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Worship: Individually or Collectively?

Question

Should we be reciting supplications [*du'ās*] in a communal setting or individually? Which of these two methods of reciting supplications has more importance attached to it [in Islam]?

Answer

Through a perfunctory glance at this question, and in order to offer a brief response, it can be stated that since the supplication is a means of connection between a servant and the Being whom one is worshipping (Allah ﷻ), the more removed a person is from the sight of others that this connection is established within, the greater the sincerity and purity [of that action and connection]. A supplication made in private is worth much more than one done in public;

however, we must also realize that this reply cannot be taken as the absolute and unreserved response in all instances in relation to supplications. Rather, the worth of an entreaty performed individually or in a group setting fluctuates by keeping in mind the below conditions and its multi-faceted aspects.

At this point, let us review what we have just stated in further depth.

The Concept of a Supplication

A supplication is an act through which a heavenly connection is established with Allah ﷻ and it is a means of getting closer to Him. Through this connection, a human being is able to ask for one's spiritual and material requests from the Almighty Lord.

Sincerity Within a Supplication

What is clear is that supplication and worship [*ibādah*] can be beneficial for a human being and attract the attention of Allah ﷻ only when it is free from displays of ostentation, and it is performed with full sincerity, and only for the sake of Allah ﷻ. If a prayer is performed in this fashion, then it makes no difference if an individual engages in this act of connection while in the company of others or if it is performed in solitaire – because such an individual will be busy in asking for one's needs and wants only from Allah ﷻ.

However if a person sees something contrary to this within oneself, then one must seriously begin to doubt the sincerity of intention in one's supplication.

In regards to this, the Noble Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ has made the following statement in which he said: “A person who beautifies his prayers (in public) so that people pay extra special attention to him

[and his prayers]; but while on his own, the prayers are performed with lethargy and in a bad form - has actually done an act of insult towards his Lord.”¹

The Commander of the Faithful, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib ؑ has said something similar to this in one of his recorded statements in which he mentioned: “A person who displays ostentation in his acts of worship has three traits: When in a gathering of people, he has extra vigour and vitality [in his worship]; yet when alone, lethargy takes him over; and he loves that all of his actions are praised by the people.”²

It is due to such things that we see that the leaders of this faith [the Prophet ﷺ and his immaculate successors ؑ] have encouraged people not to engage in supplications in certain ways. One time, after having seen a group of Muslims who were being excessively loud in their supplications to Allah ﷻ, the Noble Prophet ﷺ addressed them and said: “Be quiet! You are speaking to a Lord who hears and sees and is in your presence!”³

Supplication - Individually and Collectively?

When we engage in another analysis of the supplication, we see that we can actually divide it into two distinct portions – the first one being the usage of a supplication in the path of spiritual perfection of an individual; and the other portion which is the supplication being

¹ Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-Wasā’il*, v. 1, p. 114, trad. 131, Mu’assisa Āl al-Bayt, Qum, 1408 AH.

² Kulaynī, Muḥammad b. Ya‘qūb, *al-Kāfi*, v. 2, p. 290, trad. 8, Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, Tehran, 1407 AH.

³ Daylamī, al-Ḥasan b. Abī al-Ḥasan, *Irshād al-Qulūb*, v. 1, p. 93, Dār al-Sharīf al-Raḍī Publishers, Qum, 1412 AH.

used as a step in reaching to the shared societal outcomes which everyone desires.

Although both of these distinct portions of a supplication can be attained by recitation on one's own and also as a collective, however it seems that in terms of attaining the second outcome, the supplication in a collective manner is actually something which will take precedence over reciting it individually – just as can be seen in the daily congregational prayers (the *ṣalāt* in *jamā'at*) and also in the special prayer or supplication which is recited to plead for rain (*al-istisqā'*).

