Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on July 5, 2013

Ramadan

“O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be conscious of Allah” (al-Baqarah, 2:183). Just as fasting was the way (Sunnah) of all prophets and their followers, it is also the way of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and his followers. It is one of the important modes of worship, as explained through a hadith that says, “Islam is built on five: (1) The declaration of faith that there is no god but God and that Muhammad (SAW) is the Messenger of God; (2) ritual prayers (salah), (3) obligatory charity (zakah), (4) fasting in the month of Ramadan (siyam), and (5) pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj), once in a lifetime if one is physically and financially capable of doing so.” The objective of fasting, as mentioned in the Qur’an is to attain taqwa. To have taqwa means to be conscious and mindful of Allah (SWT).

The Arabic word sawm means to abstain from something. Thus, while we fast, we do not only abstain from food, drink, and spousal relations from dawn to dusk, but also refrain from committing any type of sin. The meaning of sawm also extends to not talking. We learn from the Qur’an that Maryam (AS) did not speak to anyone when she returned with ‘Isa (AS) to the town. “Eat, drink, and be comforted. Then if you see any human, say, ‘Indeed I have vowed a fast to the All-beneficent, so I will not speak to any human today’” (Maryam, 19:26). There is no imposition on us not to talk. When required to do so, we should engage ourselves only in useful and beneficial talk. The tongue is to be kept moist with the remembrance (zikr) of Allah (SWT).

Fasting has been ordained upon every sane, mature and adult Muslim who is able to fast. Minors, travelers, sick, elderly, and men who have to perform difficult jobs under harsh circumstances, and have no other means of livelihood may miss their fast. Also, women who are pregnant, or breast-feeding, or menstruating, or those who are having postnatal bleeding (lochia) do not have to observe the fast. There are those who can miss their fast and make up for the missed days at a later date, and others who can pay a ransom (fidya) for the missed days without the obligation to make up for the missed days. Fidya payments are meant to feed a poor person (miseen) for each of the fasting days missed.

Parents may encourage their young children to fast, even if it means fasting for small part of the time of the actual duration of fasting, which these days is 17 hours or so. This is in order to make them accustomed to this mode of worship, at an early age, just as parents are supposed to encourage them to pray from an age of seven, as known from prophetic traditions. Care must be taken to see that no hardship is imposed on young children while training them to fast, as they are not obligated to fast. We have to be compassionate toward them.

The Qur’an was revealed in the month of Ramadan. “It was in the month of Ramadan that the Qur’an was revealed as guidance for mankind.” (al-Baqarah, 2:185). Fasting was also prescribed to be observed during the month of Ramadan. Therefore, whoever of you is present in that month, should fast (al-Baqarah, 2:185).

What is the objective of fasting? The attainment of God consciousness (taqwa) is the main objective and wisdom of fasting. “O you who believe! Fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may be conscious of Allah” (al-Baqarah, 2:183).
Among the duties assigned to the Prophet (SAW) by Allah (SWT) was to teach people the Book (al-Kitab) and wisdom (hikmah). “It is He who has raised among the unlettered people a messenger from among themselves who recites His revelations to them, and purifies them, and teaches them the Book and wisdom, for they had formerly been clearly misguided” (al-Jumu’ah, 62:2). Al-Kitab in this ayah refers to the laws (al-ahkam), i.e., the do’s and the don’ts. Among the do’s is to fast during the month of Ramadan, and the wisdom behind prescribing fasting is the attainment of taqwa or God consciousness. Similarly the wisdom of prayers (salat) is the constant remembrance of Allah (SWT), as Allah says, “Establish salah to remember Me” (Ta Ha, 20:14). We fast because Allah commanded us to fast. As believers, “We listen and obey” (al-Baqarah, 2:285).

The month of Ramadan is very special and unique. One has to fast during the day and stand in prayers during the night. In submission to the divine commands, and to earn Allah’s pleasure, one has to abstain even from certain lawful (halal) things such as food, drink, and intimate spousal relationship during fasting hours. With light and empty stomach, one’s craving for passions is also reduced dramatically, which is not so with a full stomach. Hence fasting is conducive to increase one’s self-restraint. The month long rigorous training of Ramadan and the piety (taqwa) that one achieves in it should hopefully enable one to live with piety even after Ramadan.

Ramadan is also a month of spending (infaq); a month of sympathizing and empathizing with others. Charity in Ramadan is regarded better than giving charity outside Ramadan. The Prophet (SAW) called the blessed month of Ramadan ‘the month of kindness’ (shahr al-muwwasat), which implies being compassionate and kind towards fellow human beings, especially the less fortunate ones among us. It is good to pay the obligatory charity (zakah) during the month of Ramadan. This ensures that one Islamic year (haul) has passed over the savings on which zakah is payable. It also guarantees the reaping of greater rewards from Allah (SWT).

