

Respect

الإحترام

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The condition of being honoured esteemed or well regarded. This is the most commonly understood definition of respect. In fact, the thesaurus goes on to describe respect as a courteous regard for people's feelings and links respect to honour, kindness, obedience and tolerance. So what is the role of respect in Islam? Islam states that it is the responsibility of each individual to treat all of creation with respect, honour and dignity. The most deserving of respect is the Creator Himself. Respect begins with loving and obeying the commandments of God and from this respect flow all the manners and high standards of morality that are inherent in Islam.

“And whosoever obeys God and His Messenger, fears God, and keeps his duty (to Him), such are the successful ones.” (Quran 24:52)

To be one of those who are successful, Islam requires that each individual learn to obey the Creator and thus treat humankind, our environment, the believers and ourselves with respect. Bearing in mind that the believers are one nation, and if one part of the nation is in peril so too are all its parts, respect for each other is essential. Islam teaches us that we are held accountable not only for our

thoughts and actions but for the influence, we have over others and the creation. Islam asks us to enjoin the good and forbid the evil.

Islam binds respect to peace, love and compassion, all attributes of the One God, therefore to fulfil our obligation to honour and obey God one must respect the honour, reputation and privacy of others. Respect involves staying completely away from the major sins of backbiting, lying, slander, and gossip.

Respect for humanity means staying away from sins that will sow discord among the people and lead to destruction. Respect includes loving for our brothers and sisters what we love for ourselves. Respect involves treating others the way we expect to be treated and the way we hope God will treat us –with compassion, love and mercy. Major sins put a barrier between humanity and God’s Mercy and cause all the torment, misery and evil in this world and the hereafter. God commands us to stay away from sin and to strive against our own destructive character flaws. He also singles out suspicion, backbiting and gossip as bringing about nothing but shame and disgrace.

“O you who believe! Avoid much suspicion, indeed some suspicions are sins. And spy not, neither backbite one another. Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would hate it (so hate backbiting). And fear God. Verily, God is the One Who accepts repentance, Most Merciful.” (Quran 49:12)

Ibn Abbass, a companion of Prophet Muhammad and Quran commentator said God forbade backbiting just as He forbade the eating of dead flesh. Eating dead flesh is something that people naturally have abhorrence to and they should have the same natural abhorrence to backbiting one another. Respect involves caring for one another not shredding characters the way carrion would shred a dead animal.

Backbiting

Some people might say that backbiting is merely words and ask what harm it can do. Words are indeed powerful and have far-reaching effects. In addition to the obvious lack of respect involved in back biting, *mere words* cause pain to the one maligned and consign the backbiter to the fires of Hell. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, warned us of the fate awaiting those who utter disrespect. He said, “A man might speak a word without thinking about its implications, but because of it, he will plunge into the Hellfire further than the distance between the east and west.”¹

On one occasion, a close companion of Prophet inquired how he could be admitted into Paradise and distanced from the Hellfire. Prophet Muhammad mentioned the virtues of good deeds and asked his companion if he desired to know the foundation of good deeds. The companion answered “certainly”, where upon Prophet Muhammad took a hold of his own tongue and said, “restrain yourself from this”. The companion asked incredulously “are we held accountable for the things that we say?” Prophet Muhammad replied that nothing sends people into the hellfire faster than the “harvest of their tongues”.²

Having established that backbiting is anything but *mere words* how can we define exactly what it is. Backbiting is talking about somebody in a derogatory way or in a way that would not be pleasing to the one being spoken about. It is called back biting because it is usually done when the person being maligned is absent or “*behind his back*”. Prophet Muhammad defined backbiting as “to mention about your brother something that he would dislike having mentioned about him”.³ Imam An Nawawi commented that backbiting included “what concerns his body, his

1 Saheeh Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim.

2 At Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah.

3 Saheeh Muslim.

religious practice, his worldly station, his physical appearance, his moral character, his wealth, his parents, his children, his spouse, his servant, his clothing, his activities, his smiles and frowns and anything else that pertains to him. It does not matter if you mention it explicitly by word or implicitly by indication or a gesture...”

