

The Forty-first Greater Sin: Backbiting

The foremost great sin for which Qur'an and hadith have promised chastisement is back-biting. As mentioned by Allah (S.w.T.) in Qur'an,

“Surely (as for) those who love that scandal should circulate respecting those who believe, they shall have a grievous chastisement in this world and the hereafter.” (Surah an-Nūr 24: 19)

Ibn Abi Umayr narrates from Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (a.s.),

“One who reports about a believer, everything he has himself seen and heard is from those about whom Allah (S.w.T.) says, “There is grievous chastisement for those who like undesirable things regarding the believers becoming public.”¹

According to this tradition, *Ghibāba* (backbiting) is included in the ayat where clear punishment is mentioned. Therefore, the Qur'an states,

“...nor let some of you backbite others. Does one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? But you abhor it...” (Surah al-Hujurat 49: 12)

The above ayat describes the condition of the backbiter in the hereafter. He will be raised in a condition similar to the person who eats dead meat. A tradition of the Messenger of Allah (S) says,

“On the night of Miraj (ascension) I saw some people in Hell who were eating dead meat. I asked Jibrīl (a.s.) who those people were. He replied. ‘They used to eat human flesh in their worldly life (that is, they used to backbite about other people).’²

It appears therefore that one who backbites about a person deserves the punishment he would have had if he had eaten the same person's flesh.

Imam Hasan al-Askari (a.s.) says,

“Know that! *Ghibāba* of your believing brother, who is the Shia of ʿAlī Muhammad is worst than eating dead meat, regarding which Allah (S.w.T.) says, ‘do not back-bite for each other.’”

Allah (S.w.T.) says in Surah al-Humaza,

“Wael (Hell) is for every Slanderer, defamer,” (Surah al-Humaza 104: 1)

According to Tafsīr Majmaul Bayan this Divine statement is a decree of punishment for every back-biter and slanderer who causes separation between friends. Some others have stated that, it is slander when uttered in the presence of the person and defaming when speaking in his absence.

Wael is one of the compartments of Hell. There is a well in it which is a symbol of terrible punishment. *Ghiḥba* is a sin that is promised penalty at a number of places in the Qur’an.

Traditions on Ghiḥba

There are a large number of traditions that speak of *Ghiḥba* as a sin, which is promised divine punishment. We quote a tradition of Makasib where Shaykh Ansari has recorded a tradition of the Holy Prophet of Islam (S):

“*Ghiḥba* is worse than fornication because if a fornicator repents, Allah (S.w.T.) forgives him but He does not forgive the back-biter till the person about whom he has back-bited forgives.”³

One day the Messenger of Allah (S) describing the evil aspects of usury said that taking a Dirham as usury was worst than committing adultery thirty six times. Then he said that the worst kind usury is revealing the defects of a Muslim and insulting him.⁴

In the light of the above traditions *Ghiḥba* is proved to be a greater sin also because it is worse than Adultery and Usury and we have already proved in the earlier chapters that Adultery and Usury are greater sins. The Holy Prophet (S) also said,

“Allah will not keep a person who reveals the fault of a Mu’min, along with him in Paradise, and if he accuses him of faults the Mu’min does not have, the pure relationship of their faith will be destroyed and the back biter will forever dwell in Hell, which is a dreadful place.”⁵

The below tradition is sufficient for a person with insight.

