

RESPECT (PART 2 OF 3)

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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”^[1] 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 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.”^[2] 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.”^[3]

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 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.^[4] 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.

Footnotes:

[1] *At Tirmidhi*

[2] *Saheeh Muslim.*

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] *Fataawa Al-Lajnah al-Daa'imah li'l-Buhooth al-'Ilmiyyah wa'l-Ifta' (26/10).*

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