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The Sixteenth Greater Sin: Singing

The sixteenth Greater sin is singing songs. Traditions have graded it amongst the mortal sins. This fact is clear from the narration of Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.) as quoted by Amash. Muhammad Ibn Muslim relates that Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a.s.) said,

“Singing is that sin which has been promised a penalty of fire (Hell) by Allah.”

It is evident from numerous reports, that whichever sin incurs Hell as its punishment, is a Greater Sin. Singing too falls in that category.

What is Singing?

Sayyid Murtadha, in his book, Was'ila writes,

“Singing is Harām. It is also Harām to listen to a song or to sing for money. However every melodious sound is not a ‘song’. Singing denotes a special way of prolonging the voice and rotating it in the throat. These features are common in sensuous parties. Such type of singing is usually accompanied by music.”

Most of the Shia Mujtahids and the experts of Arabic language opine that ‘singing’ means the turning and rotating of one’s voice in the throat. These types of strains are invariably found in classical music and Qawwalis. A prolonged tune of a-a-a is produced. In the dictionary, ‘Sihah’ it is mentioned that singing is a sound which produces a strange type of sorrow or pleasure in the listener. The other dictionaries almost agree to this definition. In brief, singing or song is a sound that makes a man unusually sad or joyful.

The book Zakhiratul Ebad says: “Every sound that is produced for entertainment and is capable of exciting passion is known as ‘singing.’ It could be produced by making it emanate from the throat like in classical music or by any other means. In brief whatever is understood by common sense as a song is Harām. Consequently it is sinful even to recite the Holy Qur’an, Nauha or Marsiya in the tune of songs.

In fact this is more sinful than singing songs for it tantamounts to insulting and degrading the Qur'an and Nauha or Marsiya. It is for this reason that this type of sin deserves double the punishment.

About Singing

Singing is a Greater Sin

When Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a.s.) said,

“Singing is that Sin which has been promised the penalty of fire (Hell) by Allah” he (a.s.) had also recited the following verse of the Holy Qur'an:

“And of men is he who takes instead frivolous discourse to lead astray from Allah’s path without knowledge and to take it for a mockery; these shall have an abasing chastisement.” (Surah Luqmān 31:6)

“Frivolous discourse” implies Singing

Bringing together the above verse and the tradition of Imam Baqir (a.s.), singing is understood to be one of the ‘frivolous’ and ‘evil’ acts. Other worthless acts are aimless talk or action, or poetry which is of no good to the people; all these deprive man of benefit.

In other words, anything that restrains one from following the truth and the Holy Qur'an is a ‘frivolous discourse.’ Anything that leads one astray is ‘frivolous discourse.’ All those things that create passion and sensuality, sin and transgression are ‘frivolous discourse.’ It is a sin whether one sings or listens to a song. The Qur'anic verse quoted above is followed by:

“And when our communications are recited to him, he turns back proudly, as if he had not heard them, as though in his ears were a heaviness, therefore announce to him a painful chastisement.” (Surah Luqmān 31:7)

3. The exegesis (Tafsīr) of the term “False Words”

In addition to the phrase ‘frivolous discourse,’ the Holy Qur'an also refers to singing by the term, ‘False words.’ Abu Basir inquired from Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.), the exegesis of the following ayat:

“... and avoid false words.” (Surah Hajj 22:30)

The Imam (a.s.) replied,

“ (It means) singing.”

In explanation to the ayat,

“And they who do not bear witness to what is false, and when they pass by what is vain, they pass by nobly.” (Surah al-Furqān 25:72)

Imam Muhammad at-Taqi (a.s.) remarked,

“ (Vain means) singing.”¹

In yet another tradition, when Muhammad Ibn Uthman inquired about the meaning of this ayat, Imam Muhammad Taqi (a.s.) answered,

“It includes the evil words of one who is singing.”

4. “False words” denote singing

The later portion of the same verse says,

“... and when they pass by what is vain, they pass by nobly.” (Surah al-Furqān 25:72)

Thus, according to the holy Qur’an when the righteous people pass by, where songs are being played, they pass in a dignified manner, uninfluenced and unimpressed by them.

