Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on April 20, 2012

The Qur’anic Concept of Virtue – Part 1

Muslims are going through very difficult times. They are being subjected to abject humiliation. This is not necessarily a new or recent phenomenon but has been around for decades. Why is it so? What is the way out of this predicament? What does it take for a Muslim to live an honorable and distinguished life? All what has come to the Muslims is their own doing. Most certainly, Allah (SWT) is not unjust to His servants. “That is on account of what you stored up for yourselves with your own hands: God is never unjust to His servants” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:182).

The Muslim population is huge, but there are not many Muslims who are genuinely concerned about the sufferings and plight of their Muslim brothers and sisters around the world or who are doing something to bring about a positive change. Most of them are only chasing dunya and are indifferent to the hard times others may be going through. Some of them may even sell themselves and their deen for petty worldly gains.

True believers place their trust in Allah (SWT). They know that whatever befalls them is from Allah (SWT). They endure the trials and tribulations of life with patience and perseverance. They remain confident that Allah (SWT) will find out a way for them. As for the rest of us, we need to reform ourselves. We need to become true, righteous believers. Otherwise, we may well be deprived from Allah’s blessings in this world and the next. Most of us have some vague idea about the concepts of goodness, righteousness, virtue or piety. But, unless we know and understand the Qur’anic concept of these attributes, we may well be fooling ourselves thinking that we are righteous.

Ayah 177 of Surat al-Baqarah (Ayat al-Birr, if we may call it) states, “Goodness (virtue/piety) does not consist in turning your face towards East or West. The truly good are those who believe in God and the Last Day, in the angels, the Scripture, and the prophets; who give away some of their wealth, however much they cherish it, to their relatives, to orphans, the needy, travelers and beggars, and to liberate those in bondage; those who keep up the prayer and pay the prescribed alms; who keep pledges whenever they make them; who are steadfast in misfortune, adversity, and times of danger. These are the ones who are true, and it is they who are aware of God” (al-Baqarah, 2:177).

It is important to know the background and context under which a particular ayah or surah of the Qur’an was revealed. This knowledge helps us to get an insight into the content and message of that ayah or surah. Ayat al-Birr was revealed following the incident of Tahweel al-Qiblah or changing of the direction of Qiblah from Jerusalem to the Ka’ba in Mecca. Till such time that the Prophet (SAW) was at Mecca, he used to pray facing the Ka’ba toward the North. In this position, while he was facing Ka’ba, he was also facing Jerusalem, because Jerusalem lay further up north. After the hijrah, and while in Medina, the Prophet (SAW) prayed for about 17 to 18 months facing Jerusalem, because that was the Qiblah of the time; the Qiblah of Bani Israel who were among the People of the Book. Doing so, however, burdened the feelings of the Prophet (SAW) and his companions who had migrated from Mecca. They belonged to the progeny of Ismail (AS) and Ibrahim (AS), and Ka’ba was sacred to them both ethnically, and religiously. Nearly two years after the hijrah, an ayah was revealed directing...
the Prophet (SAW) to change his Qiblah from Jerusalem to al-Masjid al-Haram (al- Ka’ba) in Mecca. “We have seen you looking up into heaven, turning this way and that, so We will turn you towards a direction which will please you. Turn your face, therefore, towards the Masjid al-Haram. Wherever you all are, turn your faces towards it. Those given the Book know it is the truth from their Lord. Allah is not unaware of what they do“ (al-Baqarah, 2:144).

When the Qiblah was changed, the Jews got alarmed. It dawned upon them that this incident manifested the creation of a new Muslim ummah and the consequent marginalization of the Jewish community. The Jews began to create doubts and suspicion in the hearts and minds of believers regarding this incident. They also began to raise propaganda about the Prophet’s fickle nature of not remaining fixed and stable with the earlier Qiblah (Jerusalem). The companions who were very God conscious began to think that the prayers they had offered for nearly two years facing Jerusalem may have gone to waste.

It is in the context of the above incident of the change of Qiblah that Ayat al-Birr was revealed to explain to the people that righteousness did not merely comprise of praying toward a particular direction but real virtue and piety had to do with faith and a host of other good deeds.

Just as Ayat al-Kursi is the most comprehensive ayah on the subject of tawhid, likewise Ayat al-Birr is the most extensive ayah on the subject of real virtue (al-Birr).

According to Ayat al-Birr, the first requirement for real virtue or piety is to have iman in Allah (SWT), iman in the hereafter, iman in the angels, iman in the books, and iman in the prophets. The last three among these five articles of faith make up what is called believing in the institution of prophethood (iman bi al-Risala) that involves Angel Jibril, bringing down the books (scriptures) by way of revelations to the prophets for the purpose of providing guidance to mankind.