There is a tradition which mentions that a group of people came to Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ and expressed to him the problem of a drought having taken over their region, so they asked him to make special supplication that rain would come. The Prophet ﷺ ordered that a *mimbar* (pulpit) be assembled and that the people be gathered in that area. He then began to make supplication to Allāh ﷻ for the rain to come, and asked the people to say the word 'Āmīn' (so be it)⁴ to bring his supplication to fruition.⁵

From amongst the previous prophets, we see that Mūsā ؑ (Moses) and Hārūn ؑ (Aaron) are two individuals who right from the initial stages of their prophetic mission, were habituated in making supplication to Allah ﷻ in a collective – and not as individuals – for example:

﴿قَالَ رَبَّنَا إِنَّنَا نَخَافُ أَنْ يَفْرُطَ عَلَيْنَا أَوْ أَنْ يَطْغَى﴾

⁴ There are some who believe that this word is an abbreviated form of the Arabic phrase, “اللهم استجب لنا” – *Allāhumma istajib lanā* – which means: “O Allah! Accept our invocation” or “O Allah, respond to, (or answer) what we have said!” Other scholars say it is derived from the word *Āmana* (Arabic: آمن) which means “So be it.” (Tr.)

⁵ *Al-Kāfi*, v. 8, p. 217, trad. 266.

Both (Mūsā and Hārūn) said: “Our Lord! Surely we fear that he (Fir‘awn) may hasten to do us some harm or exceed all of the limits in transgression (against You).”⁶

In addition, in other instances we see that Allāh ﷻ would also respond to the supplications of Mūsā ﷺ and Hārūn ﷺ collectively – as He did in regards to the reformation of the societal state of affairs in Egypt:

﴿قَالَ قَدْ أُجِيبَتْ دَعْوَتُكُمَا فَاسْتَقِيمَا وَلَا تَتَّبِعَانِ سَبِيلَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ﴾

(The Lord) said: “The prayer of you both has been accepted, so the two of you need to remain steadfast and do not follow the way of those who do not know.”⁷

In such examples, we see how their supplication, made as a collective, was answered.

The Individual and Collective Supplication

In this portion of our response, we will delve into some of the statements mentioned in the Quran and other Islamic sources which show us the advantage of supplication in private – and as we know, such a supplication cannot be made except individually and far away from a congregation of people; in other examples which we will examine below, we will see the advantage of supplications made collectively in a group setting.

Advantage of a Supplication, Secluded from Others

In the Quran, Allāh ﷻ has advised the human being as follows:

⁶ *Quran*, Sūrah Ṭāhā (20), verse 45.

⁷ *Quran*, Sūrah Yūnus (10), verse 89.

﴿ادْعُوا رَبَّكُمْ تَضَرُّعًا وَخُفْيَةً إِنَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُعْتَدِينَ﴾

Call upon your Lord with humility and secretly. Surely, He does not love the transgressors.⁸

Another recommendation has been presented in the Quran in the same theme in which we read:

﴿وَاذْكُرْ رَبَّكَ فِي نَفْسِكَ تَضَرُّعًا وَخِيفَةً وَدُونَ الْجَهْرِ مِنَ الْقَوْلِ بِالْغُدُوِّ وَالْآصَالِ وَلَا تَكُنْ مِنَ الْغَافِلِينَ﴾

And keep on remembering Your Lord in your mind with humility and awe and in a voice not loud, in the mornings and in the evenings, and do not among the heedless.⁹

Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ has been reported to have said: “The best form of worship is that which is the most secretive.”¹⁰

In addition, Prophet Muḥammad ﷺ also said: “The reward for a [recommended] *ṣalāt* performed in private is equivalent to seventy of that same *ṣalāt* performed in the open.”¹¹

There is a statement from Imam al-Riḍā ؑ in which he stated: “The reward for a supplication made in seclusion is seventy times more compared to that [same] supplication made in public.”¹²

In addition to this, worship and supplications of the leaders of Islam (the Prophet ﷺ and his successors ؑ) are not things which were done in the open. As an example, the Commander of the Faithful ‘Alī

⁸ *Quran*, Sūrah al-A‘rāf (7), verse 55.

⁹ *Ibid.*, verse 205.

¹⁰ *Irshād al-Qulūb*, v. 1, p. 93.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Al-Kāfi*, v. 2, p. 476, trad. 2.