In the same saying mentioned above, the Prophet Muhammad was asked about backbiting in relation to truthful comments. He explained the severity of backbiting, and explained the difference between it and slander, by saying, “If what you said about your brother is true, then you have backbitten him. If what you said about him is false, then you have slandered him”.⁴ Slander is making a false statement; it is a major sin and deserves a severe punishment. God says in the Quran:

“And those who malign believing men and women undeservedly bear upon themselves the guilt of slander and a manifest sin.” (33:58)

In another narration of Prophet Muhammad, his beloved wife Aisha made a comment about one of her co-wives by describing her as short, or small in stature. Prophet Muhammad responded in a way that made clear the severity of her words. He said, “You have said a word that if it was to be mixed with the water of the sea, it would contaminate it.”⁵

Backbiting has become so widespread nowadays that people use it as a way of expressing anger and jealousy. Those who engage in it are disrespecting God by disobeying Him and harming others. Magazines and television shows are devoted to gossiping and prying into the private lives of others. There is no respect for privacy, and contrary to popular belief, the lives of others are not source material for gossip sessions. The person who habitually engages in backbiting and gossip and who does not struggle

4 Ibid.

5 At Tirmidhi, Abu Dawood

against his desires and begs for God's forgiveness has lost all respect for himself for he no longer fears the fires of Hell. The sin is grave, the punishment severe, but God is Merciful and always accepts sincere repentance.

“...if any of you does evil in ignorance, and thereafter repents and does righteous good deeds (by obeying God), then surely, He is Oft Forgiving, Most Merciful.” (Quran 6:54)

In this new century punctuated by astounding technological advancement, and instant global communication it has become commonplace to hear people talk about respect, or lack of it. One hears about respect for the environment, respect for other cultures and religions, respect for each other and the catch cry of the 21st century - self respect. We lose respect for our politicians and governments, we gain respect for our sporting heroes and actors. We try to respect our planet by turning off taps and unnecessary lights. We complain bitterly about our lives and the lack of respect we feel at home and at work. We live in a topsy-turvy world where we talk reverently of actors who give charity to drought ravaged countries while we throw food into garbage bins. We shed tears over drug-addicted singers yet step over the homeless cluttering our streets. We respect the learned men that warn us of global warming but we ignore the commandments of our Creator. We understand the significance of respect but we are unable to attain it. For many of us the essence is lost!

How can we regain this lost quality of respect that for many of us is seemingly unattainable? Simply by following God's commandments and worshipping Him accordingly. God says in the Quran that He created mankind for no reason except to worship Him. **(Quran 51:56)** Worshipping God is showing Him the respect He deserves. Worshipping God makes it possible for us to treat all of mankind with respect, it allows us to treat the

environment with respect and it gives others permission to respect us. Then are no human beings more worthy of our respect than those whose piety and closeness to God is obvious. In the previous article we discussed the dangers inherent in backbiting and gossip, and how those who engage in such behaviour have lost respect for themselves and more importantly, for God.

As human beings, we all must struggle against our base desires and one of the hardest sins to resist is gossiping about others. However, to worship and love God in the correct way it is imperative that we try to rid ourselves of the evil of backbiting. One way to clear ourselves of this ignoble character trait is to cultivate closeness to God by reflecting upon the verses of Quran and sayings of Prophet Muhammad that remind us of God's punishment and encourage us to repent.

“Or do they think that We hear not their secrets and their private counsel? (Yes, We do) and Our Messengers (appointed angels in charge of mankind) are by them, to record.” (Quran 43:80)

Prophet Muhammad encouraged us to feel shame before God; He said, “Feel shame before God as you ought to feel shame before Him. So guard the head and what it contains, guard the stomach and what you put in it, and think upon death and returning to dust”⁶ We should feel this shame whenever we backbite, and take the opportunity to reflect upon what we loose if we engage in this behaviour. We loose the essence of respect.