A similar kind of verse appears in Surah Al-Mum’īnīn, as well:

“And who keep aloof from what is vain.” (Surah Al-Mum’īnīn 23:3)

Both the above verses describe the qualities of a believer. Imam Ja’far as-Sadiq (a.s.) and later Imam Riḍā (a.s.), have both explained the term “vain words” as follows:

“Vain words imply music and singing and the true worshipers of Allah refrain from these.”²

5. Singing and hypocrisy

The sixth Holy Imam, Imam Ja’far as-Sadiq (a.s.) said,

“Listening to music, songs and useless words cultivate hypocrisy in the heart, in the same way as algae grows in water.”³

The same book, al-Kāfi mentions a tradition of Imam as-Sadiq (a.s.) that,

“Singing and music is a nest for the bird called hypocrisy.”

6. Singing programme

The venue of a singing programme is a place where descends divine retribution. Imam Ja’far as-Sadiq (a.s.) says:

“Do not even enter houses, the inhabitants of which are deprived of divine mercy.”

He (a.s.) is reported to have also said,

“The house where music is played is not safe from sudden disasters. Supplications at such a place are not answered. Angels do not enter this place.”⁴

It has been established in the preceding chapter that when the divine punishment descends, it does not discriminate. The excuse, “Though we go to places where there is music and song, but we dislike it in our hearts”, seems unlikely to be acceptable. Dislike needs to be expressed by ones action, also. Songs and music should be discouraged.

7. Singing causes poverty

Amir ul-Mu'minīn 'Ali (a.s.) says,

“Singing creates hypocrisy and causes poverty.”⁵

8. Punishment for Singing

The Holy Prophet (S) has explicitly stated,

“When the singer shall rise from his grave on the Day of Judgement, he will be blind, deaf and dumb.”⁶

The traditions also state that the singer will be recognised by these very signs, i.e., blindness, deafness etc.

In another tradition Holy Prophet (S) is quoted to have said:

“Molten lead shall be poured into the ears of one who listens to songs, intently.”⁷

Deprived of Divine Mercy

Qutub al-Rawandi has recorded from the Holy Prophet (S),

“The singer is from that group of people, who would not be looked upon with mercy by Allah on the Day of judgement.”

A fan of a singer

Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.) says:

“One who respects a speaker, becomes his slave. If the speaker calls towards Allah the listener worships Allah, but if he calls towards shaitan, the listener has worshipped shaitan.”⁸

It is also narrated from Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.) that he said,

“Whenever a person begins singing, two satans mount on his shoulders and continue to hit their heels upon his chest, till the time he sings the song.”

Is the one kicked by the satans to be loved and admired?

Melodious sounds of Paradise

Hazrat Imam 'Ali Ibn Musa ar-Riḍā (a.s.) said,

“One who avoids songs shall be provided by Allah, a tree, which will produce such a melodious sound as has never been heard by anyone. But the one who has not kept himself aloof from songs will not be able to hear this sound.”⁹

Beautiful songs in Heaven

The following tradition of Allah's Messenger (S) is recorded in the book Tafsīr Majmaul Bayan,

“One who has listened to too many songs will not be able to hear the *Ruhānis* on the Day of Qiyāma.”

“Who are the *Ruhānis*, O Prophet of Allah (S)?” someone asked.

The Prophet (S) replied,

“They are the melodious singers of Heaven.”

A similar tradition from Hazrat 'Ali (a.s.) is found in Nahjul Balagha,

“Hazrat Dawūd (a.s.) will be the chief of the singers of Paradise.”¹⁰

The people will listen to such melodious songs from Hazrat Dawūd (a.s.) in Heaven, the like of which have never been heard by anyone. However only those who have refrained from listening to songs in this world would be able to hear them.

Strict prohibition

The Holy Prophet (S) says:

“Calamities will befall my Umma as sinking of the earth and rain of stones.”

The people asked, “When would it happen?”

“When the instruments of music become common, singing girls are in great number and the use of

intoxicants is widespread. By Allah, many people of my Umma will be such that they shall spend the night in merry-making and sensuality and in the daytime become like monkeys and pigs. It will be the consequence of considering the prohibited things permissible, they will be occupied with singing girls, frequently take intoxicants, devour interest and shall dress in clothes made of silk.”

