Synopsis of Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on July 6, 2012

Nifaq (Hypocrisy) – Part 1

The topic of today’s khutba is nifaq or hypocrisy; a subject that is very important to understand; particularly in the times we live in. There are ayat in Surat al-Baqarah that describe some of the attributes of the hypocrites. From its very start, Surat al-Baqarah begins by identifying three distinct categories of people: the believers (al-mu’munun), the disbelievers (al-kafirun), and the hypocrites (al-munafiqun).

When describing the believers, it says, “This is the Scripture in which there is no doubt, containing guidance for those who are mindful of God, who believe in the unseen, keep up the prayer, and give out of what We have provided for them; those who believe in the revelation sent down to you [Muhammad], and in what was sent before you, those who have firm faith in the Hereafter’ (al-Baqarah, 2:2-4). It further says that “such people are guided by their Lord and it is they who are successful” (al-Baqarah, 2:5). Regarding the position and ultimate fate of the disbelievers, it says, “As for those who disbelieve, it makes no difference whether you warn them or not: they will not believe. God has sealed their hearts and their ears, and their eyes are covered. They will have great torment.” (al-Baqarah, 2:6-7). We also learn about these two distinct categories of people from another ayah of the Qur’an: “It is He who created you, yet some of you disbelieve and some believe: God sees everything you do” (al-Taghabun, 64:2).

Another category of people mentioned is that of the hypocrites, regarding whom the Qur’an says, “Among the people there are some who say, ‘We believe in God and in the Last Day,’ but they are not believers. They seek to deceive God and the believers but they only deceive themselves, though they do not realize it. There is a disease in their hearts, to which God has added more: agonizing torment awaits them for their persistent lying” (al-Baqarah, 2:8-10). A hypocrite or munafiq is one who claims to be a true believer or mu’min, when in reality he or she is not.

Legally speaking, in an Islamic state, there could only be two broad categories of people coexisting together: the Muslims and the non-Muslims. However, Muslims themselves may be of three types: the true believers on one end of the spectrum; the hypocrites who claim to be believers on the other end of the spectrum, and the ordinary Muslims in between these two. Primarily, the true believers include the companions of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW), and all those who truly follow him. Typically, the hypocrites include their leader Abdullah ibn Ubay, and all those who follow in his footsteps. The rest are the ordinary Muslims who make up the majority of the Muslims in the world. They are neither real believers nor real hypocrites, but somewhere between the two. We have to constantly keep assessing ourselves as to which end of the spectrum we are closer to. Legally, all these three categories of people are regarded as Muslims. The munafiqs have exactly the same rights as Muslims.

The distinction between true believers (mu’minun) and ordinary Muslims or between Islam and iman is aptly described in the ayah that states, “The desert Arabs say, ‘We have iman.’ Say: ‘You do not have iman. Say
rather, ‘We have become Muslim,’ for Iman has not yet entered into your hearts.’” (al-Hujurat, 49:14). There were among the Bedouins who had become Muslims after seeing the increasing power of Islam, thinking that they would not only remain safe from any attack by Muslims, but would gain materially from the Islamic conquests. These people may not have embraced Islam sincerely but had professed faith only verbally in order to be counted among the Muslims, and their inner state became exposed whenever they would come before the Prophet (SAW) with different sorts of demands and would enumerate and mention their rights as if they had done him a great favor by accepting Islam. The Prophet (SAW) is told to inform them that they have no iman, because it is not found in their hearts. This means that they do not have the required recognition of the truth and commitment to it. It is God who alone can look into people’s hearts and judge their intentions and thoughts. If people obey God by doing what He asks them to do, and their works follow God’s command, they will be rewarded, even though these works are not necessarily accompanied by recognition of truth and commitment to it. Ibn Taymiyyah and his student Ibn al-Qayyim are of the opinion that this particular ayah makes it very clear that while every mu’min is a Muslim, every Muslim is not necessarily a mu’min.

In contemporary times, most Muslims can be said to be at the level of Islam; not at the level of real iman. This is because the Qur’an says “Do not lose heart or despair- if you are true believers you will have the upper hand” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:139). Let alone having the upper hand, the Muslim ummah is being subjected to humiliation and disgrace almost everywhere. This is a clear indication that most Muslims have settled for being at the level of Islam and are nowhere near the level of real iman. Improving upon one’s iman is a constant struggle and does not come about just by wishing for it.

In the spiritual sense, nifaq or hypocrisy is a disease of the heart. “There is a disease in their hearts” (al-Baqarah, 2:10). We learn from other places in the Qur’an that the consequences of having this disease are very grim, both in this world and in the next. At one place, referring to the hypocrites, Allah (SWT) addresses the Prophet (SAW) in the following words, “It makes no difference whether you ask forgiveness for them or not: God will not forgive them even if you ask seventy times, because they reject God and His Messenger. God does not guide those who rebel against Him” (al-Taubah, 9:80). The hypocrites, however much they declare themselves to be Muslims are branded as ‘the rebellious ones’ (al-fasiqeen) in this ayah. There is another ayah that should make those who have the germs of hypocrisy in them tremble with fear: “The hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of Hell, and you will find no one to help them” (al-Nisa’, 4:145).

