

Kindness to Parents

الإحسان إلى الوالدين

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If you type the words, “kindness to parents” in Google ,six of the first ten results are Islamic articles stressing the importance of being dutiful and kind to parents. Why is this so? Islam is a religion that stresses the qualities of mercy, tolerance and respect. God has ordained the good treatment of parents and warned us against treating them with disrespect. There are several verses in the Quran where kindness to parents is even coupled with the most important aspect of Islam, worshipping God alone. This indicates that being kind to parents, honouring and respecting them, is extremely important in the way of life that is Islam.

“And your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him. And that you be dutiful to your parents. If one of them or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of disrespect, nor shout at them but address them in terms of honour.” (Quran 17:23)

No word of disrespect should be uttered toward a parent, nor even a look of resentment or contempt. Honouring parents can be considered a form of worship if the intention is to please Almighty God by respecting His commands.

God continues this verse by reminding us that parents are deserving of kindness because they raised their children with gentleness and often made great sacrifices for their wellbeing. His use of the word wing invokes the image of a mother bird tenderly shielding her young and calls to mind the gentleness that parents have for their children.

“And lower unto them the wing of submission and humility through mercy, and say: ‘My Lord! Bestow on them Your Mercy as they did bring me up when I was small.’” (Quran 17:24)

The love and mercy that emanates from the Most Merciful God is manifest in the kind treatment existing between parents and their children. God clearly prohibits the bad treatment of parents, and in another verse of the Quran He enjoins on us the need to show gratitude to Him, our Creator, **as well** as our parents. Again, God clearly links the rights owed to Him to the rights owed to parents.

“And We have enjoined on man (to be dutiful and good) to his parents. His mother bore him in weakness and hardship upon weakness and hardship, and his weaning is in two years give thanks to Me and to your parents, unto Me is the final destination.” (Quran 31:14)

Prophet Muhammad reinforced the duty to be kind to parents. A companion of the Prophet once asked him which of the many good deeds a man can do is the most loved by God. Prophet Muhammad answered him by saying, “To offer the prayer in its proper time”. The companion then asked, “And what is next?” to which Prophet Muhammad replied, “To be good and dutiful to your parents...”¹. The responsibility to be kind and good to parents comes right after the greatest duty in Islam, the prayer.

¹ Saheeh Al-Bukhari

More than Goodness

The Arabic word that is used in the Quran and the narrations of Prophet Muhammad to denote this kindness to parents as *bir*, and more often than not, it is translated as goodness. However, as is the case with most Arabic words, a direct translation into English often fails to explain the true depth of meaning. *Bir* does not only mean goodness; it contains shades of meaning that indicate kindness, compassion, respect and even patience. Islam, the way of life, encompasses all these qualities, and Muslims must strive to model this behaviour in all dealings, particularly in the relationship between parents and children.

Parents care for and nurture their children their entire lives, but at one point this duty reverses, parents become old and feeble and in need of this care and nurturing themselves. The child is obligated to care for the parents by displaying all the qualities of *bir* and knowing that the reward for this is with God. The Prophet Muhammad said, “If anyone possesses these three characteristics God will give him an easy death and bring him into His Paradise: gentleness towards the weak, affection towards parents, and kindness to slaves.”²

One Man’s Devotion

Abu Hurairah was a close companion of Prophet Muhammad; he is credited with remembering and transmitting many of the Prophets’ sayings. The life of Abu Hurairah also contains many demonstrations of his love and devotion to his mother. When he first embraced Islam, no amount of pleading could convince his mother to do the same. Weeping and afraid, Abu Hurairah approached the Prophet and begged him to make supplication to God asking that his mother be guided. Prophet Muhammad complied with this request and within a very short period of time Abu Hurairah’s mother uttered the words, “***There is no God but***

2 Tirmidhi

God and Muhammad is his slave and Messenger”, thus embracing Islam.

Throughout his life, Abu Hurairah remained kind and courteous to his mother. Whenever he wanted to leave home, he would stand at the door of her room and say, “Peace be on you mother, and the mercy and blessings of God.” She would reply, “And on you be peace, my son, and the mercy and blessings of God.” He would also say, “May God have mercy on you as you cared for me when I was small,” to which she would reply, “May God have mercy on you as you delivered me from error when I was old.”

Abu Hurairah always encouraged other people to be kind and good to their parents. One day he saw two men walking together and enquired of the younger one, “Who is this man to you?” to which the young man replied, “He is my father”. Abu Hurairah advised him by saying, “Do not call him by his name, do not walk in front of him, and do not seat yourself before he does”.

This gentleness and affection between Abu Hurairah and his mother teaches us that mutual respect and love is a duty. A Muslim is obliged to show respect towards parents even if they are non-Muslim, and the greatest love he can show towards them is to supplicate to God in hope that they will be guided to Islam. At the time of the Prophet, many of those who embraced Islam found that it conflicted with the beliefs and requests of their parents, but they were taught to be kind and to obey their parents, except if the parents demanded they disobey God.