If the objective of fasting is to attain taqwa, as mentioned in Surat al-Baqarah, one of the traits of those who have taqwa (muttaqeen) is that they spend out of what Allah has provided them. “That is the Book, without any doubt. It contains guidance for those who have taqwa: those who have iman in the Unseen and establish salah and spend from what We have provided for them” (al-Baqarah, 2:2-3). There is a direct relationship between spending in the way of Allah and taqwa. The Qur’an makes it very clear that one cannot attain piety and righteousness (taqwa) without spending from what one loves “You will not attain true goodness until you give of what you love. Whatever you give away, Allah knows it” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:92). And usually, what one loves and holds on to dearly is wealth.

The Prophet (SAW) was known to be the most generous of people. However, we find him to be even more generous in the month of Ramadan than outside it. According to Ibn ‘Abbas, the Prophet (SAW) was more generous during Ramadan than the wind sent forth from heaven. The blessings and rewards one gets for one’s act of worship and good deeds are more in Ramadan than other times. Spending in the way of Allah is a meritorious act worthy of praise and multiplied rewards. This is illustrated in a beautiful parable in the Qur’an. “The parable of those who spend their wealth in the Way of Allah is that of a grain which produces seven ears; in every ear there are a hundred grains. Allah gives such multiplied increase to whomever He wills. Allah is All-Encompassing, All-Knowing” (al-Baqarah, 2:261). This 700 times increase is only by way of parable. Allah does not restrict His reward and depending upon a person’s sincerity (ikhlas) and intention (niyyah), the reward could be manifold over. Thus, the safest and the most profitable investment one can make is to spend in the way of Allah, especially during the month of Ramadan. We should support organizations that help less fortunate people on our behalf.

It is one thing to expect a reward for a charitable deed. It is another thing to do an act just to seek the pleasure of Allah. The Qur’an makes mention of such people who while feeding the poor people say, “We feed you for the sake of Allah alone, we seek neither recompense nor thanks from you” (al-Insan, 76:9). Those who spend for Allah’s sake are ensured peace and tranquility from Allah (SWT)—something that all of us need and desire. “Those who give away their wealth by night and day, secretly and openly, will have their reward with their Lord. They will feel no fear and will know no sorrow” (al-Baqarah, 2:274). As for the righteous believers (muttaqun), they give in times of ease and hardship; control their anger and forgive others. In return for this, they are promised forgiveness and paradise from their Lord (Rabb). “Race each other to forgiveness from your
Lord and a Garden as wide as the heavens and the earth, prepared for the people who have taqwa: those who give in times of both ease and hardship, those who control their rage and pardon other people — Allah loves the good-doers” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:133-134). The conduct and behavior of a muttaqi is such that if somebody fights with him or abuses him while he is in a state of fasting, he ignores them and says, “I am fasting.” By losing patience and getting enraged and not exercising self-restraint, one may lose the benefits of fasting (siyam).

We want Allah (SWT) to be forgiving and compassionate to us. Therefore, we have to be forgiving and compassionate to others, especially to those who have wronged us, and this is the highest state of taqwa. Such are the people who qualify for Allah’s love. “Allah loves those who do good” (al-Ma’idah, 5:93).

Ramadan is also the month of mercy (Rahmah). Giving glad tidings about this month, the Prophet (SAW) said that it is the month, whose beginning is mercy, its middle forgiveness, and its end emancipation from the fire of hell. The Prophet (SAW) also said, “Save yourself from Hell-fire even by giving half a date-fruit in charity.” Ramadan is a month of seeking closeness to Allah. We should often supplicate during this month, especially before breaking our fast. Allah listens and responds to our du’as. “When My servants ask you about Me, say that I am near. I respond to the call of one who calls, whenever he calls to Me: let them, then, respond to Me, and believe in Me, so that they may be rightly guided” (al-Baqarah, 2:186). One of the Prophet (SAW)’s favorite du’as was. “O Allah, I ask You for pardon and well-being in this life and the next.”

Ramadan is also the month of the Qur’an. “The month of Ramadan is the month when the Qur’an was sent down” (al-Baqarah, 2:185). Here on this earth, if we have anything of Allah, who is beyond time and space, and beyond our comprehension, we have His speech (Kalam) in the shape of the Qur’an. Therefore, reading the Qur’an, understanding it, and reflecting upon it is something that must be consciously undertaken during the month of Ramadan for our own purification and guidance. This way, we will find ourselves closer to Allah (SWT), and more peaceful within. If this positive change from within were to come on a collective basis, then our condition as an ummah will definitely change for the better, “Allah does not change the condition of a people unless they change what is in themselves” (al-Ra’d, 13:11).

Edited by Dr. Munawar Haque
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