

Story 1473 (1989 Tape 9)

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The Ineffective Man Who Sought Meaning in Life

Now this time I shall tell you a story that involves some important elements of Turkish-Islamic culture. Once in the past there was a man who worked very hard, but in spite of all his efforts he was never able to improve his condition. He consulted a friend of his about this matter, explaining his failure to improve his lot, and he asked the friend for advice. friend said, "I do not understand what is wrong. Why don't consult your wife about this? She might know the source of your difficulty."

The ineffective man returned home and said to his wife, "Oh, Wife, my work has not benefited us as much as it should. I am working as hard as I can, but our condition grows worse every day. I cannot understand why this is so."

His wife answered, "Effendi,¹ there is a wise man that lives in such and such a place. Go and consult him about this

¹A mild honorific, comparable to Sir, it usually follows a first name: Hasan Effendi. At one time it was used to show respect to distinguished people, but it has become so devaluated in the twentieth century that it now is used only for servants and children.

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matter. Perhaps he can provide a solution to this problem.

ineffective man went to visit the wise man and explained his problem to him. After thinking for a moment, the wise man said, "Perhaps the problem is caused by your wife. She may possibly be a very wasteful woman who is not a good housekeeper, or possibly she is doing something else that is wrong."

Returning home, the ineffective man said to his wife, "Woman, I think that the fault for our lack of success may lie with you. With Allah as my witness, I swear that I am doing as much as I can for us. I am doing my utmost. The wise man suggested that it might be your fault that we are faring so badly. Are you wasting much of the money and goods which I bring home?"

But his wife denied this and refused to accept this accusation. She said, "Husband, I have always had great respect for what you have earned. I am doing my part properly and completely.

When the ineffective man visited the wise man for a second time, he was asked, "Do you have any unmarried daughters in your household?"

"I have one unmarried daughter

The wise man then said, "Go home and wait. This Friday²

²Friday remains the traditional sabbath day in Islam, even though since the founding of the Republic Sunday has been the day when all work and business cease in Turkey. Often in

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a man will come to your home and ask for the hand of daughter in marriage. Give your daughter to that man after making all of the necessary arrangements, have them married."

Having received these instructions, the ineffective man returned to his own village. On Friday while he was taking his ritual ablutions in preparation for prayers, a black man came along and called, "Selamünaleyküm.

"Aleykümselam,"³ answered the ineffective man

The black man then said, "I have come here to ask for your daughter in marriage.

Remembering the instructions of the wise man, the father gave his daughter to this black man as his wife. When the newlywed couple were preparing to leave, the ineffective man said to the bridegroom, "Brother, I have given you my daughter in marriage, and you will now take her away from here. Tell me where you will be living so that I can come and visit her in the future.

Turkish tales significant actions occur at or near the time of the Friday noon prayer service, the religious high point of the Moslem week.

³ Selamünaleyküm/Aleykümselam--traditional exchange of greetings between Moslems not well acquainted with each other. It means roughly May peace be unto you/And may peace be unto you, too. If Selamünaleyküm is not responded to, the speaker should be wary of the one so addressed.

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black man answered, "If you wish to see your daughter, you can find us at the foot of that mountain over there." As he said this, the black man pointed to a mountain that was some distance away but directly opposite that village. The two young people then said farewell and departed.

Time passed. Months and even years went by, and then one day the ineffective man said, "Wife, our daughter left us a long while ago. I think that I should go and visit her

wife said, "Yes, Husband, you should go to see her and inquire about her health.

On the following day the ineffective man set forth on his journey. After he had been traveling for a while, he saw a farmer who was reaping a crop of grain. But after the farmer had stacked his harvest in a large pile, he set it on fire and burned it. The traveler called, "Oh, my ağa!⁴ What are you doing? You have reaped a crop with great labor and difficulty under this hot July sun, but now you have burned it. Why did you do it? Why did you do something that seems so meaningless?"

⁴An ağa (English, agha) is a rural landowner, sometimes wealthy, often powerful. The word does not indicate an official title but describes an economic status. They are often the principal employers of farm workers, and they are often viewed by their employees as harsh, driving, and abusive. The term ağa is also used in a complimentary way, as an honorific, for a distinguished or just older person than the one using the term. Thus an older brother is called ağa bey by his younger siblings. Ağa bey may be used as a deferential term to one older or more prestigious than the speaker. A taxi driver may refer to his passenger as ağa bey; a salesman speaking to a male customer may call him ağa bey.

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The farmer answered, "Go and do the work you set out to do. This is none of your business. Go and find your son-in-law."⁵

The ineffective man was confused by the farmer's last remark. "Aman!"⁶ he said. "How did you know that I was looking for my son-in-law?" But the farmer made no response to this question.

The traveler then continued on his way. After a while he came upon a woodcutter. This woodcutter had stacked up the firewood that he had cut and he was now trying to pick up the stack. It was too heavy for him to lift, but instead of taking some sticks off the top of the stack, he added a few more. Again he tried to lift the stack, and again he was unable to do so, but he continued to add more and more sticks. When the ineffective man observed this, he was bewildered. He called out, "Selamünaleyküm.

