

Purposes of Fasting

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 9 April 2021

وَاسْتَعِينُوا بِالصَّبْرِ وَالصَّلَاةِ وَإِنَّهَا لَكَبِيرَةٌ إِلَّا عَلَى الْخَاشِعِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾ الَّذِينَ يَظُنُّونَ أَنَّهُمْ مُلْقُوا رَبَّهُمْ
وَإِنَّهُمْ إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾

“And seek assistance through **patience** and prayer, and this is hard except for the humble ones, who know that they will meet their Lord and that to Him they will return.” —ch. 2, v. 45–46

Fasting is a means of developing good qualities. *Patience* is a quality which is developed and strengthened through fasting. Patience means to persevere in a difficult condition voluntarily, even though you could adopt unlawful, unethical and immoral means of getting out of it, but you restrict yourself to lawful and moral means only. Patience of fasting is that we **must wait** till a certain time to satisfy our most essential physical needs and desires. The Quran, according to some, refers to fasting as “patience” in the passage I have read above.

Thankfulness is another quality developed through fasting. It is only **deprivation** that can make us realize and value the blessings which we usually take for granted. Thankfulness for what we have got, for what someone has given us, is a quality which is not only commended and stressed by Islam, and other religions, but all human beings recognize its importance. Allah even says about Himself that He is *shākir* or one who thanks others for doing good (2:158 and 4:147).

Charity and generosity: The thankfulness mentioned above should not be merely confined to our feelings or our words. It must be manifested practically. The deprivation of fasting should make us sympathise with the suffering of others, and desirous of alleviating it. It is recorded at the beginning of Sahih Bukhari:

“The Messenger of Allah was the most generous of all people, and he was most generous in Ramadan, when Gabriel met him, and he met him in every night of

Ramadan and read with him (i.e., with the Prophet) the Quran; so the Messenger of Allah was more generous in the doing of good than the wind which is sent forth (on everybody).” (hadith 6)

This hadith shows that the quality of generosity was found in its utmost perfection in the Holy Prophet, and his generosity extended to all, without distinction, just like the air. He never turned away anyone who asked him for something. We note incidentally that here the reading of the Quran by the Holy Prophet with Gabriel during every night of the Ramadan means the repeating of the whole of the Quran that had been revealed up to that time. In other versions the words are that the Prophet repeated the Quran in the presence of Gabriel. This hadith also shows that the Holy Prophet did not have any written manuscript of the Quran, to which he could compare what he had learnt by heart. This checking was done by him with the angel Gabriel. Other people possessed written manuscripts, and there was never any difference of even a single word between them and the one learnt by the Holy Prophet by heart which was regularly compared by him while reciting with the angel Gabriel.

It is because being charitable is one of the objects of fasting that those who are unable to fast during Ramadan, and unable to make up for missed fasts after Ramadan, are required by the Quran to feed needy people in place of fasting. The Quran says:

وَعَلَى الَّذِينَ يُطِيقُونَهُ فِدْيَةٌ طَعَامُ مِسْكِينٍ ...

“...And those who find it extremely hard may effect redemption by feeding a poor one.” — ch. 2, v. 184

Another object of fasting stressed in the Quran is to learn to refrain from usurping other’s rights and belongings. In fasting we voluntarily give up even what is rightfully ours; how can then we think of taking what is not ours but belongs to someone else? The last verse in the section on fasting in the Quran says:

وَلَا تَأْكُلُوا أَمْوَالَكُمْ بَيْنَكُمْ بِالْبَاطِلِ وَتُدْلُوا بِهَا إِلَى الْحُكَّامِ لِتَأْكُلُوا فَرِيقًا مِنْ أَمْوَالِ النَّاسِ
بِالْإِثْمِ وَأَنْتُمْ تَعْلَمُونَ ﴿١٦٠﴾

“And do not swallow up your property among yourselves by false means, nor seek to gain access thereby to the judges, so that you may swallow up a part of the property of (other) people wrongfully while you know.” — ch. 2, v. 188

Swallowing up “your property” may mean the property placed in your charge, meant to be used for the benefit of others, such as government or community funds. The words “among yourselves” indicate people colluding with each other to usurp community or national property which is not rightfully theirs but it can still be called “your property” because it belongs to their community. This verse also prohibits people from bribing the authorities in order to take what actually belongs to others.