Disrespect is not part of Islam

Prophet Muhammad was continually teaching his companions and reminding them about the seriousness of disobeying God. In many sayings, he explains the grave consequences of not respecting the rights of others. He said, “The one who is bankrupt from among my followers is he who comes on the Day of

6 At Tirmidhi

Resurrection with prayer, charity, and fasting to his credit. However, he had insulted this person, struck that person, and seized the wealth of another, because of which his good deeds will be taken from him. Then, if his good deeds are exhausted, the sins of those whom he wronged will be taken from them and foisted upon him and then he will be cast into the Fire.”⁷ A true believer strives to improve himself and is aware of his responsibility to protect others rather than disrespect them. In Islam, believers do not disrespect each other nor do they tolerate disrespect towards their brothers and sisters.

Another quick and easy way to protect ourselves from the evils of gossip and backbiting is to stay away from those who engage in it. God says in the Quran:

“And when they hear dirty, false, evil vain talk, they withdraw from it and say, "To us our deeds, and to you your deeds. Peace be to you. We seek not the ignorant.” (Quran 28:55)

Prophet Mohammad placed great emphasis on being around righteous people rather than those who occupy their time with vain, useless activities or talk. He said, “The likeness of a good companion and a bad companion is that of a person carrying musk and another who works the bellows. The person carrying musk might give you some of it or at the very least, you will enjoy the pleasant scent. The person with the bellows will either singe your clothing or at least make you suffer from the bad smell.”⁸

Keeping company with righteous people helps one to avoid backbiting and gossip because caring friends will remind each other of the evils and punishments associated with such behaviour. It is also useful to reflect on our own shortcomings and character flaws rather than gossip about the faults of others. The great scholar, Hasan al-Basri said: “We used to remind each other that whoever faults his brother on account of a sin that he had

7 Saheeh Muslim.

8 Ibid.

repented from, God will punish him by having him fall into that sin himself.”

Having established that backbiting, and gossip are great sins, the scholars of Islam have explained however, that there are certain conditions under which it may be permissible to talk about the faults and characteristics of others.⁹ It is allowable for one who is being oppressed to inform the authorities of the wrongs being committed against him. It is allowable for those who see vice to inform those who are capable of removing it. It is also allowable to mention people’s faults when seeking sincere religious advice from those qualified to give it. It is permissible to mention someone by describing them (blind, deaf, in a wheelchair etc) as long as it is not done in a belittling or mocking fashion. Lastly, it is not allowable to hide the character faults of a person known to you from those seeking marriage or business advice.

Careful analysis of the above conditions reveals that respect is inherent in these exceptions. To oppress someone is to disrespect them, to commit vice is to disrespect the community and to deceive people who ask for sincere advice is also a form of disrespect. If we feel ourselves disrespected then we should look to our own sins and turn to God in repentance. If the essence of respect is missing in our lives then we can regain it by worshipping God with full submission. Islam insists that we show respect for God, by obeying Him and to obey Him inherently means respecting others and ourselves.

In the previous articles about respect, we discussed how respect for each other, our environment and ourselves was inherent in the religion of Islam. The concept of treating ourselves and everything around us with respect is not possible without complete submission to God, and without understanding how and why we surrender to His will. God reminds us in Quran that our sole purpose in life is to worship Him.

9 Fataawa Al-Lajnah al-Daa’imah li’l-Buhooth al-‘Ilmiyyah wa’l-Ifta’ (26/10).

“And I (God) created not the jinn and mankind except that they should worship Me (Alone).” (Quran 51:56)

Worshipping God does not spending the entire day in one place praying, it does not mean that we neglect the life of this world in favour of a life of seclusion; what it means is that we fulfill our obligations towards God and attempt to have Him constantly on our minds and tongues. The mundane tasks of life become worship when they are done to please our Creator. When we fulfil our obligations such as to pray, fast, and give charity, it becomes worship when done with a sense of gratitude and humbleness. God does not need us, for He is Self-sufficient and Omnipotent. We are the ones in need of Him. He is the reason for our existence and He is the foundation on which we should build our lives.

Lives lived with out purpose lead to nothing but loss.

“By the time! Man is in loss, Except those who believe and do righteous good deeds, and recommend one another to the truth, and recommend one another to patience.” (Quran 103:1-3)

However, filling our lives with purpose enables contentment and this allows us to show respect for each other and ourselves. Respect for God means obeying Him. Obeying God means we are in the enviable position of being worthy of others respect. Failure to surrender to God leads to lives devoid of respect. Treating each other with contempt, gossiping and backbiting shows a lack of respect in our lives. Engaging in the great sins of lying, spying on others and using bad words also means we are not worthy of being shown respect by others.