“One who thinks that he is legitimately born is wrong, because by doing *Ghiḥba* of people he is consuming their flesh. Beware of *Ghiḥba* because it is the diet of the dogs of Hell.”⁶

“One who moves from his place with the intention of back-biting about his brother in faith, you should know that he has taken the first step towards Hell.”⁷

“Even if the back-biter repents he will be the last to enter Paradise, and one who dies without repenting will be first in Hell.”⁸

The Second Martyr (Shahīd al-Thani) narrates from Imam Sadiq (a.s.) and the Messenger of Allah (S) that the thing nearest to infidelity is that a person listens to a word from a person and remembers it for using it later to insult him by telling it to others. Such people can never make a gain in the hereafter.⁹

The Messenger of Allah (S) says,

“Ghibā affects the religion of a person faster than leprosy spreads in human body.”¹⁰

Imam Ja’far as-Sadiq (a.s.) says,

“Ghibā is Harām for all Muslims and there is no doubt that Ghibā destroys good deeds like fire destroys wood.”¹¹

The Shaykh says, “*Ghibā* eats good deeds”, means that *Ghibā* invalidates all the good actions that one has performed or that the sin of *Ghibā* exceeds the rewards he has accumulated from the past good deeds, or that the deeds of back-biter are transferred to the scroll of deeds of the one about whom he has back-bited. These points are mentioned in a number of traditions. The Messenger of Allah (S) is reported saying that a person will be brought for accounting in Qiyāma and handed his scroll of deeds. When he sees the good deeds performed by him missing from his record he would say, ‘O Allah! This is not my record because I cannot find the good deeds performed by me in it.’ He will be told, ‘Your Lord does not err or forget, your good deeds have disappeared due to backbiting about the people.’ Then another person will be brought and given his record of deeds. When he finds therein good deeds that he had never performed he shall say, ‘O Allah! This is not my scroll of deeds. Because I find recorded therein such good deeds as I had never performed’. So he shall be informed, “These are the good deeds of that certain person who back-bited about you and as a recompense his good deeds have been given to you.”

The Shaykh concludes that *Ghibā* is indeed a greater sin, and in fact it is more serious than some greater sins like Adultery and Usury.

Moreover, Khayanat discussed in the earlier chapters is confirmed to be a greater sin, and *Ghibā* can be considered a form of Khayanat; which Khayanat can surpass the action of betraying the confidential things of a believing brother? One proceeds to gobble the flesh of ones brother in faith while the latter is completely unaware.

Please take note, that *Ghibā* is Harām only in the case of believers. That is, the believers in all the tenets of faith the foremost of which is the belief in the Imamate of the twelve Imams (a.s.). Therefore, *Ghibā* of those who opposes this belief is not Harām.

However by way of precaution, we must not backbite any person belonging to any of the sects of Islam. Especially those who are not the enemies of truth and are just deficient in knowledge. We should also know that *Ghibā* is Harām not only when told to adults, it is not permitted to speak words of back biting

even to a child who is old enough to understand them and be affected by them. Some scholars have stated that *Ghiḥba* is not allowed even to children who have not yet reached the age of understanding.

Meaning and Occasions of Ghiḥba

The Messenger of Allah (S) explains *Ghiḥba* in the following words,

“Ghiḥba is remembering your brother in a way he dislikes.”¹²

Imam Sadiq (a.s.) says,

“Ghiḥba is exposing that aspect of your brother which Allah had concealed.”¹³

Imam Mūsā Ibn Ja’far (a.s.) says,

“If one speaks of a person in his absence about those of his traits which are actually present in him and people are also aware of it, it is not Ghiḥba. But if he mentions something which is present in the person but people are unaware of it, it would be Ghiḥba. Moreover if what he is saying is not present in the man, it is allegation (Bukhtān).”

On the basis of these two traditions mentioning the defects of a person which are well-known to those who are being told and also other people is not *Ghiḥba*, even if it could be construed as criticism, scolding, causing hurt and insult, which is also *Harām* as will be discussed later.

After taking into account the meaning of word *Ghiḥba* by dictionary experts and the different implications of *Ghiḥba* according to traditional reports the Shaykh concludes that *Ghiḥba* is of Three types: Absolute *Ghiḥba*, Apparent *Ghiḥba* and Implied *Ghiḥba*.