ﷺ did not compose his well-known supplication which is referred to as the Supplication of *Kumayl* in the same manner in which he would have spoken his sermons – in the midst of the congregations in the Masjid of Kūfa. Rather, Kumayl saw his master in the position of the prostration (*sajdah*) in the corner of a *masjid*, busy reciting this supplication and this is how he learnt it.¹³ Or as it has been narrated in other traditions, the Commander of the Faithful ‘Alī ﷺ took Kumayl aside and privately taught him this supplication.¹⁴

When speaking to one of his companions, Imam al-Ṣādiq ﷺ said the following: “O ‘Ammar! Charity given in secret is better than charity given in the open and I swear by Allah that worship performed in secret is better than worship performed in the open.”¹⁵

In his spiritual advice to one of his followers, Imam al-Bāqir ﷺ offered the following advice: “Safeguarding your righteous actions is even more important than the action itself!” When the companion asked the Imam to explain what he meant by “safeguarding” - protecting his actions, the Imam responded by saying: “The human being, who **only** for the sake of Allah, the One who has no partners, performs a good action to someone else or gives some financial assistance to someone. In response to such an invaluable action, Allah will give the reward to that individual due to its being done in private. But then that person [who has done the good actions] in place of doing such good actions, begins to talk about it and tells others about what one had done, and for this Allah will reduce the reward and will record a reward for one commensurate to good actions done in the

¹³ Ṭūsī, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan, *Miṣbāḥ al-Mutahajjid*, p. 844, Mu’assisa Fiqh al-Shī‘a, Beirut, 1411 AH.

¹⁴ Sayyid Ibn Ṭāwwūs, *Iqbāl al-A‘māl*, p. 706, Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, Tehran, 1409 AH.

¹⁵ *Al-Kāfi*, v. 4, p. 8, trad. 2.

open. If that individual continues to talk about that good action which one did, then Allah will once again, continue to erase from that person's rewards and will consider one as being from amongst those who show off."¹⁶

By a cursory glance at these traditions, we see the worth of worship performed in private, compared to that worship which is performed in the open; but indeed there are other proofs which we can offer to stress on the importance of supplications collectively. However from another perspective, the traditions also show us that supplications performed in a collective have been encouraged by the faith – and we relate some of these below.

It has been narrated that Imam al-Ṣādiq عليه السلام said: “No group of forty people have ever gathered together in regards to one specific issue and have prayed to Allah, except that Allah will allow their supplications to be responded to.”¹⁷

In another place, Imam al-Ṣādiq عليه السلام is reported to have said: “Any time my father (Imam al-Bāqir عليه السلام) would be faced with a difficulty in his life, he would gather his women and children around him and make supplication, then he would request them to conclude the supplication with the word ‘*Āmīn*’ (so be it!)”¹⁸

It is possible that the recommendation which has been given to perform acts of worship in a collective – such as the congregational prayers, or maybe even it being an obligation to perform some of them, such as some of the actions of the *ḥajj* pilgrimage and other acts of worship, in the collective, may make people believe that the performance of acts in congregation and as a collective is actually the

¹⁶ Ibid., v. 2, p. 296, trad. 16.

¹⁷ Ibid., v. 2, p. 487, trad. 1.

¹⁸ Ibid., trad. 3.

ideal ingredient as well in other acts of worship. To this however we need to respond and state that: “Seeing that Allah has given us a considerable amount of emphasis on the need for His servants to be specifically connected to Him, however looking at this from the other angles of the society and inner spiritual trainings, He has also not neglected considering the issue of the various act of worship and it is through those acts that the spirit of worship can spread throughout the society and become a fertile ground for the spiritual perfection of each and every single individual within a society.”

Thus, in our opinion, the above is an expression of these aspects of worship and prayer.

In confirmation of this, we note that there are narrations which speak about the performance of acts of worship in secrecy, especially for the recommended acts of worship (*mustahabbāt*) while the obligatory (*wājibāt*) have been excluded from it, such as the advice which is found in the will of the Prophet ﷺ to Abu Dharr in which the former said: “O Abu Dharr! The superiority of the reward of a recommended (*mustahab*) prayer done in secrecy compared to the same prayer done in the open is just like the supremacy of the obligatory prayers over the recommended prayers.”¹⁹

In these same regards, Imam al-Bāqir ؑ also says: “A believer prefers to perform the obligatory acts in the open, however performs their recommended actions in private.”²⁰

Perhaps the reason for this is that when it comes to the obligatory actions, there is a possibility that there is a lesser chance that they will not be done out of ostentation and pretension compared to the

¹⁹ Ṭūsī, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan, *Al-Amālī*, p. 529, Dār al-Thiqāfa Publishers, Qum, 1414 AH.

