

EXTRACTS ON BACKBITING TAKEN FROM *LIGHTS OF GUIDANCE*

(excerpt numbers are from *Lights of Guidance*)

304. *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*

“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.”

(*The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 10, Arabic no. 27)

305. *Backbiting Defined*

“As regards backbiting, i.e. discussing the faults of others in their absence, the teachings are very emphatic. In a Tablet to an American friend the Master wrote: ‘*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 were shut eternally and each one of the believers unsealed his lips in praise of others, then the Teachings of His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh would spread, the hearts be illumined, the spirits glorified, and the human world would attain to everlasting felicity.*’ (Quoted in *Star of West*, Vol. IV. p. 192) Bahá'u'lláh says in *The Hidden Words*; ‘*Breathe not the sins of others so long as thou art a sinner. Shouldst thou transgress this command ACCURSED ART THOU.*’ The condemnation of backbiting could hardly be couched in stronger language than in these passages, and it is obviously one of the foremost obligations for Bahá'ís to set their faces against this practice. 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)

306. *Abstain from Fault-Finding and Backbiting*

“On no subject are the Bahá'í teachings more emphatic than on the necessity to abstain from fault-finding 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 written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, May 12, 1925: *Living the Life*, p.3)

307. *Jealousy or Petty Attitudes Can Only Be Overcome by Love and Tact*

“...he suggests you write the National Spiritual Assembly in a loving spirit, and point out to them how it distresses you to think that, after so many years of service, statements about you which you consider unjustified should be preserved. But even if these are not taken from the records it still does not make them either true or false. Many things are preserved in records as matters of opinion; no one has given a verdict on this matter! The only way jealousy or petty attitudes can be overcome is by the love and tact of the teacher; these are not things that can be solved by a ‘ruling’.” (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, July 30, 1946)

308. *Dealing with Bahá'ís Who Act in Ways Detrimental to the Cause*

“The question of dealing with those who call themselves Bahá'ís but who act in ways which we believe to be detrimental to the interests of the Cause is a very difficult one. If we think we can help matters by a frank and friendly talk with the individual concerned, refraining from judging or condemning, but pointing out in as kind a manner as possible the way in which, as it seems to us, the sort of conduct in question is harmful to the Cause or of a nature forbidden by the teachings, then it seems well to try that method before resorting to the more formidable method of bringing the matter before the Spiritual Assembly. But if that fails or if we feel that it is hopeless to try and deal with the matter in that way, while at the same time the case is so serious that the interests of the Cause require that it should be firmly dealt with, then the proper course is to bring the matter before the Spiritual Assembly and have it frankly and fully discussed, calling such evidence as is necessary for the elucidation of the matter. After full consideration, the Spiritual Assembly should take such action as it deems advisable, and it is incumbent upon all members of the group to be loyal to whatever decision is arrived at by the Spiritual Assembly. There is, of course the right of appeal from the Local

to the National Assembly, and from that to Shoghi Effendi, but the matter ought to be dealt with, in the first instance, by the Local Spiritual Assembly.

“...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.”
(From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, followed by an extract from the Guardian’s postscript, February 11, 1925)

309. *Learning Not to Concern Ourselves with the Faults of Others*

“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...’*

“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)

310. *The Believers Need More Peace-Makers Circulating Among Them- A Function of the Older And The More Mature Bahá’ís.*

“What the believers need is not only, as you state, to really study the teachings, but also to have more peace-makers circulating among them. Unfortunately, not only average people, but average Bahá’ís, are very immature; gossip, trouble-making, criticism, seem easier than the putting into practice of love, constructive words and cooperation. It is one of the functions of the older and the more mature Bahá’ís, to help the weaker ones to iron out their difficulties and learn to really function and live like true believers!” (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, January 11, 1950)

311. *To Be Forbearing, Patient, Merciful, Rather than Succumbing to Backbiting and Criticism*

“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. Such passages as the following extract from one of the letters written on behalf of the beloved Guardian by his secretary will also be helpful:

“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... On no subject are the Bahá’í teachings more emphatic than on the necessity to abstain from fault-finding and backbiting, while being ever eager to discover and root out our own faults and overcome our own failings.”

(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, September 23, 1975)

312. *Backbiting—The Most Great Sin*

“... 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.

“It is related that His Holiness Christ—May my life be a sacrifice to Him!—one day, accompanied by His apostles, passed by corpse of a dead animal. One of them said: ‘How putrid has this animal become!’ The other exclaimed: ‘How it is deformed!’ A third cried out: ‘What a stench! How cadaverous looking!’ but His Holiness Christ said: ‘Look at its teeth! How white they are!’ Consider, that He did not look at all at the defects of that animal; nay, rather, He searched well until He found the beautiful white teeth. He observed only the whiteness of the teeth and overlooked entirely the deformity of the body, the dissolution of its organs and the bad odour.