In the first instance it is backbiting for sure. The defect be according to *Shari’a* or according to what is generally accepted as defect in a person and also that if it is mentioned in the absence of the person and were he to know about it he would not like it. Besides, one who indulges in this *Ghiḥba* should be doing it with the intention of exposing him or in trying to find defects in him. In short if one exposes the defect of a believer with a clear intention of defaming, it would be *Ghiḥba*.

In the second category is *Ghiḥba* which is not done for exposing a person but for some other purpose. For example in jest or to prove one's point, or for expressing one's concern, or to cite it as an example. In all such cases also if one is revealing the hidden defect of a believer it is *Ghiḥba* and *Harām* according to *Shari’a*.

The third kind is to mention the defects to a person who is already aware of it. Regarding this some traditions say it is not *Ghiḥba* but other traditions have included it among backbiting, particularly when the person is scolding with vehemence and insult. Such a *Ghiḥba* is absolutely *Harām* even though it is doubtful whether it is *Ghiḥba* in the real sense, since this will cause grief to a believer and humiliation.

Also if a person uses nicknames that will invite criticism, saying: he is a son of a Jew, or ‘His mother was of loose character’. All such things are *Harām* as mentioned in the verse of Surah al-Hujurat.

“...nor call one another by nicknames; evil is a bad name after faith...” (Surah al-Hujurat 49: 11)

Types of *Ghibā*

According to clear traditions and opinion of religious scholars it makes no difference whether the defect mentioned is of a physical nature, pertains to ones descent, a trait of ones character or with regard to ones speech or actions, or whether it is with regard to religion or worldly aspects. Special mention is made of defects pertaining to ones dress, house, vehicle etc. Examples are cited for each of these. A physical defect is mentioned that, such and such is cockeyed, one-eyed, bald, short, tall, dark complexioned, yellow skinned etc.

If these characteristics are mentioned in a manner that he will be unhappy if he heard about it, it is *Ghibā*. *Ghibā* of ones family origin is saying, ‘His father was a sinner, evil, miser, libertine, weaver, low caste etc. *Ghibā* of character is saying such and such is bad-character, miser, arrogant, coward, weak, hypocrite, thief or an oppressor. *Ghibā* with regard to religious matters is saying that a person is a liar, a drunkard, he neglects prayers, he is bad mannered, ungrateful, he doesn’t realize his low position, he’s talkative, a glutton, an excessive sleeper. *Ghibā* in relation to dress is saying his dress is dirty, torn, old, long or short. If these are mentioned in a manner that a person wouldn’t like to hear about himself, it is *Ghibā*.

It should be clear that it makes no difference whether the defect is mentioned verbally or expressed in action or gestures. Even if one makes an allusion and it is understood in the sense he intends, it is *Ghibā*. Sometimes allusion is worse than *Ghibā*. For example, saying, ‘Alhamdulillah (Praise to be Allah), Allah has not made us covet rulership, or made us supporters of oppressors or did not make us greedy of wealth. Or if one says, we seek refuge of Allah from jealousy, niggardliness or shamelessness, May Allah protect us from the mischief of Shaitan; and by saying all this he desires to indicate the person who has these traits.

Often times when someone intends to do *Ghibā* of a person, he initially heaps praises upon him. For example saying: He is so nice! It’s a pity he’s caught in Satan’s trap and became such and such. Another example is to be aggrieved in a hypocritical way: I am really aggrieved and my heart has burnt in the sorrow for such and such person. This is not true because if he were really sincere and a true friend he would not have criticized him and exposed his defects.

Ghibā of Specified Persons and *Ghibā* of General People

It is *Ghibā* only if it is with respect to a particular person. If there is no mention of name or special traits of a person it is not termed *Ghibā*. For example, one says, ‘I saw a person in such and such way.’ This

would not be *Ghiḥba*. But if at the same time he indicates a distinguishing feature of this person, it is *Ghiḥba*. Like for example saying that the person has such and such type of son or daughter. It is *Harām* because in this way he has caused grief to all the concerned people. If one mentions the genre like he says. 'A person from Isfahan or Shiraz has done that. This is allowed. It is also allowed to say some people of Isfahan are such and such.' But saying that all the people of Isfahan or Shiraz are like that, is *Harām* without any doubt. This is because it would amount to be the *Ghiḥba* of all the people of these cities. If one says that majority of the people of that city are like that, it is against precaution. In fact there is a strong indication of its illegality.

