

Al-Hujurat [The Apartments]

Madinah Period

In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate

[1] Believers, do not advance before Allah and His Messenger.¹ and fear Allah. Verily Allah is All-Hearing, All-Knowing.

[2] Believers, do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet and when speaking to him do not speak aloud as you speak aloud to one another, lest all your deeds are reduced to nothing without your even realising it.

[3] The ones who lower their voices in the presence of the Messenger of Allah are those whose hearts Allah has tested for God-fearing.² Theirs shall be forgiveness and a great reward.

*1. That is, the believers should remain behind rather than ahead of God and His Messenger; they should follow rather than venture to lead. What this implies is that rather than decide their problems according to their circumstances, they should first look to God's Book and His Prophet's **Sunnah** for the guidance that they might have to offer.*

2. It is being forcefully asserted here that the truly God-fearing are only those who have constantly stood up to God's tests by showing due reverence to the Prophet (peace be on him). The reverse of this is equally valid: those who lack reverence for the Prophet (peace be on him) are devoid of God-fearing.

[4] Surely most of those who call out to you, (O Prophet), from behind the apartments, are devoid of understanding.

[5] If they were patient until you went out to them, that would have been better for them³ Allah is Most Forgiving, Most Merciful.

[6] Believers, when an ungodly person brings to you a piece of news, carefully ascertain its truth, lest you should hurt a people unwittingly and thereafter repent at what you did.⁴

[7] Know that Allah's Messenger is among you. Were he to follow you in many an affair, you yourselves would suffer. But Allah has endeared faith to you and has embellished it in your hearts, and has made unbelief and evil-doing and disobedience abhorrent to you. Such are those who are rightly guided,

[8] by Allah's favour and bounty. Allah is All-Knowing, All-Wise.

3. Some of those who came from different parts of Arabia to meet the Prophet (peace be on him) were utterly insolent. On their arrival, they did not care to have him informed through any of his attendants that they would like to see him; instead, they went to his wives' apartments and brashly called him out. This hurt the Prophet's feelings intensely, yet he put up with such behaviour owing to his inherent forbearance. Eventually the matter was taken up by God Himself. He censured such people for their unrefined behaviour and directed them to refrain from calling out the Prophet (peace be on him) but to patiently wait for him to come out to them of his own accord.

4. The Muslims are here being directed that whenever any news touching on a matter of some significance spreads they should ascertain the source of that news. If the person who was the source was ungodly, they should investigate and find out the truth of the matter rather than instantly accept the report and be aroused to action.

[9] If two parties of the believers happen to fight, ⁵ make peace between them. But then, if one of them transgresses against the other, fight the one that transgresses until it reverts to Allah's command. And if it does revert, make peace between them with justice, and be equitable for Allah loves the equitable.

[10] Surely the believers are none but brothers unto one another, so set things right between your brothers, and have fear of Allah that you may be shown mercy.

[11] Believers, let not a group (of men) scoff at another group, it may well be that the latter (at whom they scoff) are better than they; nor let a group of women scoff at another group, it may well be that the latter are better than they. ⁶ And do not taunt one another, ⁷ nor revile one another by nicknames. ⁸ It is an evil thing to gain notoriety for ungodliness after belief. Those who do not repent are indeed the wrong-doers.

5. The actual words of the verse are significant: "If two parties of the believers happen to fight ..," The implication of the statement is that inter-Muslim fighting is discordant with Muslim behaviour. If they are people of faith, they would be expected not to fight one another. However, if such an eventuality did arise, they should have recourse to the remedial measure prescribed here.

6. Scoffing is not confined to committing that act by the tongue. One can scoff at another by mimicking him, by pointing at him in ways that make him a laughing-stock; by subjecting another person's words, acts, face or dress to derision, or by playing up any other defects that would make others burst into laughter.

7. This includes, reviling, deriding, Jeering, charging somebody falsely or finding faults with him, making him the target of reproach and blame by either open or tacit reference.

8. The purpose of this injunction is that a person should not be given a nickname or called by a title that degrades him. This includes addressing someone as a profligate or hypocrite, calling someone blind or one-eyed, investing someone with a title that highlights any defect in his parents or family, or calling a convert to Islam a Christian or Jew, or causing someone embarrassment and humiliation. However, it does not cover those titles which might appear to be offensive but which in fact are employed to point to a person's distinguishing marks, by

titles that do not injure his feelings nor do they subject him to disgrace. For example, to call someone a blind physician is to identify him with a distinct attribute.

[12] Believers, avoid being excessively suspicious, for some suspicion is a sin.⁹ Do not spy,¹⁰ nor backbite one another.¹¹ Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother?¹² You would surely detest it. Have fear of Allah. Surely Allah is much prone to accept repentance, is Most Compassionate.

