

Respecting the Repute of Another Muslim

(Verse 11)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا يَسْخَرُ قَوْمٌ مِّنْ قَوْمٍ عَسَىٰ أَن يَكُونُوا خَيْرًا مِّنْهُمْ وَلَا نِسَاءٌ مِّنْ نِّسَاءٍ عَسَىٰ أَن يَكُنَّ خَيْرًا مِّنْهُنَّ وَلَا تَلْمِزُوا أَنفُسَكُمْ وَلَا تَنَابَزُوا بِالْأَلْقَابِ بِئْسَ الإِسْمُ الْفُسُوقُ بَعْدَ الإِيمَانِ وَمَنْ لَّمْ يَتُبْ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ

“O’ you who have true faith! Do not let men make fun of other men – perhaps they may be better than the other (group of men). Also, do not let women make fun of other women, as it may be that they are better than the other (group of) women. Do not find faults in yourselves and do not defame one another by using bad names. How bad it is after having true faith that a person (does these acts) but does not turn in repentance (to Allah) so then surely it is these people who are the oppressors.”

The purpose of this verse and the next verse is to explain a series of Islamic rights that brothers in faith have upon one another which must be observed. Seeing as to how the previous verse stated that Muslims are brothers of one another, in this verse and the one that follows, some of the principles of etiquette are elucidated upon, which in reality are the effects of brotherhood in Islam.

The brotherhood of the Muslim Ummah is not simply a visible and verbal brotherhood – rather, it is a relationship of rights (upon one another) which has requirements and necessities (that must be fulfilled) and thus, the Muslims must observe these rights in relation to one another.

In this verse, the first three ethical principles that those who have true faith must observe are mentioned as being:

1. Showing respect to the character or repute of a Muslim.

2. Prohibition of looking for faults in other people.

3. The prohibition of using or attributing bad nicknames to a believer.

We will explain each of these three principles separately.

The first tenet that each Muslim must put into practice is to respect the character of another believer. According to this rule, Muslims must not make fun of one another and thus they are not permitted to hurt the feelings of each other either.

As we know, the level and station of the character of a person can be seen from different angles. There are people who judge and respect others only due to their noticeable, outward traits such as ones' well-proportioned body; the beauty of another's face; economic status; the types of clothing one wears; a person's style of residence and other such visible traits that reflect one's material status.

Thus, any classification which is based upon the merits and privileges mentioned leading to respect of the person, would prevent another person from mustering up the courage to speak about a person (that possesses these traits) since it would go against the imaginary character of the person (that they have conjured in their minds). However in a majority of instances, those people who do not possess the merits that were mentioned, are the ones who are made fun of.

The way of thinking and the method of judgement that a Muslim must employ are the exact opposite to what people who simply judge by seeing the apparent and material aspects do. In the teachings of Islam, the apparent and material aspect is not the scale or criteria used to judge who the better person is.

The people whose character is worthy of being respected are those whose soul and presence have been enlightened with the divine Nur (light) of Cognizance (Ma`rifah) of Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) and whose entire presence is the focus of the noble traits and etiquette and whose way of life is based on forgiveness and pardon. Performing good deeds, showing mercy and compassion, nobility and generosity, humility and modesty, pleasantness and honesty, piety and refraining from sins, etc... are what make up such a person.

By possessing such traits, a person raises his own worth and status and any type of speech or action that goes against such a person's character or personality would be forbidden and not allowed to be spoken about him (according to the teachings of Islam).

Support from the Qur'an in Strengthening this Principle

The part of this verse that states:

...عَسَىٰ أَنْ يَكُونُوا خَيْرًا مِنْهُمْ...

“...perhaps it may be that they are better than you are...”

proves to us why the Qur’an tells us it is forbidden to make fun of people who have true faith. Seeing as to how people do not possess any knowledge of the heart, mind and spiritual thoughts of another person, a true human (who possesses faith and the righteous ethical traits) and one who is showing off look similar from the point of view of their physical appearance.

It is also possible that a person who does not possess beauty, good looks, wealth in this world, nor a lofty position in the society, would be the one that people make fun of; of however from the point of view of his soul and spirit, he may be purer than other people.

By him possessing a greater spiritual level of humanity and ethical traits, he would be much higher in the presence of Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) than these other people. If the greatness of such a soul and the perfection of such a character were to be made incarnate in a physical body, then those who are making fun of them – in place of mocking them – would actually have to lower their heads in submission and surrender.

