

# The Harm of Backbiting

## INTRODUCTION: *Approaching the threshold...*

One of the most outstanding features of the Bahá'í Faith is its contribution to the spirit of love and unity created by the application of one specific spiritual law given to us by Bahá'u'lláh: to entirely avoid backbiting, which is discussing the faults of individuals or institutions in their absence. `Abdu'l-Bahá calls backbiting "the most great sin,"<sup>1</sup> while Bahá'u'lláh depicts the consequence of such behavior in even more dire language.

Instead of talking to someone about the immature behavior of another, the Bahá'í Writings encourage us to look for and affirm the praiseworthy qualities of others. Nothing can compare with the relationships of love and unity created in a Bahá'í community by this conduct.

`Abdu'l-Bahá poses the following hope: "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."<sup>2</sup> When a community of believers fully understand the importance of this great law, they can put into effect a spiritual unity that results in the attainment of this glorious vision.



Remnant of the ancient sea wall of the prison city of Akkâ, Israel, where Bahá'u'lláh was exiled

## OBJECTIVE: *A look to the horizon...*

### Facilitator

Review the following objective with the participants:

The objective of this study is to understand the fundamental verities or basic truths regarding the importance of avoiding backbiting.

## THE STUDY PROCESS: *Attaining the water of life...*

### Facilitator

Review the following study process with the participants. Then study the numbered quotations that follow, one at a time as described below.

<sup>1</sup> *Lights of Guidance*, A Bahá'í Reference File, p. 88 #305

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*

1. **READING:** *A drink from the cup of guidance...*
  - A. **Read the quotation** out loud in its entirety.
2. **CONFIRMING MEANING:** *A spray from the fountain of light...*

To better understand certain words used in the quotation, take turns with the following:

  - A. Each participant **choose a word** from the quotation and **state it** for the whole group to hear. (Like a fun game – pick a word!) Then...
  - B. Read out loud the sentence that contains the **word** you selected, **while substituting for that word**, its given phrase, definition, or synonym from the boxes below the quotation.
  - C. Repeat A and B above until everyone is satisfied with their understanding of the words.
3. **FINDING VALUE:** *Mining the gems of truth...*
  - A. **Read the quotation** out loud again in its entirety.
  - B. Take turns **stating each basic fact or truth** you can find in the quotation about backbiting.

**QUOTATIONS: *Within the meadows of Thy nearness...***

1. *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.*

(Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Arabic #27)

**accursed:** condemned to a punishing and miserable fate  
**bear witness:** serve as evidence and proof  
**breathe:** even to the slightest amount, express ↗

or speak of  
**command:** authoritative order  
**sins:** wrong doings or faults  
**transgress:** break or violate

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

(*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 265)

**aloof:** removed or distant either physically or in interest  
**backbiting:** discussing the faults of others in their absence; "...the prohibition of backbiting, which would include adverse comments about individuals or institutions made to other individuals privately or publicly..." (Letter from the Universal House of Justice, 2 July 1996, *Criticism of Institutions*, ¶16)  
**dominion:** sphere of influence  
**extinguisheth:** causes to die out or destroys ↗

**grievous:** an oppressive and burdensome  
**heart:** "... the recipient of the light of God and the seat of the revelation of the All-Merciful..." (*Gleanings from the Writing of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 186)  
**light:** reflection of spiritual knowledge and goodness  
**quenbeth:** reduces or puts out  
**regard:** look upon or consider  
**soul:** immortal essence of the rational, spiritual, and emotional self

3. 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...

(`Abdu'l-Bahá, cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, p. 90, #309)

**fault(s):** moral imperfection(s) or wrongdoing(s)  
**imperfections:** moral defects or wrongdoings  
**self:** "...ego, the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop ↗

into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on." (Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *Living the Life*, p. 18)  
**tried:** put to the test, annoyed, or troubled

4. 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.

(Written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, p. 94, #325)

**accusations:** charges of wrongdoing  
**backbiting:** discussing the faults of others in their absence; "...the prohibition of backbiting, which would include adverse comments about individuals or institutions made to other individuals privately or publicly..." (Letter from the Universal House of Justice, 2 July 1996, *Criticism of Institutions*, ¶16)

**complicity:** associating or participating in the wrongful act [and]  
**faults:** moral imperfections or wrongdoings  
**firmly:** with unchangeable purpose  
**listen:** hear with thoughtful attention given  
**tactfully:** delicately and with considerate perception of what is appropriate  
**utmost:** able best

5. 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 no longer behold the light of truth.

(*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 230-31)

**benefit:** use or advantage  
**Blessed Beauty:** Manifestation of God, Bahá'u'lláh [one of His titles]  
**Covenant:** binding agreement between God and man  
**detraction:** lowering of another's reputation or esteem by envious, malicious, or petty criticism  
**heart:** "... the recipient of the light of God and ☞

*the seat of the revelation of the All-Merciful..."*  
 (*Gleanings from the Writing of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 186)  
**honour:** high regard for moral worth, nobility, and excellence of character  
**ill:** with displeasure, unfavorably, or harmfully  
**incumbent:** imposed as a duty  
**light:** spiritual knowledge and goodness  
**on the contrary:** in a manner opposite to that

6. 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.

(Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, pp. 90-91, #311)

**admonitions:** counsels, warnings, and cautions against fault or oversight  
**affirm:** declare and testify to  
**conceal:** hide from observation and refuse to make known  
**endeavour:** try to achieve with earnest effort  
**expose:** make known or disclose  
**forbearing:** in control on one's self when provoked  
**forgive:** give up resentment or claim to requital ☞

(on account of an offence or wrongdoing) and restore affection  
**merciful:** kind and compassionate towards the suffering or condemned  
**misdeed:** gravely wrongful actions or activities  
**overlook:** without notice or attention, ignore  
**patient:** calmly putting up with pain or troubles without complaint  
**shortcomings:** deficiencies or defects

7. 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.

(Written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, cited in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, p. 90, #309)

**avoiding:** keeping away from  
**backbiting:** discussing the faults of individuals or institutions in their absence  
**strikes:** attempts to inflict harm

**unity:** a heartfelt condition of peace, love, and harmony in human relations, free of conflict, dissension, contention, and the struggle for dominance

## SHARING EXERCISE: *A breath from the spirit of inspiration...*

### Facilitator

Ask the participants to complete the statements below. When everyone has finished, have each person share, in a round, one thing that was outstanding or inspiring and what spiritual feelings it enkindled. Please remind everyone not to remark on the comments of others.

One thing from the quotations that was outstanding or inspiring to me was \_\_\_\_\_

It made me feel \_\_\_\_\_

Explain \_\_\_\_\_

## SOME QUESTIONS: *A cup from the showers of confirmation...*

### Facilitator

Ask the participants to answer the following questions. They can usually find answers in the quotations just studied or in the introduction. When everyone has finished, review the questions, then share and discuss the answers.

1. Bahá'u'lláh wrote in *The Hidden Words*: “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.”<sup>1</sup> What does “accursed” mean? \_\_\_\_\_
2. According to Bahá'u'lláh, “backbiting quencheth the light of the \_\_\_\_\_.”
3. What is one’s “light?” \_\_\_\_\_
4. If we find ourselves focused on the fault of another, we are to \_\_\_\_\_
5. If we listen with thoughtful attention to someone complaining about the faults of another, we are...
  - a. not committing any sin or wrongdoing providing we don't say anything ourselves.
  - b. guilty of complicity.
  - c. associating or participating in backbiting.
  - d. spiritually condemned to a punishing and miserable fate.

Continued on next page.

<sup>1</sup> *The Hidden Words*, Arabic #26

6. A letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice states: “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.”<sup>1</sup> Representatives of the institution of the Counsellors include Counsellors, Auxiliary Board members and their assistants. If you were to observe a Bahá’í behaving in such a way as to endanger the interests of the Faith, whom should you contact? \_\_\_\_\_

7. As Bahá’ís we are not to talk to others about the faults of another, instead we are to...

- a. overlook their shortcomings.
- b. chastise them publicly for their wrongdoings.
- c. conceal their misdeeds.
- d. forgive their misdeeds.
- e. search for and affirm their praiseworthy deeds.
- f. endeavour to be always forbearing, patient, and merciful.
- g. complain of their faults only to our spouse or close friends.

8. `Abdu’l-Bahá said: “If a man has ten good qualities and one bad one, to look at the ten and forget the one; and if a man has ten bad qualities and one good one, to look at the one and forget the ten. Never to allow ourselves to speak one unkind word about another, even though that other be our enemy.”<sup>2</sup> How do you think it would affect your life if you were to practice this regularly? \_\_\_\_\_

9. Backbiting strikes at the very \_\_\_\_\_ of the Bahá’í community.

### **APPLICATION: Showing forth divine light...**

#### **Facilitator**

Read through #1 together and proceed as stated. Then take time for the participants to write out their individual plans for action in #2. (these are not shared) When everyone has finished, move on to the closing reading.

**1. IMAGINING THE POSSIBILITIES:** *Visions of radiant lights...*

**Bahá’u’lláh wrote:** “It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action....” Imagine how the Bahá’í Teachings in this study class could be translated into reality and action. Take turns sharing the possibilities. Begin your statements with: “**One could**....” Suggest as many ideas as you want.

**2. DECIDING ACTION:** *Mirroring forth a beam of light...*

From your experience in this study class on backbiting, describe what **you** are inspired to put into reality and action. **I will make conscious efforts to...** \_\_\_\_\_

**My next step will be...** \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>1</sup> *Lights of Guidance*, A Bahá’í Reference File, p. 90, #311

<sup>2</sup> *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era*, p. 83

## CLOSING MEDITATION: *A heart song...*

A talk by `Abdu'l-Bahá in New York, 1912.

...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 the 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, cited in *Star of the West*, Vol. IV, No. 11, p. 192)

## ANSWERS: *Affirming treasures...*

1. condemned to a punishing and miserable fate
2. heart
3. something similar to: reflection of spiritual knowledge and goodness
4. “...think of yourself! What are my imperfections? - and try to remove them.”
5. b, c, and d
6. the Local Spiritual Assembly, Counsellor, Auxiliary Board member or their assistant in your area
7. a, c, d, e, and f
8. all answers are valuable
9. unity

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