²⁰ *Al-Kāfi*, v. 4, p. 60, trad. 1.

recommended actions [which may be done to show off]; but nonetheless, by doing such acts of worship in the collective, one can create a sense of spirituality in the community.

Necessity to Enjoy the Supplication

Another important issue in regards to a supplication is the need for proper use of the supplication. In other words, prayer is not just that a person speaks some words without attention to their meaning and content - rather the believers must also become equally spiritually delighted and be expecting spiritual progress in their lives through the supplications.

We know that supplications are a person's relationship with Allah ﷻ, and in this regard, one must know what one is saying with the One whom one is worshipping and is the Beloved.

With this in mind, it can be said that when it comes to performing supplications individually or collectively – everyone is different in this regards and in reaching that goal (of the purpose of supplication).

People who know Arabic, if they recite the supplication in private and on their own - because the focus of the human being is often more pronounced and defined when they are alone - then it is possible that they may gain a much better spiritual outcome of such a supplication.

However on the other hand, a person who has no acquaintance with the Arabic language and decides to read a supplication such as *Abu Hamza al-Thumālī* on the Night of Qadr - if he or she participates in a gathering without the intention to showoff and in that gathering, in addition to reading the text of the prayer, the collectiveness also bring out the important points of the supplication and explains certain passages of it, then this will surely be more beneficial for that

individual then if they were to simply recite the supplication, oblivious of its meaning.

In addition to this, it must also be known that just as the tribulation of ostentation may threaten collective worship, individual worship is also threatened by another form of pseudo-selfishness and self-conceit.

Final Result

Although in most cases, the worth of an individual and personal recommended worship - such as supplications - are considered to be superior to collective and group worship, however if the noble purpose of communicating with the Lord is not threatened by evil motives, and both the open and collective, or the hidden and private supplications, and other acts of worship will ultimately be in the interest of an individual, and the action is performed with sincerity (*ikhhlās*), whether individually or collectively, then rest assured that it will definitely have its own effect on an individual and the society.

The Lord refers to this in many cases, including in the following verses of the Noble Quran:

﴿إِنْ تُبْدُوا خَيْرًا أَوْ تُخْفُوهُ أَوْ تَعْفُوا عَنْ سُوءٍ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَفُورًا قَدِيرًا﴾

If you do good openly or do it in private or pardon an injury (done to you), then remember (that) Allah is Ever Pardoning, All-Powerful.²¹

²¹ Quran, Sūrah al-Nisā (4), verse 149.

﴿وَإِنْ تَجَهَّرَ بِالْقَوْلِ فَإِنَّهُ يَعْلَمُ السِّرَّ وَأَخْفَى﴾

If you speak aloud, (He does not stand in need of it), He knows the secret (thought) as well that which is yet deeper hidden.²²

﴿إِنْ تُبْدُوا الصَّدَقَاتِ فَنِعِمَّا هِيَ وَإِنْ تُخْفُوهَا وَتُؤْتُوهَا الْفُقَرَاءَ فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَكُمْ وَيُكَفِّرُ عَنْكُمْ مِنْ سَيِّئَاتِكُمْ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ﴾

If you give (your) charity openly it is well and good (in itself). But if you keep it secret and give them to the needy, then it is better for your own selves, and He will (thereby) acquit you of some of your evil deeds. Allah is fully Aware of what you do.²³

There are many other such examples however we suffice with these.

Ultimately, one must know that Satan does not stop his [evil] temptations, and when an individual is alone, the Devil will throw his weapon of lethargy and sluggishness into a person's soul and try to prevent him from engaging in worship; but through his demonic whispers, he tries to implement ostentation and pretension into an individual and attempts to dissuade one from taking part in collective worship as well.

Against this trick of the Devil, a human being must gradually strengthen one's will to a degree that the performance of acts of worship – either done in the open in a collective manner, or in private and secrecy - become one and the same and end up being just as the poet, Sa'di Shirāzī said:

²² *Quran*, Sūrah Ṭahā (20), verse 7.

²³ *Quran*, Sūrah al-Baqarah (2), verse 271.

رسد آدمی بہ جایی کہ بہ جز خدا نبیند

Arrive to the sacred station where you see nothing but God all around,

بگو کہ تا چه حد است مکان آدمیت

Then reflect as to what station a human being can reach to.



O Allāh! Send Your prayers upon Muḥammad and the family of Muḥammad!