The reason why iman in Allah (SWT) and iman in the hereafter are mentioned before iman in the institution of prophethood is because belief in Allah (SWT) and in the hereafter is what purifies one’s intention and motivates one to become virtuous. This is practically demonstrated by the prophets and messengers of Allah (SWT) who were the models of real virtue and piety. They were the best human beings of their times, having the most balanced personalities. “The Messenger of Allah is an excellent model for those of you who put your hope in Allah and the Last Day and remember Allah very often.” (al-Ahzab, 33:21).

According to this blessed ayah, the first manifestation of piety after iman is to have kindness, sympathy and mercy toward fellow human beings. According to a hadith, “He who is deprived of kindness is deprived of good.” There is another hadith that says, “Whoever relieves a believer from one of the hardships of this world, Allah will relieve him from one of the hardships of the Day of Judgment. And whoever eases a straitened circumstance (for the believer), Allah will make it easy for him in this life and the Hereafter; and whoever covers a believer, Allah will cover him in this life and in the Hereafter. Allah is at the assistance of the slave (of His), so long as the slave is at the assistance of his brother…”

People who spend wealth ‘despite their love for it’ (‘ala hubbihi) could imply (1) spending out of love of Allah (SWT); (2) spending despite the love of wealth itself, because man by his very nature loves wealth intensely; and (3) spending for the sake of ‘giving’ as there are individuals who by their nature love giving.

The majority of scholars are of the opinion that the pronoun ‘it’ in the ayah refers to wealth itself. “You will never attain piety until you spend out of what you hold dear, and whatever you may spend of anything, Allah (SWT) indeed knows it” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:92). There are other scholars who believe that all three interpretations are valid. And Allah (SWT) knows best.

Pious believers have the right attitude. They love to do good unto others not for worldly gains or praise, but for the sake of pleasing Allah (SWT) and to be successful in the hereafter. This notion is beautifully reflected in the ayah, which speaks of true believers as saying, “We only feed you for the sake of God; we do not desire
from you any reward or thanks. We fear from our Lord a Day, which will be horrible and difficult” (al-Insan, 76:9-10).

The first and foremost in the list of worthy recipients who deserve to be given from our wealth are our relatives, especially those who are close to us through relations of the womb. Ironically, they are the ones to whom people are generally disinclined to give. We are obliged to keep the ties of kinship intact, and helping them financially is one of the ways of doing it. There is a hadith that says that those who give their wealth to their relatives will have a double reward—one for maintaining the ties of kinship and another for charity (sadaqah).

Next in the list are the orphans. Taking care of orphans is highly meritorious. An orphan is a child who has lost his or her father and who has not reached the age of physical and emotional maturity to be able to take care of himself or herself. We all know how deprived and vulnerable a fatherless child can be. The Prophet (SAW) himself was an orphan. In a hadith, the Prophet (SAW) said, "I and the person who looks after an orphan will be in Paradise together like this..." - then he raised his forefinger and middle finger together.

The third group of people who should be helped monetarily is the miskeen. The Prophet (SAW) said: “The miskeen (poor person) is not the one for whom a date-fruit or two, or a morsel or two (of food) is sufficient, but the miskeen is he who does not beg or ask the people for anything or show his poverty at all.” This hadith defines who a miskeen is. It is not someone who is obviously poor, or who begs of people, but someone who is ashamed to let people know of his need and poverty. Such people can be recognized by their faces and by our sensitivity. Out of self-respect they do not ask others to help them but suffer in silence. They are truly deserving of our help.

Another group of people entitled for charity are the wayfarers or travelers. They are those who may be well off otherwise, but while on journey, they have been confronted with difficulties such as having lost their money, ticket, identification cards etc and are therefore deserving of our help to overcome their problems. Even when it comes to giving to beggars (fuqara’), who are yet another type of recipients deserving help, we should never scold them or scorn at them. “And as for beggars, do not rebuke them” (al-Dhuha, 93:10). The slaves are also among those who are entitled for financial help so that they can be freed from slavery, but as the institution of slavery is no longer in vogue, the scholars are of the opinion that in contemporary times, settling debts of Muslims who genuinely need to be extricated from financial debts falls into this category. And Allah knows best.

The broad spectrum of real virtue (al-Birr) in Ayat al-Birr is basically divided into three categories. These are: (1) fulfilling the rights of fellow human beings (Huquq al-'Ibad) by having mercy and sympathy toward them and by actually spending on them for the sake of Allah (SWT); (2) fulfilling the rights of Allah (Huquq Allah) through prayers (salah) and obligatory charity (zakah) since He is their Creator, Sustainer, and Master, and (3) fulfilling business transactions, marriage contracts, promises, and all other trusts. The first category has been discussed in this sermon. Insha’Allah, the other two will be discussed in future sermons.

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