“But if they (both) strive with you to make you join in worship with Me others that of which you have no knowledge, then obey them not, but behave with them in the world kindly, and follow the path of him who turns to Me in repentance and in obedience. Then to Me will be your return, and I shall tell you what you used to do.” (Quran 31:15)

Being dutiful to parents, obeying them and treating them with kindness is embedded in the teachings of Islam, however obedience to God is always the first and foremost duty in Islam.

In several verses of the Quran, God makes clear that duty, kindness and gratitude towards parents is an essential part of Islam. However, women in Islam, particularly mothers, have been singled out for the upmost respect and devotion. God Himself tells of the hardships involved in motherhood.

“And we have enjoined on man (to be dutiful and good) to his parents. His mother bore him in weakness and hardship upon weakness and hardship...” (Quran 31:14)

In the time of Prophet Muhammad, a man asked permission to go on a military expedition. The Prophet asked the man if he had a mother, when he replied yes, Prophet Muhammad said, “Stay with her because Paradise lies beneath her feet”. (*Ahmad, Al-Nasai*) What wonderful imagery these words invoke: Mothers and children gazing at each other with love and gratitude. Tiny hands closed within larger hands. A touch to the face in times of stress and illness, or the warmth of a loving mother’s voice. Images of mothers nurturing and caring for their children, in health or sickness, in good times, or trying times. Paradise lies at the feet of mothers; but what exactly do these words mean? Simply, the gates of Paradise are open for those who cherish and respect their mothers.

The role of the mother in the Islamic family is as equally important if not more as the role of the father, who is the provider and protector of his family. Not only does she go through both the joys and difficulties of pregnancy and giving birth, she dedicates the whole of her life to nurturing and caring for her children. It is her responsibility to raise and to educate them to be righteous and

pious human beings. She cooks, cleans, nurtures and educates, she is also responsible for their spiritual, emotional and physical health and well-being. In return, children owe their mothers care, love, affection, respect and dutifulness. The task God assigned to mothers is large and sometimes overwhelming. Accordingly, the reward for a righteous mother is nothing less than Paradise and in this life, she is esteemed and honoured.

Who is Most Worthy of Good Companionship?

In a hadeeth of Prophet Muhammad, a man came to the Prophet asking, ‘Who among the people is the most worthy of my good companionship? The Prophet said, your mother. The man said, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet said, then your mother. The man further asked, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet said, then your mother. The man asked again, ‘Then who?’ The Prophet replied, then your father. (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*)

From only these two sayings of Prophet Muhammad, we are able to understand the importance of mothers in Islam. However, in these days of materialism it is easy to forget that God obligated us to honour our parents, especially our mothers. Sometimes we find ourselves uttering words of contempt or complaining about our parents. This sort of behaviour is not from Islam.

God reminds us that Prophet John (known as the Baptist) was dutiful towards his parents both loving them and obeying them³. He said:

“O John! Hold fast the Scripture. And We gave him wisdom while yet a child. And (made him) sympathetic to men as a mercy (or a grant) from Us, and pure from sins and he was righteous. And dutiful towards his parents, and he was neither an arrogant nor disobedient (to God or to his parents).” (Quran 19:12-14)

3 Ibn Jareer al-Tabari

Additionally, in the Quran, we are able to hear the words of Jesus; he describes himself by coupling his obedience to God with his duties towards his mother Mary.

“Verily! I am a slave of God. He has given me the Scripture and made me a Prophet; and He has made me blessed wheresoever I be, and has enjoined on me prayer, and alms, as long as I live, and dutiful to my mother, and made me not arrogant, unblest.” (Quran 19:30-32)

As busy as our lives may be it is of great benefit to look back at the lives of the Prophets, and our righteous predecessors, to see how they treated their parents, particularly their mothers.

The Companions' Behaviour

Abdullah ibn Omar, a leading scholar from among Prophet Muhammad's companions once saw a man carrying his mother on his back and going around the Holy House in Mecca⁴. He did not complain or show any signs of annoyance; rather he kept repeating a line of poetry comparing himself to a camel. He looked at Abdullah ibn Omar and asked him whether by so doing he discharged his debt to his mother. Ibn Omar said, “No. You have not even paid back one twinge of the pain she felt when giving birth to you”.

Another companion from the early days of Islam, Dhibyan ibn Ali ath-Thowree also used to travel with his mother to Mecca. The journey was long and very hot; on the side of the road during their travels, he would dig a little pool and fill it with cool water. He would then turn to his mother and say, “Mother, sit in this water to cool yourself.”

Muslims who are obedient to God can never be unmindful or unkind to their parents. Great reward is offered to those who treat their parents, especially their mothers, with affection and

4 One of the rites performed during the Pilgrimage (Hajj) is circling the Holy House (Kaba)

gentleness, but a stern warning is also given. The danger of disrespect is illustrated in the following saying of Prophet Muhammad.