We note with deep regret that in Muslim countries this particular command is violated so blatantly and widely that the outside world, especially the Western world, has come to think that bribery and corruption are a part of Muslim culture, and that Islam has nothing to say about these malpractices. The above verse makes the teachings of Islam on this point very clear. Honesty and probity are also human values and whoever adheres to them will benefit and will be held in high regard, whether they are Muslims or non-Muslims.

In fasting we give up, for a while, the use of things which are ours and which we are fully entitled to use. This abstaining teaches us that sometimes in this life, **for a higher purpose**, it is better to give up something **that we are entitled to**, instead of insisting on having it. It can help to establish peace between people and nations if everyone is not always insisting on, and demanding to, get their own rights.

Often in life, in order to get only what we are entitled to, we have to claim **more than what we are entitled to**, and this involves use of falsehood. Fasting teaches us only to demand what is rightfully ours, even if it means having to settle for a little less.

The first verse commanding Muslims to fast is the following:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

“O you who believe, fasting is prescribed for you as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may guard against evil.” —The Quran, ch. 2, v. 183

The first purpose of fasting is to enable us to develop and strengthen our powers of self-control. This means that we become more able to resist wrongful desires and bad habits, and therefore “guard against evil”. In fasting, by refraining from the natural human urges to satisfy one’s appetite, we are exercising our ability of self-restraint. The more you exercise any ability or skill, the more developed it becomes. Then the power of self-restraint developed through fasting **must be applied in normal daily life** to bring about self-improvement. Seeking food, drink and sex are the basic, most deeply-ingrained instincts of an animal, including human beings. Therefore, in fasting we are tested with having to show control in face of **the strongest possible inner urges**. Fasting is a reminder that real and true human life is something higher than satisfying physical desires. That true life is attained by connecting the human soul with God and by having sympathy for those who are in need and practically helping them.

It is important to remember that fasting in Islam does not just consist of refraining from eating and drinking, but in fact from every kind of selfish desire and wrongdoing. The fast is not merely of the body, but essentially that of the spirit. The physical fast is really only a symbol and outward expression of the real, inner fast. A person who is fasting is actually saying: “I am refraining from all wrong actions that I *desire* to do, by refraining from my deepest physical *desires*.”

In this connection, the Holy Prophet Muhammad has said:

مَنْ لَمْ يَدَعْ قَوْلَ الزُّوْرِ وَالْعَمَلَ بِهِ فَلَيْسَ بِاللَّهِ حَاجَةً فِي أَنْ يَدَعَ طَعَامَهُ وَشَرَابَهُ

“He who does not give up uttering falsehood (*qaul az-zūr*) and acting according to it, God has no need of his giving up his food and drink.” (Bukhari, hadith number 1903)

In another version of this hadith, there is a small addition: “He who does not give up uttering falsehood and acting according to it, *and ignorance*” (Bukhari, hadith 6057). The word for ignorance here is *jahl*. So all talk and behaviour based in ignorance must be avoided as well. Bukhari has given this version the heading: “The word of Allah: And shun false words (*qaul az-zūr*)”. He does this to point out a connection between this hadith and what the Quran says: “And shun false words (*qaul az-zūr*)” (22:30).

May Allah enable us to strive hard to acquire the qualities that are the purpose of fasting and to keep our fasts in their true sense and spirit, and make the coming month of Ramadan a means of us attaining nearness to Him, increasing our knowledge and improving ourselves, ameen.

بَارِكْ اللَّهُ لَنَا وَكُمُ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعْنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالْآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-
