

THE ETIQUETTE OF EATING (PART 1 OF 2): BEFORE AND DURING THE MEAL

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“And I (God) created not the jinn and humankind except they should worship Me (Alone).” (Quran 51:56)

The religion of Islam is a holistic way of life. It is not separated into physical, emotional and spiritual areas; rather it teaches that all aspects of life combine to fulfil one purpose. What is that purpose and is it possible to understand the meaning of life? Yes it is! Islam makes it very clear that the purpose of life is to worship our Creator, the One True God. What gives meaning to our existence is understanding that all our actions, no matter how grand or how trivial, can be turned easily into worship. All actions performed in the daily course of life can be raised to the status of worship simply by remembering to praise God and seek His pleasure.

Islam makes remembrance easy by giving us guidelines. It teaches us in a gentle and moderate way that life is worship, and worship is the meaning of life. To this end, even eating has an etiquette that raises its status from the mundane to worship. Food plays a significant role in our everyday lives. We spend a lot of time, effort and money in shopping, cooking and eating so it makes sense to turn these worldly acts into worship worthy of reward. The sayings of Prophet Muhammad are filled with guidelines and recommendations that make eating a rewardable action.

Cleanliness is an important part of Islam. Not only should a Muslim purify himself before turning to God in prayer but they must pay attention to the cleanliness of their bodies and their surroundings at all times. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, reminded us that our body has certain rights and one of those rights is that it should be maintained with cleanliness. Our bodies are a trust from God and living in filthy conditions causes disease and ill health. Therefore, before preparing food it is important to be sure that the food, the food preparation area and the hands that will touch the food are clean.

Muslims begin every task or action by mentioning the name of God, and eating is no exception. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said:

“When one of you eats, he should mention God's name; if he forgets to mention God's name at the beginning, he should say: "I begin with the name of God at the beginning and at the end of it (i.e. this meal).””[1]

It is important to remember that Islam is a moderate way of life, we should not overindulge nor should we deprive ourselves of the delicious food that God has provided for us. The Islamic guidelines in relation to eating are taught to us predominantly in the sayings of Prophet Muhammad.

Eating with the right hand is one such saying and it is obligatory for Muslims unless there is an excuse such as illness or injury. The left hand is usually used to clean the body of filth and impurities while the right hand is used for eating, passing objects from one person to another and for shaking hands. Prophet Muhammad also advised his companions that Satan eats with his left hand and that the believers should disassociate themselves from anything that resembles Satan.[2]

One of Prophet Muhammad's companions, Omar ibn Abi Salamah also related a story about the etiquette of eating. He said,

“When I was a young boy in the care of the Messenger of God, my hand used to wander all over the platter (of food). The Messenger of God said to me, ‘O young boy, say Bismillah (I begin with the name of God), eat with your right hand, and eat from what is directly in front of you’.”[3]

In situations where everyone is eating from common platters or serving themselves, taking the food that is directly in front of you is considered good manners. Reaching over others or searching for the most delicious pieces of food can make others uncomfortable or make you appear to be ungrateful or greedy. Part of the etiquette of eating includes eating in moderation and not overindulging no matter how appetizing the food is.

Prophet Muhammad reminded us that keeping the body light and healthy is better than being overweight, lazy and idle. He said,

“A man does not fill any vessel worse than his stomach. It is sufficient for the son of Adam to eat enough to keep him alive. But if he must do more than that, then one-third for his food, one-third for his drink and one-third for his air.”[4]

There are many guidelines pertaining to the etiquette of eating. However inconsequential each action may seem, treating others with respect and thinking about how our actions will please or displease God turns eating into worship. It is from the manners of Prophet Muhammad to show respect towards guests by offering them the choicest food and delivering it in a timely manner. The guest is able to respond by hastening to taste and praise the food and by praying for and sending blessings upon the host. Prophet Muhammad's companion, Anas, said that Sa'd ibn Ubada once brought some bread and oil to the Prophet who responded by saying

“May fasting people break their fast with you, may the righteous eat your food, and may the angels send blessings upon you.”^[5]

While it is a part of good manners to send blessings upon your host, Prophet Muhammad made it clear to his followers that the food God provides is full of the blessings of God. He taught us to be thankful and grateful. Prophet Muhammad advised us to pick up, dust off and eat any pieces of food that fall on the floor, to be certain not to miss any blessings or to leave the food for Satan.^[6]

Finally the etiquette of eating includes eating with a group rather than alone, sharing the bounties God provides, eating with three fingers, licking the remains of the food off your fingers, not reclining while eating, and refraining from spitting or blowing your nose whilst eating. It is also part of Islamic good manners to praise the food. It is wrong to criticise food, rather it is better to refrain from eating anything you do not like.

Paying attention to the etiquette of eating allows the believers to gather blessings and rewards with ease. God has provided us with delicious foods of every kind, meats, grains, fruits and vegetables and He said,

“And eat and drink, but waste not in extravagance, certainly He (Allah) likes not those who waste in extravagance.” (Quran 7:31)

Footnotes:

[1] *At Tirmidhi, Abu Dawood & Ibn Majah.*

[2] *Saheeh Muslim*

[3] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim.*

[4] *Ibn Majah*

[5] *Abu Dawood*

[6] *Saheeh Muslim*

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