

Three Ways to Forgiveness

By: Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī¹

*“Oh son of Adam, as long as you call upon me and hope in me,
I will forgive you for whatever (sins) you have and I will not mind...”*

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¹ Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī’s book, “Jāmi’ al-‘Ulūm wal-Ḥikam”, is an explanation of the forty-two famous ḥadīth collected by Imām an-Nawawī. The ḥadīth explained in this article is the last one, number forty-two.

The Ḥadīth

حَدَّثَنَا أَنَسُ بْنُ مَالِكٍ (رضي الله عنه) قَالَ : سَمِعْتُ رَسُولَ اللَّهِ (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) يَقُولُ : « قَالَ اللهُ تَعَالَى : يَا ابْنَ آدَمَ ! إِنَّكَ مَا دَعَوْتَنِي وَرَجَوْتَنِي ، غَفَرْتُ لَكَ عَلَى مَا كَانَ فِيكَ وَلَا أُبَالِي . يَا ابْنَ آدَمَ ! لَوْ بَلَغَتْ ذُنُوبُكَ عَنَانَ السَّمَاءِ ثُمَّ اسْتَغْفَرْتَنِي غَفَرْتُ لَكَ وَلَا أُبَالِي ، يَا ابْنَ آدَمَ ! إِنَّكَ لَوْ أَتَيْتَنِي بِقُرَابِ الْأَرْضِ خَطَايَا ثُمَّ لَقِيتَنِي لَا تُشْرِكُ بِي شَيْئًا لَأَتَيْتُكَ بِقُرَابِهَا مَغْفِرَةً »

Anas Ibn Mālik (رضي الله عنه) said: I heard Allah’s messenger (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) saying: “Allah (تعالَى) said, ‘Oh son of Adam, as long as you call on me and hope in me, I will forgive you for whatever (sins) you have and I will not mind. Oh son of Adam, if your sins were to reach the clouds in the sky and then were you to ask for my forgiveness, I would forgive you and I would not mind. Oh son of Adam, if you were to come to me with sins as much as the earth and then you meet me not worshipping anything else along with me, I would come to you with as much forgiveness.’”²

This ḥadīth of Anas (رضي الله عنه) contains three ways to obtain forgiveness...

² Recorded by at-Tirmidhī (no. 3540). Shaykh al-Albānī said it is authentic in “Ṣaḥīḥ Sunan at-Tirmidhī” (no. 2805).

The First Way: Hopeful Supplication

The first way is by hopeful supplication. Calling upon Allah is something we have been commanded to do and have been promised a response as Allah (تعالى) says:

﴿ وَقَالَ رَبُّكُمْ ادْعُونِي أَسْتَجِبْ لَكُمْ ﴾

And your lord said, “Call upon me, I will answer you.”³

Also, in the four famous collections of ḥadīth (an-Nasāī, Abū Dāwūd, at-Tirmidhī, & Ibn Mājah), an-Nu'mān Ibn Bashīr (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said:

« إِنَّ الدُّعَاءَ هُوَ الْعِبَادَةُ »

Supplication – it is definitely (a form of) worship.

(an-Nu'mān continues,) “Then he recited this verse (the previous verse above).”⁴

However, supplication is only guaranteed a response when its conditions are fulfilled and anything that prevents the response is avoided.

³ The Quran, Sūrah Ghāfir, 40:60.

⁴ Recorded by al-Bukhāree in “al-Adab wal-Mufrad.” an-Nasāī, Abū Dāwūd, at-Tirmidhī, Ibn Mājah, and Aḥmad. at-Tirmidhī said it is “A ḥasan ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth”. al-Ḥākim also said it is authentic and adh-Dhahabī agreed with him. See “Aḥkām al-Janāiz” (pg. 194) by al-Albānī.