9. The believers are being asked here not to be excessively suspicious rather than never to entertain any suspicion at all. The reason for this directive is clearly stated - some kinds of suspicion are sinful. One becomes guilty of this kind of suspicion when one suspects without justified reason; or when in forming one's opinion about another person one suspects him; or one mistrusts a person's words or deeds when apparently he is a good person. It is also sinful to be inclined to negatively interpret a person's words and deeds out of suspiciousness although it is equally possible he has a good intent.

10. "Do not spy" means that believers should not go about prying into the secrets of others, nor should they try to investigate matters that pertain to others. Thus they should refrain from reading others' Private letters, eavesdropping, peeping into others' homes and trying to dig out information about others' domestic or private affairs.

*11. The Prophet (peace be on him) was asked to explain what was meant by backbiting, He said: "It is talking of your brother in a manner that would hurt him," He was further asked: "What if the defect mentioned by me is actually found in him?" The Prophet (peace be on him) replied: "It would be backbiting if the defect that is mentioned exists. But if it does not exist, then it would be slander." This makes it quite clear that talking ill of another person behind his back during his life or after his death is only permissible in a very limited number of situations. One may mention another person's defects only when, according to the standards set by the **Shariah**, it is absolutely necessary to do so, or when not mentioning a person's defect leads to greater evil than backbiting. Elaborating on this exception the Prophet (peace be on him) laid down the following principle: "To attack any Muslim's honour without right is the worst kind of evil." The words "without right" in this tradition imply that in certain circumstances it is permissible to speak ill about another person in his absence, For instance, the person who has been subjected to a wrong by another has the right to lodge a complaint, stating the wrongs the other person did him. To convey the complaint of the wronged against the wrong-doer to a person who, in his opinion, has the power to save him from that wrong. It is also lawful to bring to light the evils of a person or a group to those who can do something to eradicate those evils. It is also lawful to state the facts of someone's misdeeds before a **mufti** to solicit his religious or legal verdict. It is also lawful to warn people against the mischief of a person (or persons) so that they might be on guard. It is also lawful to raise one's voice against those who are spreading immorality, religious heresies or misleading ideas, or who are leading people to irreligiousness, or subjecting them to oppression.*

12. Here backbiting is likened to eating the flesh of one's dead brother. The reason for this is that the victim of the act is not even aware that someone has launched an assault on his honour.

[13] Human beings, We created you all from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another. Verily the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God-fearing of you.¹³ Surely Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.

13. In the verses above, the Muslims are provided with the necessary directives to keep their community immune from evil and corruption. But now through the present verse mankind is being warned about the major erroneous notion that has always led to the spread of evil around the world; namely, the notion of prejudice based on race, colour, language, homeland and nationality. Addressing all human beings, the Qur'an emphasises three basic points: [1] that all human beings have the same origin, that all of us have arisen originally from the same father and mother. Thus, all ethnic and racial entities that exist today are branches of the same family, their ultimate parents having been the same. [2] That it was natural for mankind to become divided, despite their common origin, into diverse national and tribal entities. While this diversity is quite natural, it does not provide any justification for some people to claim any inherent superiority over others; to consider some on these grounds as high and others as low, some as noble and others as ignoble. Considerations of colour, race or nationality do not warrant people of any particular colour, race or nationality to regard themselves as superior to others. God created such diversities to foster greater cooperation and to enable these different entities to become mutually introduced. [3] There is only one basis for regarding one as better than the other and that is on account of their moral excellence.

[14] The Bedouins say: "We believe."¹⁴ (O Prophet), say to them: "You do not believe; you should rather say: 'We have submitted'"; for belief has not yet entered your hearts. If you obey Allah and His Messenger, He will not diminish anything from the reward of any of your deeds. Surely Allah is Most Forgiving, Most Compassionate.

[15] Indeed the ones possessed of true faith are those who believed in Allah and His Messenger and then they did not entertain any doubt and strove hard in the Way of Allah with their lives and their possessions. These are the truthful ones.

[16] Say, (O Prophet), (to these pretenders to faith): "Are you apprising Allah of your faith? Allah knows all that is in the heavens and the earth. Allah has full knowledge of everything."

[17] They count it as a favour to you that they accepted Islam, Say: "Do not regard your (accepting) Islam as a favour to me; rather, Allah has bestowed a favour on you by guiding you to faith, if you are truthful (in your claim to be believers).

[18] Surely Allah knows; every hidden thing of the heavens and the earth. Allah sees all that you do.

14. This applies to some specific groups of Bedouins rather than to all bedouins who embraced Islam. Observing that Islam's power was on the rise, some bedouins had converted to Islam merely to remain secure from attack or to derive material benefit ensuing from Islamic conquests. Such people had not become Muslims from the depths of their hearts. They had simply enrolled themselves as Muslims by virtue of verbal profession of faith, a profession which was motivated by utilitarian considerations.