

Justice and its Principles in the Quran (4)

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 18 December 2020

وَمَنْ يَكْسِبْ إِثْمًا فَإِنَّمَا يَكْسِبُهُ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ ۗ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلِيمًا حَكِيمًا ﴿١١١﴾ وَمَنْ يَكْسِبْ خَطِيئَةً أَوْ إِثْمًا
ثُمَّ يَرْمِ بِهِ بَرِيئًا فَقَدِ احْتَمَلَ بُهْتَانًا وَإِثْمًا مُّبِينًا ﴿١١٢﴾

“And whoever commits a sin, commits it only against himself. And Allah is ever Knowing, Wise. And whoever commits a fault or a sin, then accuses of it one innocent, he indeed takes upon himself the burden of a slander and a manifest sin.” (The Quran, 4:111–112)

The above two verses are also among those which occur in connection with the incident I discussed in last week’s *khutba*, in which a Muslim stole something and when he was suspected of the theft he hid the stolen thing in a Jew’s house, who was entirely innocent. When the Muslim was accused of the crime, he claimed that the Jew had committed the theft. The Holy Prophet was guided by Allah with the truth and he convicted the Muslim, even though this alienated the whole of that Muslim’s tribe from Islam. These verses lay down the principle that it is the committer of the sin who bears the guilt upon himself. If he accuses an innocent person of what he had himself done, he commits the further great sin of slandering an innocent person. This may sound obvious but it needs to be reinforced as a principle because in every country we find cases of innocent people being found guilty of crimes through deliberate false accusation by someone else who has some motive for getting that person convicted.

Another principle taught in the Quran is that a person who has some evidence to give must not conceal it. It says:

وَلَا تَكْتُمُوا الشَّهَادَةَ ۗ وَمَنْ يَكْتُمْهَا فَإِنَّهُ آثِمٌ قَلْبُهُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ عَلِيمٌ ﴿٢٨٣﴾

“And do not conceal testimony. And whoever conceals it, his heart is surely sinful. And Allah is Knower of what you do.” (2:283)

In another place the Quran requires that at the time of making a will a Muslim should take “two just persons” as witnesses. It adds that if you have any doubt about the reliability of the witnesses, you can require them to swear in the name of Allah as follows: “We will not take for it a price even for a relative, nor will we hide the testimony of Allah, for then certainly we shall be sinners” (5:106). They swear that they will not give false evidence in return for a bribe, nor for the benefit of a close relative, and they will not hide what is called here “the testimony of Allah”. To give true testimony is here called giving the testimony of Allah. This is because it is the testimony which is known to Allah, and the testimony which Allah would give if He could appear as a witness.

The Quran also gives examples of the principles of justice in the histories of some of the earlier prophets. This is most prominent in the story of Joseph (Yusuf) in chapter 12 of the Quran. As a young boy he was abandoned by his jealous brothers in the wilderness. There he was picked up, taken to the neighbouring country of Egypt and sold as a slave to a high officer. After he grew up, one day the officer’s wife attempted to seduce him. He rejected her advances and ran to the door of the room. She pursued him and tore his shirt from behind. Just then her husband arrived at the door and she told him that Joseph had tried to force himself on her sexually. Joseph presented his side of the case and said: “She sought to seduce me”. Now, what would be the reaction of a husband and other relatives of the woman in any society, old or modern, Muslim or non-Muslim? They would probably attack the man, especially considering that he is their slave or servant, as against the lady of the house. But the Quran tells us that a member of her own family said: “If his shirt is torn in front, she speaks the truth and he is a liar. And if his shirt is torn from behind, she tells a lie and he is truthful” (12:26–27). As the shirt was torn from behind, Joseph’s innocence was established. The principle of justice we learn here is that we must decide by the evidence even if the evidence goes against our own relations, our own section of society and our emotions. Remember that these people belonged to a civilization of unbelievers as we would call them. They were not followers of the religion which was

preached by Joseph later on. Yet they seemed to have such high regard for justice which Muslims ought to show.

Although Joseph was exonerated at this time, the wife of the officer, who had accused him, conspired against him with the help of some other wayward women and he was sent to prison under another false accusation. While he was in prison, he preached the oneness of God to his fellow-prisoners and also interpreted their dreams. It so happened that the King of Egypt had a puzzling dream which no one could interpret. Someone who was in prison with Joseph was now working for the King. He offered to go and see Joseph and put the dream to him. Joseph gave him its interpretation. The King was very pleased to hear it and he ordered Joseph to be brought out of prison into his presence. But Joseph refused to leave prison unless the King investigated the charge against him. The King investigated it and the women who had accused Joseph admitted: “We knew of no evil on his part” (12:51).