A response may be delayed or withheld because some of its conditions are not met or because of some other things or etiquettes that prevent one's supplication from being answered.⁵

One of the greatest of these conditions is that the caller should put his whole heart into his supplication and have certain hope that Allah will answer him, as in the ḥadīth of Abū Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) that the prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said:

« ادْعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَنْتُمْ مُوقِنُونَ بِالْإِجَابَةِ وَأَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَسْتَجِيبُ دُعَاءَ مَنْ قَلْبٍ غَافِلٍ لَاهٍ »

Call upon Allah while you are certain of the response. And know that Allah does not answer the supplication from a careless, inattentive heart.⁶

For this point, that one should be certain of a response, the servant has been forbidden to say in his supplication:

« لَا يَقُولَنَّ أَحَدُكُمْ اللَّهُمَّ اغْفِرْ لِي إِنْ شِئْتَ ، اللَّهُمَّ ارْحَمْنِي إِنْ شِئْتَ ، لِيَعْزَمَ الْمَسْأَلَةَ ، فَإِنَّهُ لَا مُكْرَهَ لَهُ »

None of you should say, “Oh Allah, forgive me *if you want*. Oh Allah, have mercy on me *if you want*.” Instead, he should be certain and determined in asking because certainly no one forces or compels him (Allah) anyway.⁷

⁵ Ibn Rajab explains in another part of his book, “Jāmi’ al-‘Ulūm wal-Hikam,” some conditions for the acceptance of supplication such as a person’s sustenance being permissible and from permissible means, the supplicant being certain of Allah’s response, the supplicant’s heart being fully attentive and present during supplication, among other conditions.

⁶ Recorded by at-Tirmidhī (no. 3479), al-Ḥākim and others. It is acceptable (ḥasan) based on its many supporting chains. al-Albānī also declared it ḥasan in “Ṣaḥīḥ Sunan at-Tirmidhī” (no. 2766).

A person should also not be too hasty and therefore stop calling on Allah if the particular response he wants does not come immediately. This is one of the things that could prevent supplications from being answered. The servant should not lose hope in having his supplication answered even if time passes. Certainly, Allah loves those who are persistent and constantly supplicate to him.

Allah (تعالی) says:

﴿وَادْعُوهُ خَوْفًا وَطَمَعًا إِنَّ رَحْمَتَ اللَّهِ قَرِيبٌ مِّنَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ﴾

And call upon him in fear and hope. For sure, the mercy of Allah is near to those who do good.⁸

So, as long as a servant persists in calling on Allah, aspiring for a certain response without losing hope, then he is close to getting his response; whoever consistently knocks on the door will eventually have it opened for him.

One of the most important things a servant could ask his lord for is the forgiveness of his sins. That implies being saved from the fire and entering Paradise. The prophet (صَلَّى) said:

« حَوْلَهَا نَدْنِدُنُ »

⁷ Recorded by al-Bukhārī (no. 6339, 7477) and Muslim (no. 2679) and by at-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd, Ibn Mājah, Aḥmad and others.

⁸ The Quran, Sūrah al-Arāf, 7:56.

In general, it is about that (the fire & Paradise) that we constantly supplicate for.⁹

Abū Muslim al-Khawlānī said, “I never made a supplication that I mentioned the fire except that I ended up making it (the supplication) totally for seeking protection from it.”

One way that Allah is merciful towards his servant is that whenever a servant calls on him, seeking help with any of his needs of this world, Allah assists him with it and exchanges it for something better. He may, as a response to his call, either prevent some harm from befalling the person, save the response and reward for him in the hereafter, or Allah may forgive one of his sins as a reward for his supplication. Imām Aḥmad records in “al-Musnad” a ḥadīth from Abū Sa’īd (رضي الله عنه) that the prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said:

« مَا مِنْ مُسْلِمٍ يَدْعُو بِدَعْوَةٍ لَيْسَ فِيهَا إِيْتِمٌ وَلَا قَطِيعَةٌ رَحِمَ ، إِلَّا أَعْطَاهُ اللَّهُ بِهَا إِحْدَى ثَلَاثٍ : إِمَّا أَنْ تُعْجَلَ لَهُ دَعْوَتُهُ ، وَإِمَّا أَنْ يَدَّخِرَهَا لَهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ ، وَإِمَّا أَنْ يَصْرِفَ عَنْهُ مِنْ السُّوءِ مِثْلَهَا »

No Muslim supplicates for anything – as long as it does not pertain to anything sinful or the cutting off of kinship ties – except that Allah will give him as a reward for it one of three things: either Allah will immediately respond to his supplication, or he will save the person’s reward for him in the hereafter, or Allah will prevent a similar evil from befalling him.