Expiation and Repentance for Ghiḥba

As *Ghiḥba* is a greater sin anyone falling into it, is obliged to feel remorse for having disobeyed Allah (S.w.T.). After sincere repentance he must seek forgiveness, with the intention of never repeating it in the future. As mentioned in some of the traditions, if possible one must apologize to the person whose *Ghiḥba* he had done. He must beg him for forgiveness and somehow obtain his satisfaction. Also he must make up for it by speaking well of the person in proportion to the *Ghiḥba* he has committed with regard to this person.

This is more appropriate when the person is already dead and it is not possible to contact him. Or there is a good chance, the person will be more angry and would distance himself further. For example when he is ignorant of what was said about him and by hearing about the *Ghiḥba* he would be infuriated. The aim of seeking his forgiveness would not be achieved. In such cases we should ask Allah (S.w.T.)'s forgiveness for him and beseech Allah (S.w.T.) to make this person happy, as mentioned in the 39th Du'a of Sahifa Sajjadiya. It is also mentioned in the supplication of Monday.

Occasions when Ghiḥba is Permitted

Scholars permit *Ghiḥba* in some cases. We shall mention the opinion of Shaykh in this matter as given in his book Makasib Muhrima.

(1) *Ghiḥba* of a person whose defect is not hidden. It is known to all. Like the one who roams the streets with a bottle of wine on his lips.

“One who sins openly is not worthy of respect and his Ghiḥba is not Harām. 14

A tradition also says,

“(The Ghiḥba of) one who has thrown away the robe of shame (and commits sins openly) is not Ghiḥba. 15

It should be noted that, *Ghiḥba* is allowed only for those sins that are committed openly. There is no proof of the legality of *Ghiḥba* for the sins committed secretly, though according to the Shaykh, if his

visible sins are more severe than his concealed defects, there is no harm in relating them. However, one should abstain from it as a matter of precaution.

Ghiḥba is allowed only in the case of a person who has himself announced his sins openly. But if he presents an excuse for this action, his *Ghiḥba* is not allowed. For example, he says, 'I drink wine for medicinal purpose and I am in Taqlid of a person who allows it.' Or one who eats during daytime in the month of Ramadhan says that he is sick or on a journey, or he may be having other acceptable reason. Similarly in the case of one who oppresses or cooperates with the oppressors, and then justifies his act. However, it should not be a blatant act. As a matter of precaution, *Ghiḥba* should not be done about a person who commits sins openly but in an alien town or locality.

(2) If an oppressed person complains about the oppressor and mentions his acts of injustice, it is not *Ghiḥba*. As the Almighty Allah (S.w.T.) says,

“And whoever defends himself after his being oppressed these it is against whom there is no way (to blame). The way (to blame) is only against those who oppress into and revolt in the earth unjustly, these shall have a painful punishment.” (Surah Ash-Shūrā 42: 41-42)

In Surah an-Nisā', the Almighty Allah (S.w.T.) Says,

“Allah does not love the public utterance of hurtful speech unless (it be) by one to whom injustice has been done.” (Surah an-Nisā' 4: 148)

Precaution demands that we must complain of injustice to someone who is capable of redressing it. It is not permitted to complain to someone who is not capable of getting justice for you.

(3) Advice to those who ask for it. When a Muslim approaches for advice in a particular deal that he intends to enter with a person and the person approached knows about a defect of that person which, if he does not reveal the person who enters into contract will suffer loss and have problems; in this case there is no harm in passing such information.

