

Part 15 Surah 17 Al-Isra' Verses 34-39

Do not come near the property of an orphan before he comes of age, except with the best of intentions. Be true to all your promises, for you will be called to account for all that you promise. (34) And give full measure whenever you measure, and weigh with accurate scales. That is fair, and best in the end. (35) Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Man's ears, eyes and heart shall all be called to account. (36) Do not walk on earth with an air of self-conceit; for you cannot rend the earth asunder, nor can you rival the mountains in height. (37) All this is evil; odious in your Lord's sight. (38) These [injunctions] are but a part of the wisdom with which your Lord has inspired you. Do not set up any deity alongside God, lest you should be cast into hell, blamed and rejected. (39)

34 Perfect Honesty

Having completed its instructions concerning the sanctity of people's honour and life, the surah tackles the question of orphans' property and the requirement of fulfilling one's promises and pledges towards them:

Do not come near the property of an orphan before he comes of age, except with the best of intentions. Be true to all your promises, for you will be called to account for all that you promise. (34)

Islam makes it clear that a Muslim's life, honour and property are to be protected and preserved. The Prophet says: "Everything that belongs to a Muslim is forbidden to be taken away by another: his blood, honour and property." [Related by alBukhari, Muslim, Malik and Abu Dawud and al-Tirmidhi] The surah, however, makes a special case concerning the property of an orphan, ensuring its full protection. It forbids the mere coming near it except for what is best for the orphan. That is because an orphan is too weak to manage his property or defend it against assault. Hence, the Muslim community is required to take proper care of the orphan and his property until he comes of age and is able to take care of his own affairs.

An important point to be noted in connection with all these instructions is that matters which an individual needs to implement in person, as an individual, are phrased in the singular form. By contrast, the instructions that are addressed to the Muslim community are given in the plural. Thus we see that orders to be kind to parents, to be charitable to relatives, the needy and stranded travellers, and to refrain from extravagance, maintain a middle way between being tight-fisted and spendthrift, to ascertain the truth in every situation and refrain from showing arrogance and conceit, are all given in the singular form. This is due to the fact that responsibility in these areas is shouldered by the individual. On the other hand, the plural form is used to express the instructions prohibiting the killing of children, adultery, and homicide, and those concerning the protection of an orphan's

Giving in to greed and stinginess in weight and measure betrays meanness and dishonesty which destroys trust within the community. It leads to poor trading, and a lack of blessings and trust in the community. This is bound to have repercussions on individuals who find themselves losers after they had thought to gain through selling people short. Whatever gain they may make is superficial and short-lived. Stagnation of trade, which is a by-product of such stinting, is certain to show its effects on individuals.

This is a fact, recognized by far-sighted business people. They maintain honesty as a business principle not because of any ethical, moral or religious motive, but because they see from practical experience that it delivers much better gain. Thus one person may be fair in business and give full weight and measure for practical and trade reasons while another does the same as part of implementing his religious convictions. The difference between the two is that the latter gets all the benefits received by the former in addition to maintaining a clear conscience and looking towards higher horizons. He benefits by a much broader vision of life. This clearly shows that Islam fulfils the objectives of practical life while building its wider concepts and happier environment.

36-39 Accountability for All Actions

A basic characteristic of the Islamic faith is that it is straightforward, clear and transparent. Nothing is permitted on the basis of suspicion, myth or unsubstantiated impression:

Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge. Man's ears, eyes and heart shall all be called to account. (36)

These few words establish a complete method for the human mind and heart, incorporating the scientific approach that humanity has begun to apply only recently. It adds, however, honesty and fear of God. This is an advantage Islam adds over cold rational approaches that are devoid of spirituality.

Making certain of every report, action or situation before passing a judgement concerning it is the essence of the Qur'anic approach. When hearts and minds faithfully follow this approach, there remains no room for superstition in matters of faith, or for suspicion in legal affairs. What is more is that there is no room for theoretical assumptions or superficial conclusions in science and research.

Scientific integrity which, in modern times, people unreservedly praise is no more than the conscientious integrity which the Qur'an establishes as a requirement to be accounted for. The Qur'an makes everyone responsible and accountable for

property, honouring promises and pledges, and giving fair weight and measure, because these concern the community as a whole.

Here we see that the order not to come near the property of an orphan, except with the best of intentions, is given in the plural in order to make the whole community responsible for the protection of orphans and their property. It is then a collective responsibility.

Looking after an orphan's property is an act of trust which constitutes a pledge by the whole community. Hence, it is followed with an order to honour all promises and pledges: "*Be true to all your promises, for you will be called to account for all that you promise.*" (34) God will certainly question people about their promises and will hold to account anyone who is in breach of any trust or pledge. Islam attaches great importance to the fulfilment of promises and pledges and to being true to one's trust because this is the essence of honesty and integrity, both personal and social. In fact, fulfilment of promises and honouring trust is mentioned in various ways and forms in the Qur'an and hadith, both with regard to pledges given to people or to God, by the individual, community or state, ruler or ruled. In practice, Islam has set an example for such fulfilment which humanity has never seen except under Islamic rule.

