

Fast 14: Religious principles taught to Israelites — (8) Spirit of prayer, fasting, charity

- The next two verses, after those discussed in the last Study, are as follows:

<p>“⁴⁵And seek assistance through patience and prayer, and this is hard except for the humble ones, ⁴⁶who know that they will meet their Lord and that to Him they will return.” — ch. 2, v. 45–46</p>	<p>وَاسْتَعِينُوا بِالصَّبْرِ وَالصَّلَاةِ وَإِنَّهَا لَكَبِيرَةٌ إِلَّا عَلَى الْخَاشِعِينَ ﴿٤٥﴾ الَّذِينَ يَظُنُّونَ أَنَّهُمْ مُلْقُوا رَبَّهُمْ وَأَنَّهُمْ إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ ﴿٤٦﴾</p>
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Very shortly after the command “keep up prayer” in v. 43, these two verses tell us about the spirit of prayer. It was the spirit of prayer which the Israelites had lost. Thus Jesus said to his disciples in his Sermon on the Mount:

- “And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by others.” (Matthew, 6:5)
- Patience is mentioned here first. It will help and assist you. Whatever we try to achieve, whether worldly progress or spiritual advancement, we have to be patient in our efforts. Patience (*sabr*) means to persevere in a difficult situation, adopting the right methods to achieve relief from difficulties. To use some wrong or unlawful means is to give way to impatience.
- Prayer will only help if you resort to it along with showing patience. If you are prepared to adopt any means whatsoever to achieve the result that you want, when you want it, and in the way you want it, praying for it becomes simply meaningless. Employing patience shows that you recognize the spirit of prayer, that it is not merely a matter of uttering a few words or formulas to receive what you desire.
- Some say that by patience here is in fact meant fasting, since patience is the essence of fasting. This interpretation is supported by the fact that in his Sermon on the Mount Jesus has also condemned hypocrisy in fasting after he condemned hypocrisy in prayer (as quoted above). We have already quoted him in Study 1 that he said:
 - “Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad appearance (i.e., looking in distress).” (Matthew, 6:16)
- It is further interesting to note that Jesus, in the continuation of his Sermon on the Mount in chapter 6 of the Gospel of Matthew, begins as follows:
 - “Be careful not to practise your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.” (6:1)

This corresponds to the verse of the Quran quoted in the last Study:

- “Do you tell people to be good and neglect your own souls while you read the Book? Have you then no sense?” (2:44)

“Telling people” to do good is not only telling them by words, but also by your apparent actions. This is what Jesus calls here as “practising your righteousness in front of others”. But if this is done, as Jesus says, “to be seen by them”, then it is the same as what the Quran calls “neglecting your own souls”, because you are showing to others something which is not in your heart and is not reaching your own soul.

- In the next verse, Jesus mentions hypocrisy in giving charity: “So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honoured by others” (Matthew, 6:2). After this, he goes on to denounce hypocrisy in prayer (6:5) and then in fasting (6:16). In the verses from the Quran that we have been dealing with in this and the last Study (2:43, 45–46), the same three acts of worship are mentioned, if we take “patience” as meaning “fasting”.
- Then the Quran says that the performance of these duties feels to people as if it is hard upon them:
 - “and this is hard except for the humble ones, who know that they will meet their Lord and that to Him they will return” (2:45–46).

Jesus, after telling people that their giving in charity, their praying or their fasting, should not be merely to show others, each time adds the following words:

- “your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.”

This statement of Jesus is very similar to the Quran saying that the humble ones are those who *know* that they will *meet their Lord* and will *return to Him*.

- What the Quran teaches in 2:45–46 is that, to carry out these duties in their true sense and spirit, a person has first of all to be humble, to believe that he stands in need of God’s help, and is nothing without it. He cannot be like one who thinks that he has prayed and fasted, so God owes him something. He cannot be like one who feels proud over other people because he has done these duties. He has to bear in mind that while people can see him, it is not his purpose to impress them. He “knows” that he will “meet” God. That is not only in the Hereafter because if he bears in mind that God can see him then he is meeting God in this life. If he recalls that he will “return” to God, he will realize that trying to fool himself or fool others by his religious observance is ultimately of no avail as God is the sole, final judge.
- The reason for reminding Muslims of what the Israelites forgot, about how to act on religion, is that Muslims were also going to forget in the same way as the Israelites.