Singing and fornication

Singing instigates one to commit fornication. The Holy Prophet (S) said:

“Singing is the stepping stone to fornication.”¹¹

Songs are responsible for awakening the latent sensual desires of man, which are soon manifested. It is the same whether one sings a song or merely listens to it. He forgets Allah (S.w.T.) and is prepared to commit any kind of indecency.

Imam Ja’far as-Sadiq (a.s.) says,

“And all those wasteful pastimes are Harām which make one forgetful of Allah; like songs and playing musical instruments.”

Yes! Music makes one shameless and lacking in self-respect. It also destroys the feeling of love, compassion and mercy, reducing society to a nightmare.

Prohibition regarding songs and singing

There is no difference of opinion among the Shia jurists about the illegality of singing. It can be said that there is ‘ijma’ (unanimity) upon this point. The writer of the book, titled Mustanad says, “To consider singing and music ‘Harām’ is one of the necessities of faith. That is, if a Muslim says that singing is not Harām then he becomes a kafir.” According to the author of Izah, “the traditions that state that music and singing is Harām, are mutawatir (very numerous).”

However a slight difference of opinion exists, as to the meaning and connotation of the word ‘song’. The majority of the Mujtahids believe that any kind of sound, capable of creating a desire for joyful mirth and sensual feelings is a song; and it is Harām.

Reciting Qur’an in tune of songs

As we have stated earlier, it is Harām to recite Qur’an in the characteristics of songs. Similarly it is also Harām to recite Nauhas, Marsiya or Azān in this way; it is immaterial whether it is poetry or prose that is being recited. Rather, rendering of the sacred compositions into songs carries double punishments. One for the sin of singing songs and the other for causing disrespect to a sacred text.

Reciting Qur'an in a melodious voice

Every melodious sound is not a song. If Qur'an or Nauha is recited in a pleasant voice without unduly turning it in the throat, it is not Harām, rather it is desirable to do so. The Messenger of Allah (S) is reported to have said,

“Recite the Qur'an in a pleasant voice, in the style of Arabs. You are ordered to avoid the transgressors and doers of greater sins. Certainly, such people will appear in the world who will recite the Qur'an in a singing manner to make the listeners emotional. It is not allowed to go near these people or to call them near you. The hearts of these people have deviated and those who are influenced by them shall also have their hearts deviated.”¹²

Pleasant voice and singing

While describing the signs of the arrival of the Day of Judgement, the Prophet of Allah (S) said:

“Such kind of people will appear in the world that they would learn the Qur'an for worldly benefits and will recite it in a singing tune.”

However there are many traditions to the effect that reciting the Qur'an in a pleasant voice is Mustahab (recommended). However we must ensure that its tone is not that of singing.

Singing and music during weddings

Subject to the following Three conditions some of the Mujtahids have allowed women to sing on the occasion of marriages.

1. The first condition is that no grown-up men should be able to hear the singing. Not even those who are mahram (under the prohibited degree).
2. Secondly, the songs must not be loud and also must not be based on false statements.
3. And lastly, the singing must not be accompanied with any kind of music.

A few scholars have permitted playing of the small tambourine (tambourine is a drum with skin on only one of its sides). Shahīd al-Thani and Muhaqqiq al-Thani say that tambourine could be played in a wedding if it does not have tinkles around it.

However, precaution is desirable and hence on the occasion of weddings also women should avoid singing; the playing of tambourine should also be avoided. Shaykh Ansari (r.a.) quotes Shahīd al-Thani in the book, Makasib and Sayyid Murtadha says in his book Wasā'ila that, “Precaution is the way to salvation.”

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1. Refer Amali of Shaykh Tusi and also the book al-Kāfi.
 2. al-Kāfi
 3. al-Kāfi
 4. al-Kāfi and Mustadrak ul-Wasa'il
 5. Mustadrak ul-Wasa'il, chapter 78
 6. Jameal-Akhhbar
 7. Mustadrak ul-Wasa'il
 8. Furu al-Kāfi
 9. al-Kāfi
 10. Nahjul Balagha
 11. Mustadrak ul-Wasa'il
 12. Wasa'il ul-Shia

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