

## My Favorite Sufi Aphorism

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One day, a rich man came to Rabi'a al-'Adawiyyah and said, "*For many years I've lived a very spoiled, arrogant and sinful life. If I repent now will God forgive me?*"

Rabi'a replied, "*No, but if God forgives you, you will repent.*"

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This is one of those sayings which just drives the literalists bonkers - and no, I don't have an *isnad* for it. Indeed, on the surface this *hikmah* might seem to be flirting with theological error, but it's chock full of wisdom anyway - like it or not. Yes, truth can often be expressed in paradox, but just don't take it too far. On the other hand, the neo-Pharisees (you know who I'm talking about) are regularly frustrated when dealing with the often esoteric, subjective and experiential nature of religious truth. They seemingly can't handle the fact that they can't dot all their i's and cross all their t's, thus they opt for superficiality, literalism and rigid formalism. This has aptly been labeled the "*boy scout*" approach to religion (i.e. reducing it to just a bunch of rules to follow while depriving it of any spiritual depth), where the tough questions and dilemmas of life are rarely entertained. This problem certainly isn't unique to Islam, since many religions and many people tend to be rather superficial in their approach to life's higher truths - if they ever really address them at all. Too many people just want to keep their heads buried in the sand. The Qur'an seems to talk about such people a lot. As we might say in America, they're content going through life "*fat, dumb and happy*". Pray for them...

Anyway, it seems to me that one sees the truth in this statement of Rabi'a, my God be pleased with her, more through human experience than by mere logic. Anyone who has tried to "*earn their way to heaven*" by their own self-righteous effort, but has crashed and burned a few times, should be able to appreciate this. Yes, it's all about depending on Allah and His grace abounding - not on our own selves. I can speak from experience that one of the biggest traps that people fall into is attributing their own "*good deeds*" to themselves, instead of understanding them as blessings from God. Indeed, there is no power or strength except for Almighty God - and He alone grants success!

From what I've seen, this *hadith* is not heard often enough: The Prophet said, "*Do good deeds properly, sincerely and moderately, and receive good news because one's good deeds will not make him enter Paradise.*" They (i. e. his companions) asked, "*Even you, O Messenger of God?*" He said, "*Even I, unless and until God bestows His pardon and Mercy on me.*" ([Sahih al-Bukhari](#), Volume 8, Book 76, Number 474). I seem to recall a translation which said, "*...unless God's mercy covered me like a blanket*", but I'm not certain.

By the way, Rabi'a al-'Adawiyyah (714 CE - 801 CE) lived in Basra, which is in present day Iraq. She was one of the earliest and most prominent Muslim mystics, being a contemporary of Hassan al-Basri, and there are many awesome sayings and spiritual insights attributed to her. Some of these can be found in [Early Sufi Women](#) (Translated by Rkia Cornell, *Fons Vitae*, 2000, 433 pages), which contains both Arabic text and English translation.

Enjoy...

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