

The guidance of the Quran on how to speak to people

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 26 March 2021

وَإِذْ أَخَذْنَا مِيثَاقَ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ لَا تَعْبُدُونَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ ۗ وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا وَذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسْكِينِ وَقُولُوا لِلنَّاسِ حُسْنًا وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتُوا الزَّكَاةَ ۗ ثُمَّ تَوَلَّيْتُمْ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِّنْكُمْ وَأَنتُمْ مُّعْرِضُونَ ﴿٨٣﴾

“And when We made a covenant with the Children of Israel: You shall serve none but Allah. And do good to (your) parents, and to the near of kin and to orphans and the needy, **and speak good (words) to (all) people**, and keep up prayer and give the due charity. Then you turned back except a few of you, and you are averse (i.e., dislike it).” (The Quran, 2:83)

This verse lists the very basic teachings of religion as given to the Israelites by God through their prophets, in particular through Moses, their great law-giver. The same teachings are meant for Muslims as well. The particular point I want to note here is this instruction to “speak good words to all people”. *Husnā* or good here indicates words of wisdom and knowledge from which the hearers benefit. These are words which are sincerely meant, politely uttered, and are without any animosity, deception or some hidden motive.

The Quran also mentions our speaking to certain people whom we deal with in our daily lives. Regarding parents it says: “speak to them a generous word” (17:23), which is called *qaul-an karīm-an*. When distributing inheritance to relatives and other needy persons, it says: “speak to them kind words” (4:8), which is called *qaul-an ma'rūf-an*. Regarding those to whom we give something as charity, the Quran says: “A kind word with forgiveness is better than charity followed by injury” (2:263), which again is *qaul-un ma'rūf-un*. In the verse before this, it says that when we give something material in charity to someone it should not be followed by “reproach or injury”. We must not, then, make them feel that we are superior and have done them a good turn or

that they are inferior and that their plight is their own fault. Just “a kind word” would be better than such charity. In a similar way the Quran refers to a situation in which you are unable to give to a needy person because you don’t have anything yourself at that time but you are hoping to receive something in the future, out of which you can give. It says: “And if you (have to) turn away from them (in order) to seek mercy from your Lord that you hope for, then speak to them a gentle word” (17:28). The “gentle word” here is called *qaul-an maisūr-an*. It can also mean a word which brings ease and comfort to them.

When God appointed Moses (*Mūsā*) and Aaron (*Hārūn*) as prophets and commanded them to go to the Pharaoh to preach to him — and he was a most powerful, terrifying, brutal, oppressive and arrogant ruler — God said to them: “speak to him a gentle word, perhaps he may be mindful or fear” (20:44). The “gentle word” here is called *qaul-an layyin-an*. You may recall that in the last *Khutba* I mentioned in connection with the words about the Holy Prophet Muhammad, “you are gentle to them” in 3:159, that the word *linta*, “you are gentle” is similar to the English word “lenient”. Here again, *layyin* is similar to the English word “lenient”. God held out the hope to Moses and his brother that, even though Pharaoh was brutally oppressing the Israelites and had degraded them to the level of the worst slavery, but if they spoke to him gently he might take notice and fear God. Maulana Muhammad Ali comments on this as follows: “This is the method of preaching Islam which Muslims must follow today. When this hope was held out for a degenerate man like Pharaoh, why shouldn’t the same hope be held out today, that by preaching the truth and Islam using gentle words, those who rule over Muslims might be convinced to accept Islam?” Muhammad Asad writes under this verse that this is a permanent principle of preaching: “it is evident that God’s command to Moses to speak to one particular sinner ‘in a mild manner, so that he might [have a chance to] bethink himself’, retains its validity for all times and all such attempts at conversion”.

The Quran also says: “O you who believe, keep your duty to Allah and speak straight words. He will put your deeds into a right state for you, and forgive you your sins” (33:70). The “straight words” here are called *qaul-an sadīd-an*. It is wrong to

think that speaking “straight words” means that you can be insulting and rude to people and bluntly tell them the truth. Speaking “straight words” is to make your meaning clear and unambiguous, and not subject to different interpretations. For example, if someone wants you to do something for them, and you are not in a position to do it or you consider it wrong to do it, and you make up some excuse about why you can’t do it that time, it doesn’t convey to the other person the real reason why you are declining to do it. It leaves it open for them to ask the same again on a future occasion when your excuse doesn’t apply. You were not speaking straight words. Another example is that we may need to warn a person of a danger if he persists in a wrong course that he is following, such as a doctor needing to warn a patient. “Straight words” need to be spoken to make the person fully aware of the seriousness of his actions. But this does not mean humiliating or belittling that person as an individual. He can be warned in a general sense and told that people who do what he is doing will cause harm to themselves.