There are certain misconceptions among Muslims regarding nifaq that need to be addressed and clarified. The first misconception is that there are no munafiqs among us today in our world, and that they existed only at the time of the Prophet (SAW). This statement may be only partially true. It is true that munafiqs did exist in the times of the Prophet (SAW), and Allah (SWT) even divulged their names to him. Yet, it is wrong to think that nifaq is not prevalent among Muslims today. Munafiqs exist today and will continue to exist till the end of times. However, while the Prophet (SAW) knew the Munafiqs of his time by name, as he was informed by Allah (SWT) about them, we are not in a position to say anything or pass any judgment about the state of nifaq of a Muslim.

The second misconception regarding nifaq is that Muslims are secure from or immune to nifaq. Muslims further think like other nations thought or claimed before them that they are the only beloved ones of Allah (SWT). “The Jews and the Christians say, ‘We are the children of God and His beloved ones.’ Say, ‘Then why does He punish you for your sins? You are merely human beings, part of His creation: He forgives whoever He will and punishes whoever He will’” (al-Ma‘idah, 5:18). As a matter of fact, no one is safe from or immune to nifaq. This matter is vividly brought to light by the following a story from the sirah of the Prophet (SAW):

Abu Rib‘i Hanzala (RA), one of the scribes of the Messenger of Allah, said, “Abu Bakr, may Allah be pleased with him, met me and said, ‘How are you, Hanzala?’ I said, ‘Hanzala is a hypocrite!’ He said, ‘Glory be to Allah! What are you saying?’ I said, ‘We were with Allah’s Messenger (SAW), who reminded us of the Garden and the Fire and it was as if we could see them with our eyes. When we leave the presence of Allah’s Messenger (SAW), we attend to our wives, children and estates in a state of great heedlessness.’ Abu Bakr said, ‘By
Allah, we have experienced the same as this!’ So Abu Bakr and I went to visit the Messenger of Allah and I said, ‘Hanzala is a hypocrite, O Messenger of Allah!’ The Messenger of Allah (SAW) said, ‘Why is that?’ I said, ‘Messenger of Allah, when we are with you, you remind us of the Garden and Fire and it is as if we could see them with our eyes. When we leave your presence, we attend to our wives, children and estates in a state of great heedlessness.’ The Messenger of (SAW) said, ‘By the One in whose hand my soul is, if you were to remain in the state you are in when you are in my presence and in the dhikr (remembrance), the angels would shake hands with you on your bed and in the street, but, Hanzala, different times are not the same.’”

We learn from another story that Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman (RA) used to keep a list of the hypocrites, given to him by the Prophet (SAW) with instructions to keep the names in the list a closely guarded secret. After Umar (RA) became the caliph (khalifa), he would go to Hudhayfah (RA) and request him to let him know if his name was there on the list. Such was the fear of Umar (RA) from the disease of nifaq that even he did not consider himself secure from being infected by it. We learn from traditions that the Prophet (SAW) said, “If there were to be a prophet after me it would be Umar ibn al-Khattab.” Umar (RA) was referred to by the Prophet (SAW) as “al-Farooq” meaning “one who discriminates right from wrong.” After the first righteous caliph Abu Bakr (RA), Umar (RA) is considered to be the top ranking individual in the history of Islam. We can now perhaps appreciate that no one should feel himself or herself immune from nifaq.

The third misconception about nifaq is that all munafiqs are conscious of their nifaq. This is not so. The majority of the Muslims are not even aware of their nifaq. We have to take lessons from the stories of Hanzala and Umar (RAA) to be able to become conscious of the disease of nifaq, which may attack us so stealthily that we may not even be aware of it.

The Arabic word nifaq is derived from the root letters noon-faa-Qaaf. The word nafaqun means an underground tunnel with openings at its two ends. The word naafaqah refers to a desert lizard that Arabs used to hunt for food. It lives in a tunnel, using one of the openings of the tunnel to escape whenever it feels its life to be threatened from the other opening of the tunnel. The underlying principle of this phenomenon is that in reality, the munafiq is a person who wants to play safe. He is double faced, and will not always mean or do what he says: “O you who believe! Why do you say what you do not do?”(al-Saff, 61:2). Whenever Allah (SWT) addresses believers with the words, “O you who believe!” it actually implies, “O you who profess to believe!” because the munafiqs always professed to believe and for all practical purpose, they were Muslims.

The munafiqs are not prepared to struggle in the path of Allah (SWT) at all. On the other hand, Muslims are ordained by their faith not to let any consideration become an impediment in their love of Allah, His Messenger, and the struggle in His cause, however, attractive or remunerative that consideration might be. “Say: ‘If your fathers, sons, brothers, wives, tribes, the wealth you have acquired, the trade which you fear will decline, and the dwellings you love are dearer to you than God and His Messenger and the struggle in His cause, then wait until God brings about His verdict.’ God does not guide the rebellious” (al-Taubah, 9:24).

It is not expected of us to withdraw ourselves completely from the love and attraction of the things mentioned in this ayah because that would be unnatural. We are only being cautioned that our allurement for these things should not be to the extent that it keeps us away from God, His Messenger, and from struggling in His path. Our biggest struggle (jihad) today is jihad al-nafs or struggle against our own base desires, and jihad bil Qur’an or struggling with the Qur’an by defending our deen, our Prophet, and our Book—the Qur’an, which is the last and final divine guidance for humanity. If we do all this, we will be blessed by God, and if we don’t do this, then we will have to face the consequences of our actions in both worlds.

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