⁹ Recorded by Abū Dāwūd (no. 792), Ibn Mājah (no. 910), and others. al-Albānī said it is authentic in “Ṣaḥīḥ Sunan Abī Dāwūd” (no. 710). The full text of the ḥadīth is that the prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) asked a man, “What do you say in prayer?” He replied, “I make the *Tashahhud* and then I say, ‘Oh Allah, I ask you for Paradise and I seek your protection from the fire.’ As for me, I am not proficient in making those detailed, elaborate supplications like you and Mu’āz do.” The prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) then replied with the above ḥadīth.

The companions then said, “In that case, we will increase (in supplication)”. The prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said:

« اللَّهُ أَكْثَرُ »

Allah will increase even more.¹⁰

In any case, persistence and diligence in supplicating for forgiveness while hoping in Allah is the way to obtain forgiveness.

Another excellent way to get this forgiveness is that whenever a servant commits a sin, he neither seeks nor hopes for anyone’s forgiveness other than from his lord. He knows that no one forgives sins or takes people to account for them other than Allah (عزَّ وجلَّ).

As for Allah’s statement (in the main ḥadīth on pg. 2), “**As long as you call on me and hope in me, I will forgive you for whatever (sins) you have and I will not mind,**” this means: No matter how numerous your sins and bad deeds may be, forgiving you is not something too great for me and I will not consider it too much.

As recorded in “Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim”, the prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said:

« إِذَا دَعَا أَحَدُكُمْ فَلَا يَقُلُ اللَّهُمَّ اغْفِرْ لِي إِنْ شِئْتَ وَلَكِنْ لِيَعِزِّمِ الْمَسْأَلَةَ وَلِيُعِظِمِ
الرَّغْبَةَ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَتَعَاضَمُهُ شَيْءٌ أَعْطَاهُ »

¹⁰ Recorded by Imām Aḥmad (no. 10749) and it is authentic based on its supporting chains of narrations.

When anyone of you supplicates, he should not say, “Oh Allah, forgive me if you want.” But he should be resolved and certain in his request and increase his hope and enthusiasm because Allah – nothing is too great for him to give.¹¹

So, regardless of how great and numerous a servant’s sins may be, the pardon and forgiveness of Allah is certainly greater. Such sins are completely insignificant when compared to the Allah’s forgiveness and pardon.

Someone said (in poetry form):

فَلَقَدْ عَلِمْتُ بِأَنَّ عَفْوَكَ أَعْظَمُ	يَا رَبِّ إِنَّ عَظُمَتَ ذُنُوبِي كَثِيرَةٌ
فَمَنْ ذَا الَّذِي يَدْعُو وَيَرْجُو الْمَجْرِمُ	إِنْ كَانَ لَا يَرْجُوكَ إِلَّا مُحْسِنٌ
وَجَمِيلٌ عَفْوَكَ ثُمَّ إِنِّي مُسْلِمٌ	مَا لِي إِلَيْكَ وَسِيلَةٌ إِلَّا الرَّجَاءُ

My Lord, when my sins become numerous, but I have already known your pardon is greater. If it is only the good-doer who has hope in you, then upon whom would the sinner call and hope? I have no way to you except by hope and the magnificence of your forgiveness, then the fact that I am a Muslim.

¹¹ Recorded by Muslim (no. 2679).

The Second Way: Asking for Forgiveness

The second way to obtain forgiveness is to sincerely ask for it even if your sins are very severe and as numerous as the clouds in the sky or as far as the eye can see. In another narration of the same ḥadīth, the wording is:

« لَوْ أَجْطَأْتُمْ حَتَّى بَلَغَتْ خَطَايَاكُمْ مَا بَيْنَ السَّمَاءِ وَالْأَرْضِ ثُمَّ اسْتَغْفَرْتُمْ اللهُ لَغَفَرَ لَكُمْ »

If you were to commit so many sins that they filled the space between the sky and earth and then you were to ask for Allah's forgiveness, he would forgive you.