One must pay attention to two things in this case: The defect should be mentioned only if there is harm in not informing about it. If the defamation or insult caused by revealing the defect is more serious than the loss caused to the other person, one should abstain from *Ghiḥba*. Secondly, *Ghiḥba* is allowed only if by doing so the person is warned. If he can be cautioned without doing *Ghiḥba*, *Ghiḥba* is not allowed. For example he says, "I don't see benefit in this matter" and the person who sought advice obeys him. Then one should stop at this.

(4) *Ghiḥba* is allowed with the intention of Nahy Anil Munkar. For example you see a Muslim prone to an evil way and think that by doing *Ghiḥba* he'll give it up. *Ghiḥba* is allowed in this case provided one is sure that it will have the desired effect. If there is doubt that the person has already given it up his *Ghiḥba* is not permitted. As in the previous case, we should take into consideration the harm of doing his

Ghibā in comparison to the harm caused by his bad deed. That is, if the exposure of this Muslim is more serious than the sin he is committing, his *Ghibā* is not allowed, even if we are sure that by doing his *Ghibā* he would give up the act.

Conclusive remarks from the foregone discussions

When one sees a Muslim doing something wrong one must study all its aspects. If the person has already given up the sin his *Ghibā* is *Harām*. By the same token he must not be scolded or criticised because *Nahy Anil Munkar* is to wean him away from sin; if he himself has given it up there is no sense in reprimanding him. If he has not discontinued it and he does it secretly then his sin comes in the ambit of secret sins and it is *Harām* to mention them to others. What is required in this case is to do *Nahy Anil Munkar* with all necessary conditions and if in spite of this he does not reform himself and we know that he will forgo it only if it is made public, we can do his *Ghibā*. But we must be sure that his sin is more serious than his *Ghibā*.

Therefore *Ghibā* for the purpose of *Nahy Anil Munkar* is allowed only when the person is persistent in his sin, and refuses to heed admonitions, when the evil of his sin is greater than exposing him; and we must be sure that he will forgo it if he is exposed. However, if any one of the four conditions are missing his *Ghibā* is *Harām*.

(5) *Ghibā* of a person is allowed if in addition to committing the sin himself he is instrumental in instigating others to follow him. For example he introduces an innovation in Allah (S.w.T.)'s religion. In order to warn the people of his deceit his *Ghibā* is permitted.

(6) *Ghibā* is allowed in connection with a person who narrates a false hadith or gives a false testimony. It should be to ensure that people are not misled by his falsehood.

(7) It is allowed to mention the defect of a person by which he is well-known. For example blind, cock-eyed, lame etc. Our intention must not be to point out his defect but by way of indication. Also one must bear in mind that the person himself not feel irked by these titles. Only in such circumstances is it allowed, otherwise we must use some other means to indicate towards him.

(8) One is allowed to expose the false claims of a person's lineage, because the harm caused by this exposure is less than the harm to families and clans if he relates himself to them.

(9) If two people are eyewitness to a sin. Later one of them mentions it to others. There is no harm in it because the one who is spoken to is not hearing something unknown to him, *Shahīd Thani* says it is better to refrain from mentioning something which the other person has forgotten or when there is a risk of scandal.

(10) According to *Shaykh Ansari* the discussion between two people who are eyewitnesses is allowed, if they do not do it with the intention of criticizing or denouncing the person. In all cases, *Ghibā* is allowed

when the harm it causes is less serious than the insult or defamation incurred by the person.