Lying

Lying is one of the major reasons for corruption in society. Any form of lying creates enmity and sews disrespect between people, but the most obnoxious form of lying is to falsely attributing things to God or to his Prophets and Messenger. Islam

forbids lying and enjoins the believers to be truthful. The words of Quran testify to this. God says:

“O you who believe! Be wary of God, and be with those who are true (in words and deeds).” (Quran 9:119)

And

“...who does more wrong than one who invents a lie against God, to lead mankind astray without knowledge?” (Quran 6:144)

In his narrations and sayings, Prophet Muhammad often exhorted his followers to adhere to honesty and stay away from the vices inherent in lying. He said,

“Beware of telling lies, for lying leads to immorality and immorality leads to Hellfire.”¹⁰

Even one of his greatest enemies attested to the fact that Prophet Muhammad was truthful and commanded truthfulness. Abu Sufyan¹¹, although despising the Prophet, revealed that he commanded his follows to pray, to be truthful and to uphold the ties of kinship.¹²

Spying

Prophet Muhammad warned his followers of the evils of spying on others when he said,

‘Beware of suspicion, for suspicion is the falsest of speech. Do not eavesdrop; do not spy on one another; do not envy one another; do not forsake one another; do not hate one another. Be, O slaves of God, brothers.’¹³

10 Saheeh Muslim.

11 In the early years of Islam Abu Sufyan was an avowed enemy of Prophet Muhammad and Islam; however, after the conquest of Mecca he embraced Islam.

12 Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim.

13 Saheeh Muslim.

Indeed God himself has reminded us to avoid suspicion. He said:

“Avoid much suspicion; indeed some suspicions are sins. And spy not...” (Quran 49:12)

In Islam, it is not permissible to search for or reveal the secrets of others. Spying and all it involves, such as eavesdropping and asking too many private questions, is forbidden because it involves disrespecting the private lives of others by disobeying God.

The great and well respected Caliph Umar ibn Abdul-Azeez said to someone who passed on malicious gossip to him:

“If you wish, we can look into the matter. If you are lying, you will be one of the people mentioned by God in the verse, **“If a rebellious evil person comes to you with news, verify it, lest you harm people in ignorance, and afterwards you become regretful to what you have done.”** (Quran 49:6) If you are telling the truth, you will be one of the people mentioned in the verse, **“A slanderer, going about with calumnies.”** (Quran 68:11) Or if you wish, we will forgive you”. He said, “Forgive me, O Leader of the believers, I will never do it again.” Lying, gossiping, slandering and spying are great sins, so to is using bad words.

Foul Language

Bad words show disrespect to those being spoken about and a total lack of self-respect. Reviling, insulting, cursing and rudeness, these are bad words and they usually are uttered when someone is overcome by anger. Anger is an emotion that may open the doors to all kinds of evil and disrespect. It can sometimes result in breaking the bonds of goodwill and even destroy family relationships. Anger can even move beyond just using insulting words and cause one person to physically harm another.

Prophet Muhammad was not a person to use insulting words or obscene language and he did not curse people. If he wanted to rebuke someone he would say, **“What is wrong with him? – woe to him!”**¹⁴ The true believer, the one submitted to God, must learn to control his tongue and not speak unless he says something good. In his sayings, Prophet Muhammad reminds us that whoever believes in God the Last Day (or Judgement) must speak good or keep silent¹⁵. He said trading insults with a believer was evil, fighting was minor disbelief and cursing a believer was like killing him.¹⁶

Stern words indeed, they leave no room for misinterpretation. Bad words lead to evil doing and ultimately punishment. God reminds us that the best speech is the remembrance of God because it brings contentment and a sense of peace.

“... verily, in the remembrance of God do hearts find rest”
(Quran 13:28)

A person who keeps himself busy doing good deeds and seeking God’s pleasure is a person who knows the meaning of respect.

14 Saheeh Al-Bukhari.

15 Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim

16 Saheeh Al-Bukhari.