Asking for this forgiveness is to seek protection from the evil results of one's sins and for them to be concealed. Seeking forgiveness has been mentioned many times in the Quran.

Sometimes, seeking forgiveness comes in the form of a command like in the statement of Allah (تعالى):

﴿ وَاسْتَغْفِرُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴾

And ask forgiveness from Allah. Surely, Allah is forgiving, merciful.¹²

¹² The Quran, Sūrah al-Baqarah, 2:199.

And his statement:

﴿ وَأَنْ اسْتَغْفِرُوا رَبَّكُمْ ثُمَّ تُوبُوا إِلَيْهِ ﴾

And seek forgiveness of your lord and repent to him.¹³

At other times, Allah praises those who consistently ask for his forgiveness:

﴿ وَالْمُسْتَغْفِرِينَ بِالْأَسْحَارِ ﴾

...and those who seek forgiveness before dawn.¹⁴

And Allah (سبحانه وتعالى) says:

﴿ وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا فَعَلُوا فَاحِشَةً أَوْ ظَلَمُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ ذَكَرُوا اللَّهَ فَاسْتَغْفَرُوا لِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَمَنْ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ ﴾

And those who, if they commit an immoral deed or wrong themselves, they remember Allah and ask for forgiveness for their sins. And who can forgive sins other than Allah?¹⁵

And other times, verses of the Quran mentioned that Allah forgives anyone who asks for his forgiveness.

﴿ وَمَنْ يَعْمَلْ سُوءًا أَوْ يَظْلِمْ نَفْسَهُ ثُمَّ يَسْتَغْفِرِ اللَّهَ يَجِدِ اللَّهَ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا ﴾

¹³ The Quran, Sūrah Hūd, 11:3.

¹⁴ The Quran, Sūrah Āli-'Imrān, 3:17.

¹⁵ The Quran, Sūrah Āli-'Imrān, 3:135.

And whoever commits an evil or wrongs himself but then asks for Allah's forgiveness, he will find Allah forgiving, merciful.¹⁶

Often, seeking forgiveness is mentioned alongside repentance. When it is, seeking forgiveness means to actually ask for Allah's forgiveness by the tongue while repentance means to refrain from sinning with the heart and limbs.

Other times, seeking forgiveness is mentioned alone (without the mention of repentance) and receiving Allah's forgiveness is mentioned as the result; such is the case with this ḥadīth (on pg. 2) and others like it.

It has been said that whenever seeking forgiveness is mentioned, it is understood to also include repentance. It has also been said that all the texts that mention only seeking forgiveness are general, yet are still tied to the condition mentioned in the verse of Sūrah Āli-'Imrān¹⁷ in that there should be no insistence and continuation of the sin. In this verse, Allah promises forgiveness to whoever asks for it and does not persist in committing the sin. So, with this understanding, the general texts mentioning seeking forgiveness are understood to be according to this condition. In other words, when someone says, "Oh Allah, forgive me," he is requesting Allah's forgiveness and supplicating for it. The ruling of it is the same as any other supplication – if Allah wills, he may answer and forgive the supplicant, especially when the supplication originates from a heart that has ceased committing the sin. Or if it were made during one of the

¹⁶ The Quran, Sūrah an-Nisā, 4:110.

¹⁷ The verse referred to here is: **And those who, if they commit an immoral deed or wrong themselves, they remember Allah and seek forgiveness for their sins. And who can forgive sins other than Allah? (They are) those who do not knowingly persist in what (sins) they have done.** (Sūrah Āli-'Imrān, 3:135)

times that a response is certain like before dawn or at the end of prayers, again then the response can be expected if Allah wills.