A man came to Prophet Muhammad and said, “A young man is dying and people are asking him to say there is no god but God, but he is unable to do so. “The Prophet then asked, "Did this man offer prayers?" The answer was yes. The Prophet then went to see the man and tried to encourage him to say there is no god but God. Still he was unable to pronounce the words. Prophet Muhammad then called for the dying man’s mother. The mother he had persistently disobeyed.

When she appeared, the Prophet asked, 'Respected lady, is he your son?' She replied yes. He then asked, “O respected lady, if we threaten to throw your son into a raging fire, would you recommend him to be forgiven?” The lady replied that she would definitely ask him to be forgiven. The Prophet then said to her, “Then declare, making God and me your witnesses, that you are now pleased with him.” The old woman readily declared, "O God, you and your Prophet are my witnesses that I am pleased with this beloved son of mine.” Then Prophet then turned to the dying man and asked him to recite, "There is no god but God, He is the One and has no partners and I witness that Muhammad is His Servant and Messenger.” (*At Tabarani, Ahmad*)

Because of his mother’s forgiveness, the dying man was able to recite the words that, by the Grace and Mercy of God, may have allowed him to enter Paradise. The good treatment of parents can be the key to Paradise, on the other hand, bad behaviour towards them may result in a punishment in hellfire.

Islam is a religion of justice and compassion. It teaches morality and forbids bad conduct. Special status has been afforded

to the elderly; they are treated with respect and dignity. Muslims are urged to honour them and this is especially true when it comes to the treatment of parents. Although death may take us at any age, parents are often elderly and as such require special care and attention. Even though the rigours of old age may cause parents to be demanding, impatient or petulant, a Muslim is still obligated to treat them with kindness and to look after them lovingly. God linked honouring parents to the command to believe in Him Alone.

“Worship God and join none with Him (in worship); and do good to parents...” (Quran 4:36)

One of Prophet Muhammad’s companions asked about the deeds God loved most. The Prophet replied, the prayer offered on time and *honouring parents...* (*Saheeh Bukhari*)

The sayings of Prophet Muhammad abound with words of wisdom about the obligation to be dutiful and kind to parents. He was once heard to say:

“May he perish, May he perish, may he perish”. Those around him immediately asked whom he was referring. Prophet Muhammad replied, “He whose parents (one or both) attain old age in his life and he does not enter Paradise (because of his goodness towards them).” (*Saheeh Muslim*)

Respect for parents is a key to the gates of Paradise. By upholding the commands of God and giving parents the affection and love due to them, we receive the reward of eternal bliss.

Beneficial Actions

There are many ways a Muslim can continue to honour and respect his or her parents after their death. He may pray and make supplications for God to show mercy towards them; he may pay any worldly debts they may have accumulated or debts owed to God such as fasting or making the pilgrimage (Hajj); and he may also give charity in their name. Keeping the ties of kinship and

friendship are also ways of continuing to show love and respect to parents after their death, and Islam carefully explains what actions on the part of the living may be beneficial. The Prophet said,

“When a person dies, all his deeds come to an end except three: ongoing charity, beneficial knowledge (which he has left behind), or a righteous child who will pray for him.” (*At Tirmidhi*)

A man from among the companions asked Prophet Muhammad,

“Is there anything left from the goodness I owe my parents I should present to them after their death?” He replied, “Yes, four things: Pray and ask forgiveness for them. Fulfil their pledges. Be kind to their friends. And maintain the ties of kinship that come from only their direction”. (*Ahmad, Abu Dawood & Ibn Majah*)

Thus, it is understood that the kindness and gratitude we are obliged to show our parents should be continued even after their death. Prophet Muhammad also told us about a man raised to a very high station in Paradise. The man was surprised and asked how he achieved such a noble position. He was informed,

“Because your son prayed for your forgiveness”. (*Ibn Majah*)

The Keys to Paradise

Life in the 21st century is hectic, and we are often overwhelmed by worldly concerns; so much so, we tend to forget that morals and manners are a large part of this way of life that is Islam. Kindness to parents is an obligation and we would do well to remember and to emulate the behaviour of the first Muslims. They held their parents in high esteem, they loved and cherished them by following the commandments of God and knew that paradise really did lie at the feet of mothers. These were not just words to our predecessors; they were the keys to paradise.

In the narrations of Prophet Muhammad, we are able to observe the behaviour of Abdullah, the son of Omar ibn al

Khatab. On the road to Mecca, Abdullah met a Bedouin. He greeted him with peace, had him ride the mount that he was riding and gave him the turban that he had been wearing on his head. One of Abdullah companions commented, “May God guide you, they are just bedouin and they are content with something simple.” Abdullah answered, “The father of this man was a close friend of my father, and I heard the Messenger of God say, “The best way of honouring one’s parents is for the son to keep in touch with his father’s friends.”

Islam recognises the importance of the family unit, and a good and loving relationship between parents and children is essential. After God, our parents deserve our gratitude and obedience. A Muslim is obligated to show goodness and mercy to his or her parents. There is only one exception to this, if parents expect their children to associate anything with God or to do something regarded impermissible in Islam, then the child must not obey, however nothing removes the obligation to be kind and respectful.