"Aleykümselam.

"Brother, why are you doing such a foolish thing? Can't

⁵ Eniste usually refers to either one's brother-in-law or to an uncle who is the husband of one's aunt, but apparently the term can, by extension, refer to any male in-law relative. Here it quite clearly refers to a son-in-law.

⁶ Aman is a common exclamation in Turkish. It may (negatively) mean alas! or oh, dear! Used more positively, it may suggest oh, my goodness! or the equivalent of wow! or golly!

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you understand that your stack is too heavy for you to carry? You should be taking some wood off your stack instead of adding more to it."

The woodcutter answered, "Brother, this is no concern of yours. Attend to your own affairs and go find your son-in-law!"

The ineffective man could understand neither the woodcutter's behavior nor the means by which he knew about his search for his son-in-law. Saying nothing further, however, he continued on his way and puzzled over the strange things he had witnessed. He soon came to another man who was behaving just as strangely as the first two he had encountered. This third man was a farmer who was trying to plow, but he had his two oxen yoked in opposite directions. One was pulling toward the east and the other was pulling toward the west. "Selamün-aleyküm."

"Aleykümselam," answered the farmer.

"Oh, brother, don't you know that you cannot possibly plow that way? Why don't you yoke them both in the same direction? They cannot go anywhere yoked the way they are now."

"Go away and pursue your own task. Do not put your nose into the business of others. If you wish to ask me questions, ask me about your son-in-law."

Confused by this remark, the ineffective man said, "Very

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well, then. Tell me about my son-in-law."

The farmer said, "I shall tell you exactly where you can find his house if you will promise to give me half of whatever gifts he may give you."

The ineffective man said, "All right!" and he gave his word to share with the farmer whatever his son-in-law might him.

The farmer then gave him the necessary directions. He said, "Do you see that cave mouth on the other side of the road? Go and enter that cave, which is light throughout because the other end of it is also open. Follow the path that leads away from the other end of the cave and you will soon a large palace at the end of that path. That palace is the home of your son-in-law."

The ineffective man did exactly as the farmer had instructed him to do. As he approached the palace, his daughter saw him coming and opened the door for him. The two talked and talked. The girl asked about her mother: "Is she in good health? Is she all right in every other way?" The father asked his daughter about her husband, and she said, "He has gone hunting, but he will be back at sunset."

At night, the girl's husband returned home, and he and his father-in-law greeted each other and talked at length

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After three or five⁷ days the ineffective man asked his son-in-law for permission to leave.⁸ The son-in-law responded, "Of course! You have that permission." To his wife the son-in-law said privately, "When your father departs, place an equally large amount of gold in both of his saddlebags." After the girl had done this, she and her husband bade the ineffective man farewell.

As he started traveling home, that man thought, "If I travel on the opposite side of the road, the farmer who was having trouble with his oxen will not see me. In that case I shall then not have to share with him the gold given to me by my son-in-law." But a few minutes later he became ashamed of having had such a thought. He said to himself, "Such an idea is wrong, for it is against our religious belief. I promised that farmer that I would share equally with him everything that I received as gifts from my son-in-law. I cannot be a liar. But even if I give him half of the gold, there will still be a great amount of wealth left for me."

⁷ Instead of saying a couple or a few or even three or four, Turkish narrators often say üç beş (three or five).

⁸ Good etiquette in rural Turkey demands that a guest not leave his host's home until he has asked for and received permission to leave. This custom is no longer so common in urban areas.

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When the ineffective man reached the field of the farmer, he saw at once that the farmer was plowing in the correct way this time. Both oxen were yoked in the same direction "Selamünaleyküm," he said to the farmer.

"Aleykümselam," responded the farmer. "Did you see your son-in-law?"

"Yes, I saw my son-in-law

"Did he give you anything?"

"Yes, he filled my saddlebags with gold, and I am now going to share that gold with you.

Taking a small bowl from his personal packet, the farmer said, "I do not need so much gold. Just fill up this small bowl with gold for me, and I shall be satisfied." The ineffective man poured the contents of one saddlebag into the small bowl, but it did not fill the bowl. Then he poured in the contents of the other saddlebag, but there was still not enough gold to fill the small bowl. The farmer then said, "I shall give all of this gold back to you and I shall also explain to you the unusual and confusing things that you have been witnessing."

"Please, please do explain these things to me. I have been unable to understand several of the things that I have recently seen."

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The farmer started his explanation. "This bowl represents rich people. They are so greedy that they often envy even the very small house of a poor man. They are never satisfied with what they have. The burned crop represents the sins that people commit. They may read the Koran and carry out all parts of their religious rituals during the evening, but then they cancel all their goodness by the sins they commit on the next day. The stack of wood also represented sins. The things people do create a burden of sin too great for them to carry, but they continue to add to the load."⁹

/Translator, Necibe Ertas: There are no concluding remarks or any other indication that this is the end of the tale.⁷

⁹ Is this a badly told version of a really coherent and meaningful tale? Or is it simply the aimless meandering of a person trying to give shape to some largely unrelated moral truths?