A ḥadīth narrated by Abū Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) in the two authentic collections (“Ṣāḥīḥ al-Bukhārī” and “Ṣāḥīḥ Muslim”) confirms this in which the prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said:

« إِنَّ عَبْدًا أَذْنَبَ ذَنْبًا ، فَقَالَ : رَبُّ أَذْنَبْتُ ذَنْبًا فَاغْفِرْ لِي ، قَالَ اللهُ تَعَالَى : عَلِمَ عَبْدِي أَنَّ لَهُ رَبًّا يَغْفِرُ الذَّنْبَ وَيَأْخُذُ بِهِ ، غَفَرْتُ لِعَبْدِي ، ثُمَّ مَكَثَ مَا شَاءَ اللهُ ، ثُمَّ أَذْنَبَ ذَنْبًا ، فَقَالَ رَبُّ أَذْنَبْتُ آخَرَ فَاغْفِرْهُ ، فَقَالَ : عَلِمَ عَبْدِي أَنَّ لَهُ رَبًّا يَغْفِرُ الذَّنْبَ وَيَأْخُذُ بِهِ ، غَفَرْتُ لِعَبْدِي ، ثُمَّ مَكَثَ مَا شَاءَ اللهُ ، ثُمَّ أَذْنَبَ ذَنْبًا ، قَالَ : رَبُّ أَذْنَبْتُ آخَرَ فَاغْفِرْهُ لِي ، فَقَالَ : عَلِمَ عَبْدِي أَنَّ لَهُ رَبًّا يَغْفِرُ الذَّنْبَ وَيَأْخُذُ بِهِ ، غَفَرْتُ لِعَبْدِي ثَلَاثًا فَلْيَعْمَلْ مَا شَاءَ »

There was a servant who committed a sin and then said, “My lord, I have sinned so forgive me.” Allah (تَعَالَى) replied, “My servant knows he has a lord who forgives sins and takes them to account. I have forgiven my servant.” Then, a period of time passed as Allah willed, and he sinned again. He said, “My lord, I have committed another sin so forgive it.” He replied, “My servant knows he has a lord who forgives sins and takes them to account. I have forgiven my servant.” Then, another period of time passed as Allah willed, and he committed another sin. He said, “My lord, I have sinned again so forgive it.” Allah replied, “My servant knows he has a lord who forgives sins and takes them to account. I have

forgiven my servant.” for the third time (then adding), “So let him do as he pleases.”¹⁸

Meaning: He will be forgiven as long as he continues in this state: whenever he sins, he simply (but sincerely) asks Allah for forgiveness.

Apparently, it is understood that his asking for forgiveness is without insisting on or intending to commit the same sin again.

As for someone asking forgiveness just with the tongue while the heart is still intent on committing the sin again, this is merely a supplication – if Allah wills, he may forgive him otherwise he may not.

It may be that his insistence upon committing the same sin could become the very factor that prevents his supplication from being answered. In Imām Aḥmad’s “al-Musnad”, there is the ḥadīth of ‘Abdullāh Ibn ‘Umar (رضي الله عنهما):

« وَيَلُّ لِلْمُصْرِبِينَ الَّذِينَ يُصِرُّونَ عَلَى مَا فَعَلُوا وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ »

Let the insistent sinners beware – those who insist on committing what (sins) they did while they know.¹⁹

¹⁸ Recorded by al-Bukhārī (no. 7507) and Muslim (no. 2758).

¹⁹ Recorded by Aḥmad (no. 6505, 7001) and it is authentic. This ḥadīth is “marfū” which means it was recorded as a statement of a companion but has been raised to the level of actually being a statement of the prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ) (. وسلّم).

So, the complete way to seek forgiveness, the way that assures forgiveness, is done by also not committing the sin again. Allah has praised such people and promised them forgiveness.²⁰

Undoubtedly, the best way to ask forgiveness of Allah is by not insisting on the sin. In this way, the servant is hopeful of a true, sincere repentance. If he says only by his tongue, “I seek forgiveness from Allah,” while his heart has not fully renounced the sin, he is merely calling upon Allah to forgive him (without actual repentance).²¹ This is still good though, because it is hoped he will also be answered.

As for someone who repents with a false repentance, this is not real repentance as some people believe. True repentance is not possible unless one stops committing the sin. When someone says, “I seek Allah’s forgiveness and I repent to him,” then there are two possible scenarios:

1. His heart is still insistent upon committing the sin. In this case, he is lying in his statement, “I repent to you,” because he has actually not repented. So, it is wrong for him to say of himself that he is repenting while in fact he is not.
2. He has given up the sin with his heart and does not insist upon doing it.