Listening to *Ghiba* is also *Harām*

Lending ear to *Ghiba* is *Harām* just as uttering *Ghiba* is *Harām*. The Messenger of Allah (S) says,

“The one who listens to *Ghiba* is one of those who do *Ghiba*.”¹⁶

He (S) also says,

“One who lends ear to back-biting is one of the back-biters.”¹⁷

Imam Sadiq (a.s.) says,

“*Ghiba* is equal to infidelity (One who does it is *Kafir*) and listening to and being pleased with it is like polytheism.”¹⁸

Traditions that describe the respect due to believers, indicate that the honour of a *Mu'min* is more than the respect of *Kaba*. His dishonour is same as his murder. His exposure will bring upon the guilty severe chastisement. It is obvious that the main pillar of *Ghiba* is the one who listens to backbiting. Because if the listener is not there or he refuses to listen to it, there is no *Ghiba*.

Therefore all Muslims are obliged not to hear the *Ghiba* of a believer. They must restrain the back biter so that the honour of the *Mu'min* is preserved. They should help the *Mu'min* in saving his honour.

The Messenger of Allah (S) says,

“If the *Ghiba* of ones believing brother is being done in ones presence and it is possible to defend him, one must defend him and Allah will help such a person in Hereafter. If in spite of being able he does not defend him, Allah will leave him on his own in the Hereafter and He shall not help him.”

(*Al-Majalis*)

He (S) has also said,

“If one defends his believer brother’s honour while back-biting is done about him in a way that he proves him faultless, Allah shall remove from him thousands of mischiefs from the world and the hereafter. But if he does not dispel them in spite of being able to do so, his sin shall be seventy times that of the back-biter.”

After quoting the above tradition, the Shaykh says that the sin of the listener is more than that of the back-biter because, but for him the back-biter would not have dared to back-bite. And listening to *Ghiba* mutely implies support of the back biter.

So if it is a worldly defect that is pointed out, he must say there is nothing of the sort. Faults are those which are described as faults by Allah (S.w.T.) and those that Allah (S.w.T.) has prohibited. So if you say anything that is not a fault in Allah (S.w.T.)'s view, it is not a *Ghibā*. The real mistake is the mention of this imaginary fault.

If the defect mentioned is according to religious law, one should try to absolve the Mu'min in whatever way possible. One can present a valid excuse for his actions or if this is not possible, one should draw the attention of the criticizer that after all a Mu'min is not infallible; if a Mu'min falls into sin we should pray for his forgiveness, instead of exposing and defaming him. We should also make him realize that his revelation can be more serious sin than the one committed by the Mu'min.

As a corollary to the discussion on what constitutes *Ghibā* according to the condition described, it is not obligatory to restrain the backbiter. At times it may happen that one may not be sure whether the criticism is of the permissible kind or not. In this case one should weigh the pros and cons of the situation. It is possible that the criticism is of the permissible type and by restraining the backbiter or by refuting his statements, we may do more harm, either to an individual or to a cause.

Hell and the two Tongues

Upon the conclusion of his discussion on *Ghibā* Shaykh Ansari writes in Makasib: If a person backbites about a person but heaps excessive praises on him in his presence, the sin of his backbiting is double. In religious language he is termed 'Zul lisānīn', one having two tongues. It is absolutely *Harām* and according to traditions, "The man with two tongues will be brought on the day of Qiyāma in such a way that two tongues of fire shall be there for him."¹⁹

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1. al-Kāfi Vol. 2 page 357
 2. Mustadrak ul-Wasa'il
 3. Makasibe Muhrima Vol. 3 page 310
 4. Makasibul Muharima
 5. Makasibul Muharima
 6. Makasibul Muharima
 7. Makasibul Muharima
 8. Makasibul Muharima
 9. Kashful Rabi of Shahīd al-Thani
 10. al-Kāfi Vol. 2 page 357
 11. al-Kāfi
 12. Makasib Muhrima
 13. Makasib, al-Kāfi Vol. 2 page 358
 14. Makasib Muhrima page 27, Vol. 4
 15. Makasib Muhrima page 27 Vol. 4
 16. Mustadrak ul-Wasa'il
 17. Kashful Rabi

18. Mustadrak ul-Wasa'il

19. (Makasib Muhrima)

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