This is the attribute of the children of the Kingdom. This is the conduct and the manner of the real Bahá’ís. I hope that all the believers will attain to this lofty station.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Tablet to Dr. M.G. Skinner, August 12, 1913: *Star of the West*, Vol. IV, No. 11, p. 192)

313. *Backbiting “Quencheth the Light of the Heart”*

“... Backbiting quencheth the light of the heart, and extinguisheth the life of the soul.” (Bahá’u’lláh: *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 193)

314. *Criticism a Calamity*

“Vicious criticism is indeed a calamity. But its root is lack of faith in the system of Bahá’u’lláh, i.e., the Administrative Order—and lack of obedience to Him—for He has forbidden it! If the Bahá’ís would follow the Bahá’í laws in voting, in electing, in serving and in abiding by Assembly decisions, all this waste of strength through criticizing others could be diverted into cooperation and achieving the Plan...” (From a letter written in behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, December 18, 1949: *Bahá’í News*, No. 233, p. 2 July 1950)

315. ***Suppress Every Critical Thought and Every Harsh Word***

“When we see the condition the world is in today, we must surely forget these utterly insignificant internal disturbances, and rush, unitedly, to the rescue of humanity. You should urge your fellow-Bahá’ís to take this point of view, and to support you in a strong effort to suppress every critical thought and every harsh word, in order to let the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh flow into the entire community, and unite it in His love and in His service.” (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, February 16, 1951: *Living the life*, p. 17)

316. ***An Unwise Act or Statement***

“... an unwise act or statement by a Bahá’í in one country could result in a grave set-back for the Faith there or elsewhere—and even loss of the lives of fellow believers.” (From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, December 8, 1967: *Wellspring of Guidance*, p. 131)

317. ***Personal Differences and Petty Pre-Occupations***

“He feels that you should do your utmost to call the attention of the friends to these large things and real triumphs, and away from their personal differences and petty pre-occupations. Now is certainly not the time for any man to think of himself, or busy himself with the weaknesses of his brother; but, rather each and every Bahá’í must concentrate in the tasks ahead and be reborn in the service of Bahá’u’lláh.” (From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the Area National Teaching Committee (USA), July 17, 1950: *Bahá’í News*, October 1970, p.3)

318. ***Like Ploughmen Each Has his team to Manage***

“... 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.” (From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, May 12, 1925: *Living the Life*, pp. 2-3)

319. ***Be a Friend to the Whole Human Race***

“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.” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *Selections of the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, p. 169)

320. ***Bahá’í Must be Distinguished***

“I desire distinction for you. The Bahá’í must be distinguished from others of humanity. But this distinction must not depend upon wealth—that they should become more affluent than other people. I do not desire for you financial distinction. It is not an ordinary distinction I desire: not scientific, commercial, industrial distinction. For you I desire spiritual distinction; that is, you must become eminent and distinguished in morals. In the love of God you must become distinguished from all else. You must become distinguished for loving humanity; for unity and accord; for love and justice. In brief, you must become distinguished in all the virtues of the human world; for faithfulness and steadfastness; for philanthropic deeds and service to the human world; for love toward every human being; for unity and accord with all people; for removing prejudices and promoting international peace. Finally, you must become distinguished for heavenly illumination and acquiring the bestowals of God. I desire this distinction for you. This must be the point of distinction among you.” (Abdu’l-Bahá: *Promulgation Of Universal Peace*, p. 185)

321. *Believers Should Draw on Each Other's Love*

“Indeed the believers have not yet fully learned to draw on each other’s love for strength and consolation in time of need. The Cause of God is endowed with tremendous powers, and the reason the believers do not gain more from it is because they have not learned to draw fully on these mighty forces of love and strength and harmony generated by the Faith.” (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, May 8, 1942: *Living the Life*, p.8)

322. *Worst Enemies of the Cause Are in the Cause*

“The worst enemies of the Cause are in the Cause and mention the name of God. We need not fear the enemies on the outside for such can be easily dealt with. But the enemies who call themselves friends and who persistently violate every fundamental law of love and unity, are difficult to be dealt with in this day, for the mercy of God is still great. But ere long this merciful door will be closed and such enemies will be attacked with a madness...” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá answers questions asked by Dr. E. C. Getsinger in the Holy Land: *Star of The West*, Vol. 6, No. 6, p.45)

323. *Backbiting is Divisive*

“... 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. 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)

324. *When Criticism and harsh Words Arise*

“When criticism and harsh words arise within a Bahá’í community, there is no remedy except to put the past behind one, and persuade all concerned to turn over a new leaf, and for the sake of God and His Faith refrain from mentioning the subjects which have led to misunderstanding and inharmony. The more the friends argue back and forth and maintain, each side, that their point of view is the right one, the worse the whole situation becomes.

“When we see the condition the world is in today, we must surely forget these utterly insignificant internal disturbances, and rush, unitedly, to the rescue of humanity. You should urge your fellow Bahá’is to take this point of view, and to support you in a strong effort to suppress every critical thought and every harsh word, in order to let the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh flow into the entire community, and unite it in His love and in His service.” (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, February 16, 1951)

325. *If We Listen, We are Guilty of Complicity*

“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)