The people have differed with regards to the permissibility of one (who continues to insist upon the sin) saying, “I repent to Allah.” A group of the pious predecessors

²⁰ As in the verse (3:135) mentioned on pg. 10, footnote no. 15.

²¹ Note that Ibn Rajab is differentiating between asking for forgiveness and repentance.

disliked it and they are the companions of Abū Ḥanīfah. This is reported from them by aṭ-Ṭaḥāwī.

al-Rabīʾ Ibn Khaytham said that a person's statement, "I repent to Allah," while continuing the sin is a lie and even another sin. Instead, he should say, "Oh Allah, I seek your forgiveness so forgive me," without claiming repentance.

Again, this is the case of someone who has not totally stopped committing the sin; his heart has not completely renounced it.

Muhammad Ibn Sawqah used to say when asking forgiveness, "I ask forgiveness from Allah, the Magnificent, other than whom there is no god, the Ever-Living, the Controller of everything. And I ask him for a sincere repentance."

It's reported that Ḥudhayfah said, "It is sufficient enough as a lie for someone to say, 'I seek Allah's forgiveness,' yet he keeps returning to the same sin."

Muṭarrāf once heard a man saying, "I seek forgiveness from Allah and I repent to him." So he was irritated and said, "Perhaps you should not say this."

By this, it may be understood that it is disliked (by some) that one should say, "I repent to Allah." This may be because true, sincere repentance is one in which the repentant never returns to commit the sin again. Therefore, if he does commit the same sin again, then at that time his statement, "I repent to you," would in fact become a lie.

Likewise, Muhammad Ibn Ka'b al-Qurazī was asked about a person vowing to Allah that he would never disobey him again. To this he replied, “Who would be a worse sinner than such a person? He swears an oath to Allah that his decree will never be carried out upon him!?”

Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī supported his statement in this and it's been reported that Sufyān Ibn 'Uyaynah made a similar statement.

Despite all of this, the majority of scholars are still of the opinion that it is permissible for the repentant servant to say, “I repent to Allah,” (while continuing to sin). And he may also promise Allah to never return to a particular act of disobedience because such a determination and intention is already obligated upon him in the first place (i.e. the intention not to sin). For this determination, Allah said to the one who kept returning to sins, “I have forgiven my servant so let him do as he pleases.”²²

Another supporting evidence of the permissibility of saying this is the ḥadīth that mentions the supplication for someone to say when concluding any sitting. In it, the prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) concluded by saying:

« أَسْتَغْفِرُكَ وَأَتُوبُ إِلَيْكَ »

“I seek your forgiveness and I repent to you.”²³

²² See the ḥadīth that was mentioned on pg. 12-13 (footnote no. 18).

²³ Recorded by an-Nasāī (no. 1344), Abū Dāwūd (no. 4857), at-Tirmidhī (no. 3433), and others. al-Albānī said it is authentic in “Ṣaḥīḥ Sunan an-Nasāī” (no. 1275).

The best way for person to ask for forgiveness is to start by praising his lord, then to confess the sin, and then ask for Allah’s forgiveness. An example of this is in the ḥadīth of Shaddād Ibn Aws (رضي الله عنه) that the prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said:

« سَيِّدُ الاسْتِغْفَارِ أَنْ تَقُولَ : اللَّهُمَّ أَنْتَ رَبِّي ، لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنْتَ ، خَلَقْتَنِي وَأَنَا عَبْدُكَ ، وَأَنَا عَلَى عَهْدِكَ وَوَعْدِكَ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُ ، أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنْ شَرِّ مَا صَنَعْتُ ، أَبُوءُ لَكَ بِنِعْمَتِكَ عَلَيَّ ، وَأَبُوءُ لَكَ بِذُنُوبِي ، فَاعْفُرْ لِي فَإِنَّهُ لَا يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ إِلَّا أَنْتَ »