It is due to this (the criteria of judging the character of a person as being based on a series of hidden issues which the people cannot see – the affairs of the inner heart and soul) that it is not permissible for a person who has true faith to mock other people. We are told in this verse that there is a possibility that such a person (whom we want to make fun of) may be higher and much greater from the point of view of his inner-soul, humanistic characters, and his great ethical traits.

Psychological Motives for Making Fun of Others

When we look at the psychological reasons that lead a person to make fun of other people, we see that there is a defect or shortcoming that the person himself possesses and by making other people feel inferior, he wants to try and compensate for his own shortcomings and thus he tries to instill in himself his supposed greatness. Therefore those people who have character and personality and who do not feel inferior or feel that they have defects within themselves, will never resort to acting in this manner and whenever they see people acting like this, it truly pains and grieves them.

In addition to this, there are also other factors which are at play such as: these sorts of people actually derive pleasure and enjoyment in destroying the character of other people and making fun of them and feel their own spirit getting larger. Such people end up having their soul become fierce and animal-like and take control over them. This internal mental state comes about through a series of various psychological traits and is physically manifested through making fun of other people.

As we see in the world around us, a wild animal resorts to killing, ripping to shreds and devouring weaker animals to satiate his hunger and to gain pleasure. Similarly, people who try to make others feel inferior act just like the wild beasts by attacking people who do not have the ability to defend themselves thus destroying their character and self-esteem. Through this act, they seek to satiate the hunger of their own minds and to derive spiritual pleasure.

In order to protect the character of people of all levels, Islam has commanded that individuals must be respected and no Muslim is to be considered as insignificant or worthless:

لَا تَحْقِرَنَّ أَحَدًا مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ فَإِنَّ صَغِيرَهُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ كَبِيرٌ

“Do not consider any of the Muslims as being insignificant, since in the eyes of Allah (that person whom you consider as being insignificant) actually has a high rank.”¹

Through His final Messenger, Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) sent the following message to the world that:

وَقُلْ لِعِبَادِي يَقُولُوا الَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ

“And say to My servants (O’ Muhammad) that they speak only that which is most excellent.”²

Imam Muhammad ibn `Ali al-Baqir (peace be upon him) has said:

عَظِّمُوا أَصْحَابَكُمْ وَوَقِّرُوهُمْ وَلَا يَتَجَهَّمْ بَعْضُكُمْ بَعْضًا

“Treat your companions and friends with kindness and never make faces or show contempt towards them.”³

Truly, the Muslims can learn magnificent lessons by studying the lives of the great leaders of Islam (the Prophet and A’immah) and how they showed respect to the character of other people. The Noble Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny) displayed respect for all people and anytime a person came to him, he would open his Qabah (over-coat) on the floor for the person to sit on and would give the pillow that he was resting on to the other person who came to meet him.

Occasion of Revelation of this Verse

In regards to the occasion of revelation of this Qur'anic verse, the Commentators have mentioned two incidents:

1. One day, Thabit ibn Qais who was weak of hearing entered into the Masjid and started to break the lines of the people so that he could get closer to the Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny). One of the Muslims prevented him from moving forward any further and made him sit behind him.

In order to get revenge on the person who stopped him from moving forward, when the Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny) finished his talk, Thabit turned towards the man and said, "Who are you?" The man replied to him, "I am the son of so and so." In order to ridicule him, Thabit replied, "Behold! This is the son of so and so woman!" and he took the name of this man's mother, which during the time of ignorance (before the coming of Islam) was a name that people mocked at. When this person heard the name of his mother, he became embarrassed and thus, lowered his face.

2. Umme Salamah (may Allah be pleased with her), the chaste wife of the Prophet of Islam (blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny), had wrapped some white cloth around her waist. A small piece of this cloth was hanging out at which time, `Ayesha binte Abu Bakr and Hafsa binte `Umar said to one another, "Umme Salamah has a piece of fabric hanging out which resembles the tongue of a dog when he is chasing himself!"

Due to these incidents, this verse was revealed to the Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny) as a reminder to the men and women that, *"Men must not make fun of one another nor must women make fun of other women."*

1. Majmu`ah Warram, Volume 1, Page 31.

2. Surah al-Isra' (17), Verse 53.

3. al-Kafi, Volume 2, Page 173.

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