A different example is where a person deliberately makes a statement in a way that the hearers will misinterpret it, but he can always claim that he told the truth. Someone says “I went to Oxford” to create the impression that he studied at Oxford University. But in fact he only on one occasion visited the city of Oxford. He can claim that he made a true statement, while the intent was to deceive. This is the opposite of what the Quran calls “speaking straight words”. As the Quran goes on to say in this verse, if you speak straight words then your deeds will also be right because if you haven’t spoken straight words then you will find yourself having to commit further misdeeds in order to make your words appear true. The verse also says that God will forgive you your sins. Let us say you have spoken straight words in admitting a weakness in you, or a mistake you made, or a wrong you did. Then you are on the path of being forgiven by people and by God, due to those straight words of yours. Another situation could be that you have sincerely spoken straight words, but by your human error they mislead others. Then that fault on your part is forgiven.

There was a prophet or a wise man by the name of Luqman who is mentioned in the Quran in a chapter named after him. He preached to his son good morals and good

behaviour, including the following: “And do not turn your face away from people in contempt, nor **go about** in the land exultingly. Surely Allah does not love any self-conceited boaster” (31:18). And this continues in the next verse: “And pursue the right course in your **going about** and lower your voice. Surely the most hateful of voices is braying of donkeys” (31:19). The “going about” is mentioned twice. Some translate it as “walking” and take verse 19 here as saying: Be modest or moderate in your bearing, in how you hold yourself, or in your walking among the people. Luqman taught his son that he should not walk among people or go about in public as if (to use an expression) he owns the place, and he should not turn his face away from people as if he is too high and mighty to talk to them on the same level. He should be modest in how he walks and moves and holds his body, and he should lower his voice, meaning that he should not shout at people as if he is ordering them like the rich and powerful order their servants. About the word “bray” (“braying of donkeys”), a dictionary says: “A mule or donkey’s bray is loud and jarring when compared to the gentle neigh of a pony.” Jarring means an unpleasant sound which alarms and startles you. That is not how a person should communicate with others. Of course, the teaching of Luqman to his son given in the Quran is not just as a story but is binding on Muslims on act upon.

A similar teaching is given directly to Muslims as follows: “And the servants of the Beneficent are they who walk on the earth in humility, and when the ignorant address them, they say, Peace!” (25:63). By “peace” is meant a good word. It is stated in the classical commentary of the Quran *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* about this verse: “If the ignorant people insult them with bad words, they do not respond in kind, but they forgive and overlook, and say nothing but good words. This is what the Messenger of Allah did: the more harsh someone was, the more patient he would be.”

The Quran does, however, say: “Allah does not love the public utterance of hurtful speech, except by one who has been wronged” (4:148). This exception applies to several different kinds of situations. The “hurtful speech” here is any kind of bad talk about someone. God does not like a person to openly talk badly about someone, including making accusations about him in public, except by a person who has been

the victim of an injustice by someone. The victim may speak badly about that person, if the victim can do so truthfully and without exaggeration.

Some Jews used to address the Holy Prophet Muhammad by distorting the greeting *as-salāmu 'alaikum* (“peace be upon you”) and saying *as-sāmu 'alaikum*, which means “death be upon you”. His wife Aishah once replied to them: “And upon you be death and curse”. The Holy Prophet told her: “Be calm, Aishah, Allah loves that one should be kind and lenient in all matters.” She said: “Messenger of Allah, Did you not hear what they said?” He said: “Yes, but I replied to them: ‘And on you.’ ” So without repeating their actual words back to them, the Holy Prophet, who was the victim of an unjust curse, simply said: “And on you”. In the event that he misheard the person, who had actually said *as-salāmu 'alaikum*, no harm would be done because the Holy Prophet had said: Whatever you wish for me, I wish you the same.

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