The best way to seek forgiveness is to say, “Oh Allah, you are my lord. There is no god worthy of worship but you. You created me and I am your servant. And I abide by your covenant and promise as much as I am able. I seek refuge with you from the evil of what I have done, I acknowledge before you your favors on me, and I confess to you my sin. So, forgive me, because surely no one can forgive sins except you.”²⁴

‘Abdullāh Ibn ‘Amr (رضي الله عنه) narrated that Abū Bakr aṣ-Ṣiddīq (رضي الله عنه) said, “Oh messenger of Allah, teach me a supplication that I may use in my prayer.” The prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) replied:

« قُلِ اللَّهُمَّ إِنِّي ظَلَمْتُ نَفْسِي ظُلْمًا كَثِيرًا وَلَا يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ إِلَّا أَنْتَ فَاعْفِرْ لِي
مَغْفِرَةً مِنْ عِنْدِكَ وَأَرْحَمَنِي إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ »

²⁴ Recorded by al-Bukhārī (no. 6306, 6323), at-Tirmidhī (no. 3393), an-Nasāī (no. 5522), and others. The remainder of the ḥadīth is, “And whoever says it during the day, being sincere and certain in it, should he die during the day before nightfall, he is from the people of Paradise. And whoever says it during the night, being sincere and certain in it, should he die before he reaches the morning, he is from the people of Paradise.”

Say, “Oh Allah, I have certainly wronged myself with much transgression. And no one forgives sins except you. So, forgive me with forgiveness from yourself and have mercy on me. Surely you are the Forgiving, the Most Merciful.”²⁵

And also from the reported ways to ask forgiveness is that a servant says:

« أَسْتَغْفِرُ اللَّهَ الْعَظِيمَ الَّذِي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ الْحَيُّ الْقَيُّومَ وَأَتُوبُ إِلَيْهِ »

“I ask forgiveness from Allah, the greatest, other than whom there is no god worthy of worship, the Ever-Living, the Controller of everything. And I repent to him.”²⁶

It is recorded in “Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī” from Abū Hurayrah (رضي الله عنه) that the prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said:

« وَاللَّهِ إِنِّي لَأَسْتَغْفِرُ اللَّهَ وَأَتُوبُ إِلَيْهِ فِي الْيَوْمِ أَكْثَرَ مِنْ سَبْعِينَ مَرَّةً »

By Allah, I ask Allah’s forgiveness and repent to him during the day more than seventy times.²⁷

And in “Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim,” from al-Agharr al-Muzanī that the prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said:

« إِنَّهُ لَيُغَانُ عَلَى قَلْبِي وَإِنِّي لَأَسْتَغْفِرُ اللَّهَ فِي كُلِّ يَوْمٍ مِائَةَ مَرَّةٍ »

²⁵ Recorded by al-Bukhārī (no. 834, 6326, 7388), Muslim (no. 2705), at-Tirmidhī (no. 3531), an-Nasāī (no. 1302), Ibn Mājah (no. 3835), and others.

²⁶ Recorded by at-Tirmidhī (no. 3397, 3577), Abū Dāwūd (no. 1517), and al-Hākim said it is authentic and adh-Dhahabī agreed. al-Albānī said it is authentic in “Ṣaḥīḥ Sunan at-Tirmidhī” (no. 2831).

²⁷ Recorded by al-Bukhārī (no. 6307).

Certainly my heart becomes preoccupied, but I still seek Allah's forgiveness a hundred times in a day.²⁸

In conclusion, the remedy for sins is to seek forgiveness. And whoever's sins become too numerous for him to even count, then let him still ask Allah's forgiveness, for surely Allah knows everything and counts everything as he says:

﴿يَوْمَ يَبْعَثُهُمُ اللَّهُ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُهُم بِمَا عَمِلُوا أَحْصَاهُ اللَّهُ وَنَسُوهُ﴾

On the day when Allah will resurrect them all and inform them of what they did. Allah had counted it, while they forgot it.²⁹

²⁸ Recorded by Muslim (no. 2702) and Abū Dāwūd (no. 1515).

²⁹ The Quran, Sūrah al-Mujādilah, 58:6.

