

Lessons on Detachment in the Tablet to Pope Pius IX

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Lessons on Detachment in the Tablet to Pope Pius IX

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I. Question Presented.

What lessons of detachment for individual Bahá'ís are contained within the majestic summons proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh in the Tablet to Pope Pius IX?

II. Thesis Statement.

Stunning lessons for detachment abound within the Words of Bahá'u'lláh in the Tablet to Pope Pius IX. This Tablet is rich with meaning and wisdom applicable to the lives of individual Bahá'ís. As Bahá'u'lláh commands the Pope to "rend the veils asunder," He also offers us individually an opportunity to glimpse more deeply the many levels and meanings of detachment.

Bahá'u'lláh's Words to the Pope serve as a clear warning and the Pope's subsequent history serves as a chilling example of the imperative necessity of cultivating the art of detachment in our lives.

III. Body.

Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet to Pope Pius IX, Revealed in Arabic in the city of 'Akká circa 1869, proclaims unequivocally His station as the promised return of Christ, and summons the Pope to arise and serve His Cause. Bahá'u'lláh warns the Pope to "beware that thou dispute not with Him even as the Pharisees disputed with Him (Jesus) without a clear token or proof . . .," calling to mind the historical example of the rejection of Jesus by the religious establishment of the time. Bahá'u'lláh vividly establishes the contrast between temporal sovereignty and true spiritual sovereignty with the Words:

"Dwellest thou in palaces whilst He Who is the King of Revelation liveth in the most desolate of abodes? Leave them unto such as desire them, and set thy face with joy and delight towards the Kingdom . . . "

The emptiness of the Pope's lifestyle in palaces, surrounded by pomp and luxury

is again invoked, and the Pope is called upon to exhibit uncompromising detachment in the lines:

"Sell all the embellished ornaments thou dost possess, and expend them in the path of God . . . Abandon thy kingdom unto the kings, and emerge from thy habitation, with thy face set towards the Kingdom, and, detached from the world, then speak forth the praises of thy Lord betwixt earth and heaven."

The sad consequences of the Pope's rejection of Bahá'u'lláh's Message sends us all a powerful example of the failure to detach ourselves from the material world. The historical image of the Pope portrayed by the Guardian of a man, humiliated, routed by his enemies, forced to his knees in the Scala Santa, utterly divested of his temporal sovereignty, and left bewildered, powerless and unaware of the true cause of his predicament, is both moving and chilling in its ramifications. Through the passage of time, the inevitably fleeting nature of temporal power is dramatically exposed in the Pope's crushingly bitter end. What, then, is it which has prevented the Pope from responding to Bahá'u'lláh's summons, and how can we learn from his example?

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

"Call thou to remembrance Him Who was the Spirit (Jesus) Who, when He came, the most learned of His age pronounced judgment against Him in His own country whilst he who was only a fisherman believed in Him. Take heed, then, ye men of understanding heart!"

Although the Tablet is directed to the Pope individually, the warning above is addressed in the collective. Bahá'u'lláh warns us all to beware of the danger of arrogance which learning and power can bring. Cultivating detachment from worldly things such as our reputations, our learning or our status in the world is our only hope for obtaining true knowledge. The Pope, despite Bahá'u'lláh's clear Message and the clear example of the historical treatment of Jesus by the learned of His age, chose to ignore His Summons. Given the repeated warnings by Bahá'u'lláh not to allow temporal power to veil the Pope from God, one can conclude that it is precisely that attachment to temporal power which is the root cause of his rejection of Bahá'u'lláh's Message. To have accepted, or even truly investigated Bahá'u'lláh's Claims, would have threatened the Pope's outer glory, his reputation among his peers and his temporal sovereignty. The historical outcome of the Pope's decision dramatically underscores the fleeting nature of those things for which he lost that priceless opportunity.

Individual Bahá'ís might be tempted to dismiss the lesson provided by the Pope, since we claim to have recognized the Station of Bahá'u'lláh. However, the lessons of detachment in the Tablet to Pope Pius IX are multi-layered. Becoming detached is a process, a goal towards which we strive all our lives. How often is our ability to serve the Faith

hampered by attachment to the very same obstacles as that which deterred the Pope? The cancer of materialism in the national life of the United States surely afflicts the American Bahá'í community as well. We are constantly struggling to shake off the bondage of apathy, materialism, and comfort with our lives and our reputations as they currently stand in order to arise to serve the Faith. Bahá'u'lláh's Command to the Pope is threefold: (1) recognize His Station as the Promised Manifestation of God; (2) detach himself from worldly effects and concerns; and (3) arise to serve the Cause of God. It would appear from this breakdown, then, that one of the primary barriers to our ability to truly arise in the service of the Faith is our reluctance to relinquish our attachment to the world. Our comfort, our homes, our jobs, our time, our reputation and prestige both internal and external to the Bahá'í community often seem to matter to us more than that which lasts, paralyzing us from bold and daring action in service to the Faith. In this way, the Pope's example can serve to help us to shake off our sloth and worldly attachments, and remember the fleeting nature of the earthly days in which we are living.

IV. Conclusion.

In conclusion, the Tablet to Pope Pius IX is a majestic summons from Bahá'u'lláh to the head of Christendom to embrace the Cause of God. The failure of the Pope to respond to this Command is a significant event in Bahá'í history with dramatic results for the Pope individually as well as for the state of the Papacy as an institution. In addition, the lessons of this event can be applied to our own lives as individuals to draw out deeper levels of detachment and service. The example of the Pope's downfall underscores the fleeting nature of temporal attachments. Bahá'u'lláh's words to the Pope chillingly evoke the nature and effect of time, which is in the Hands of God alone, "Who causeth the night to return upon the day, and the day to return upon the night." This Tablet is a beacon of light summoning us all to prioritize our lives according to that which is eternal and will last beyond the short span of our own lives on this earth.

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