This shows us another key principle of justice: that accusations must be investigated, and either dismissed or proved. Just because Joseph performed a service for the King didn't mean that he should be freed from prison. It doesn't absolve Joseph of the false charge against him, for which he was sent to prison. No doubt Joseph could have jumped at the offer of getting out of prison and going straight to the royal palace to be honoured by the King. But he most of all wanted to be cleared by a proper investigation.

The King then appointed Joseph to a high official position, as the keeper of the national treasury. The Quran says about this: “And thus did We give to Joseph power in the land — he had mastery in it wherever he liked.” (12:56) Such was his position. When a famine and crop failure came over Egypt and neighbouring countries, Joseph's brothers, not knowing even that he was alive, came to buy their ration of corn from the government of Egypt. One of his brothers was called Benjamin and the other ten brothers were jealous of him just as they had been of Joseph. So Joseph wanted to retain him in Egypt and not return with them. But under the law of Egypt Joseph could not retain this foreigner. As the Quran says: “He could not take his

brother under the king’s law, unless Allah pleased” (12:76). Joseph, as mentioned in the Quran in 12:56, had great power in Egypt. But he did not abuse his power to keep his brother with him. He could have easily done so, but he abided by the law of the land. The words “unless Allah pleased” mean that Allah brought about circumstances which enabled Benjamin to stay in Egypt and not return with his brothers. It is not in the scope of this *khutba* to go into the details, but the important point is that Joseph applied the restrictions of justice to himself by remaining within the law.

Another example of justice is provided in a story relating to the prophet David. Two men brought a dispute to him. The complainant said that the other person was his “brother”, but he meant not literally brother but someone in the same line of business. He said about him: “He has ninety-nine ewes (female sheep) and I have a single ewe. Then he said, Make it over to me, and he has prevailed against me in dispute” (38:23). David gave the following judgment: “Surely he has wronged you in demanding your ewe (to add) to his own ewes. And surely many partners wrong one another except those who believe and do good, and very few are they!” (38:24). So David gave the judgment in favour of the man who had very little and against the man who had nearly everything. It shows that David was not overawed by the man who possessed vastly more than the other. The man with just one sheep had the same right to continue his business with independence as the man with the ninety-nine sheep. This is another great principle of justice: to uphold the rights of the weak when the strong want to take their rights away.

Allah Himself sets before mankind the example of doing justice by doing justice Himself. Allah says in the Quran to those who would receive His punishment:

ذٰلِكَ بِمَا قَدَّمْتُمْ اَيْدِيكُمْ وَاَنَّ اللّٰهَ لَيْسَ بِظَلّٰمٍ لِّلْعٰبِدِ

“This is for what your own hands have sent ahead, and because Allah is not in the least unjust to the servants.” (3:182; 8:51; see also 22:10 for a similar statement). It says here that Allah is not *ẓallām*, a word which means extremely unjust. He is not

“extremely unjust” doesn’t mean that He is moderately or mildly unjust! It is as Maulana Muhammad Ali has interpreted it “not in the least unjust”. Muhammad Asad translates it as: “never does God do *the least* wrong to His creatures”. Many others have it as “*never* unjust”.

The word for “servants” here is *‘abīd*. Being a servant of Allah is of two kinds: (1) by choice, whereby a person chooses to serve and obey God, and (2) without choice, because every created thing is a servant of God without choosing or knowing, but just because it is His creation and subject to His general laws of life and death. The word *‘abīd* indicates servants in this second sense, and includes all human beings, not only those who consciously strive to serve and worship God.

The Quran elsewhere says clearly: “Surely Allah does not wrong (anyone even by) the weight of an atom; and if it is a good deed, He multiplies it and gives from Himself a great reward” (4:40). The word for “does not wrong” here is *yazlimu*, or doing *zulm* or injustice. According to this verse, the minimum which Allah does to anyone, good or bad, is justice. But for good deeds He goes beyond justice and gives a multiple reward, over and above the requirement of justice.

بَارَكَ اللهُ لَنَا وَكُنَّا فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعَنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-