The Third Way: Tawhīd

The third way to obtain forgiveness is by sincerely believing in tawhīd (that only Allah alone should be worshipped) and in fact, it is the greatest way. Whoever loses tawhīd loses forgiveness, and whoever comes to Allah with tawhīd has come with the greatest means of earning his forgiveness. Allah (سبحانه وتعالى) says:

﴿ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَغْفِرُ أَنْ يُشْرَكَ بِهِ وَيَغْفِرُ مَا دُونَ ذَلِكَ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ ﴾

Surely, Allah does not forgive that others should be worshipped along with him, but he forgives whatever is less than that to whom he wills.³⁰

Whoever comes with tawhīd and, along with it, the earth full of sins, Allah will meet him with as much forgiveness. But it should be understood that this is Allah's decision; if he wills, he may forgive the person, or he may take him to account for his sins. However, the final result is that such a person (who has actualized and died upon tawhīd) will not remain forever in the fire. Rather, he will be taken out and allowed to enter Paradise.

Some scholars said that the one who actualizes tawhīd will not even be thrown into the fire as the disbelievers will, nor will he reside therein as disbelievers will. So, if a servant's tawhīd is complete and he is sincere to Allah in it and fulfills all its conditions with his heart, tongue, and limbs, or with his heart and tongue at the time of his death, then that would secure for him complete forgiveness for all previous sins he committed.

³⁰ The Quran, Sūrah an-Nisā, 4:48.

It would also prevent him from entering the fire at all. So, whoever actualizes tawhīd with his heart completely empty of everything but Allah out of love, honor, respect, fear, hope, and reliance, then that would remove all his sins and misdeeds even if they were as much as the foam of the sea. Perhaps they would even be exchanged for good deeds as has been mentioned in the narrations of bad deeds being replaced with good ones.³¹

Undeniably, this tawhīd is the greatest medicine. If even a small amount was dropped on a mountain of sins and bad deeds, it would replace them all with good deeds.

³¹ One particularly appropriate ḥadīth as an example of this is recorded by Muslim (no.190) and at-Tirmidhī (no. 2596) from Abū Dharr (رضي الله عنه) that the prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) said:

« إِنِّي لَأَعْلَمُ آخِرَ أَهْلِ الْجَنَّةِ دُخُولًا وَالْجَنَّةِ وَآخِرَ أَهْلِ النَّارِ خُرُوجًا مِنْهَا رَجُلٌ يُؤْتَى بِهِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فَيَقَالُ اعْرِضُوا عَلَيْهِ صِغَارَ ذُنُوبِهِ وَارْفَعُوا عَنْهُ كِبَارَهَا فَتُعْرَضُ عَلَيْهِ صِغَارُ ذُنُوبِهِ فَيَقَالُ عَمِلْتَ يَوْمَ كَذَا وَكَذَا وَكَذَا وَكَذَا وَعَمِلْتَ يَوْمَ كَذَا وَكَذَا وَكَذَا فَيَقُولُ نَعَمْ لَا يَسْتَطِيعُ أَنْ يَنْكِرَ وَهُوَ مُشْفِقٌ مِنْ كِبَارِ ذُنُوبِهِ أَنْ تُعْرَضَ عَلَيْهِ فَيَقَالُ لَهُ فَإِنَّ لَكَ مَكَانَ كُلِّ سَيِّئَةٍ حَسَنَةً فَيَقُولُ رَبِّ قَدْ عَمِلْتُ أَشْيَاءَ لَا أَرَاهَا هَاهُنَا ! »

I certainly know who will be the last to enter Paradise and the last to be brought out of the fire. He is a man who will be brought on the Day of Resurrection and it will be said, "Present to him his minor sins and take away his major ones." So, his minor sins will be placed before him. He will be asked, "On this day, did you do this and that, and on that day did you do this and that?" He'll reply, "Yes." He will not be able to deny anything. He will become terrified that his major sins will also be presented to him. He will then be told, "For you, every sin will be replaced with a good deed." The man will then say, "Oh my lord, I even did other things (sins) I do not see here!"

I (Abū Dharr) then saw Allah's messenger (صلى الله عليه وسلم) laughing so much that I could see his back molar teeth.