35 Just Weight and Measure

The code of conduct the surah outlines also speaks about fairness in commercial dealings:

And give full measure whenever you measure, and weigh with accurate scales. That is fair, and best in the end. (35)

The relevance of fulfilling promises and giving fair and full measure and weight is readily apparent, both in meaning and expression. This makes the progress from one to the other easy and smooth. To be fair in transactions and to give full weight and measure are actions which mark honest dealing and good faith. Thus internal dealings within the community are set on the right footing which promotes trust and honesty, and ensures blessings all round: "*That is fair, and best in the end.*" (35) It is good in this life as it maintains fairness, and better in the hereafter as it ensures good reward.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'Anyone who is able to secure unlawful gain yet abandons this for no reason other than fearing God will certainly receive from God what is better than such gain here in this life, before they receive their reward in the life to come.'

their hearing, seeing and feelings in front of God who has given them their ears, eyes and hearts. This is the integrity and honesty of senses, heart and mind. Man is accountable for all these and the organs themselves will be questioned about their actions on the Day of Judgement. When we consider the magnitude of this responsibility, we are overwhelmed because it applies to every word we say and every judgement we make.

"Do not pursue that of which you have no knowledge..." (36) Certain knowledge must be the only basis for judgement or conviction. Whatever is not certain must never constitute such a basis. In an authentic hadith, the Prophet is quoted as saying: "Refrain from assumption, for assumption is the basis of the worst lies." Another hadith related by Abu Dawud quotes the Prophet as saying: "It is indeed a bad practice for a man to always begin his statements with, 'it is claimed.'" In another hadith the Prophet said: "The worst falsehood is that a man makes his eyes see what they have not seen."

Thus we see how Qur'anic verses and ahadith combine to establish such a complete and integrated system which requires the mind to make certain of its grounds for any judgement it makes. But Islam does not stop at this. It also requires the heart to make sure of its basis for whatever thoughts or feelings it entertains. Thus people must ascertain every detail, circumstance and factor before making any judgement or arriving at any conclusion. This is a practical fulfilment of the Qur'anic statement made earlier in this surah: "*Surely this Qur'an shows the way to that which is most upright...*" (9)"

These orders and instructions that are closely linked to the faith based on God's oneness are concluded with an order prohibiting conceit and arrogance: "*Do not walk on earth with an air of self-conceit; for you cannot rend the earth asunder, nor can you rival the mountains in height.*" (37) When man is devoid of belief in God, the Creator who has power over all creation, he may feel himself too powerful or admirable on account of his wealth, power or beauty. If only he remembers that whatever blessing he enjoys is granted to him by God and that he is powerless in front of God, he will see how misplaced his conceit is and so refrain from such arrogance.

The Qur'an puts the conceited and arrogant face to face with their humbleness and powerlessness: "*You cannot rend the earth asunder, nor can you rival the mountains in height.*" (37) Physically man is small and insignificant, particularly when compared to giant creation. But he is strong when he relies on God's power, honourable with His honour, and noble with His spirit which God has breathed into him. God has given man all this so that he always remembers and remains conscious of Him.

Such humility which the Qur'ān calls upon people to adopt, decrying at the same time all types of conceit, is a mark of maintaining proper relations with God and one's fellow human beings, and a proper personal and social attitude. No one abandons such good manners except the petty and the conceited. Such people are disliked by God because they overlook His favours which they enjoy, and are hated by human beings for their arrogance. The Prophet is reported to have said: "Whoever maintains humility for God's sake, God will elevate him. Thus he looks humbly at himself but people look at him with respect. By contrast, God humiliates an arrogant person so as he rates himself highly while people look down upon him. Indeed he may be more disliked by people than a dog or a pig."¹

As we have seen, these instructions are mainly concerned with prohibiting evil action and improper behaviour. Their outline concludes with declaring God's disapproval of them: *"All this is evil; odious in your Lord's sight."* (38) This serves as a summary and reminder that commandments are issued by God alone. The reason for prohibition is God's dislike of such evil. No mention is made here of good matters which Islam orders to be practised or maintained. It is the prohibitions that are outlined in this code of conduct which the surah gives in detail.

This outline of the Islamic code of conduct is brought to an end by showing its details again linked to faith in God's oneness, which was also stated at the outset of this passage. This is coupled with a warning against associating partners with God. Furthermore, we are told that this code is only a part of the wisdom to which the Qur'ān guides people: *"These [injunctions] are but a part of the wisdom with which your Lord has inspired you. Do not set up any deity alongside God, lest you should be cast into hell, blamed and rejected."* (39)

Thus the ending is akin to the opening, with both emphasizing the basis on which Islam builds its structure for human life, namely, the concept of God's oneness. For it is to God that all worship should be addressed.

¹ This hadith is cited by Ibn Kathir in his commentary on the Qur'an.