THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS IN ISLAM

‘Id al-Adha Sermon, 1961

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A partial view of the 'Id congregation at Woking. At the appeal of the Imam, they all raised their hands to show their willingness to contact at least two persons during the coming year with a view to making them interested in Islam.
DEAR BROTHER/SISTER IN ISLAM,

ASSALAMU 'ALAIKUM.

If you were present at the ‘Id al-Adha Festival at Woking this year I am sure you must have also raised your hand at my appeal for contacting at least two persons during the coming year with a view to making them interested in Islam (please refer to the last part of the ‘Id sermon). I extend this appeal now to all the Muslims wherever they may be. If you think it is a good thing tell yourself:

"I am also going to help this cause."

Now say it once again: ........................................

..........................................................

If you have done so, you have also joined with those who raised their hands at the ‘Id congregation.

May God help you in your noble undertaking. Amen.

Yours fraternally in Islam,

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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF
OF RIGHTEOUSNESS IN ISLAM

Slavery should be completely stamped out of Muslim countries.

Hindus, Buddhists, Christians and Muslims should have equal opportunities for practising and preaching their faiths.

AT LEAST TWO PERSONS SHOULD BE MADE INTERESTED IN ISLAM IN THE COMING TWELVE MONTHS.
ليس اليَزِّان تُولُوا وَجَهَّاكُمُ بِقِبْلَ الشَّرْقِ
وَالْمَغْرِبِ وَلَكِنَّ الْيَرَمُونَ أَصْنَ يَأْسَرُ اللَّهُ وَالْيَوْمَ الآخِرُ وَتَلِيدُ
وَالْكُتُبِّ وَالْقُوْمِينَ وَأَنَّ الْمَالَ عَلَيْهِمْ ذَوَّ الْقُرُبِ وَالْمَيْتَ
وَالسَّلِيِّينَ وَابْنِ السَّبِيعِ وَالْسَّائِلِينَ وَفِي الْبَقَابِ
وَأَقَامَ الصَّلَاةَ وَأَتَى الزَّكَوْةَ وَالْمَوْقُونِ يُعَهْدُ هُمْ لَأَعْهَدُ وَاَلْبَيْعُ
وَالْبَيْعُ الْيَتِيمَ وَالْيَتِيمَ الَّذِينَ صَدَقَوْا وَأَلَّمُهَا هُمْ مُنْقُونُ

"It is not righteousness* that you turn your faces towards the East and the West, but righteous is the one who believes in God, and the Last Day, and the angels, and the Book and the prophets, and gives away wealth out of love for Him to the near of kin and the orphan and the needy and the wayfarer and those who ask and to set captives free and keeps up prayer and pays the poor rate; and the performers of their promise when they make a promise, and the patient in distress and affliction and the time of conflict. These are they who are truthful; and these are they who keep their duty."²

* Birr (righteousness) means extensive goodness or goodness of a high order (Al-Mufradát by al-Rághib).
The verse I have recited is a beautiful description as to the true significance of the faith of Islam.

A companion asked the Prophet Muhammad (may his memory ever remain green!) what is Faith? In reply the Prophet recited this verse. But the enquirer was not satisfied with it. To him it appeared rather a strange kind of definition of Faith. He asked once more what Faith was. The Prophet recited this verse again. But the companion asked the same question for the third time. Then the Prophet said:

"Listen, love of righteousness and enmity towards evil, that is what Faith is."³

Love of righteousness and enmity towards evil, this is the sum and substance of the message of Islam. But the question may be asked, what is righteousness and what is evil?

During the time of 'Umar, the second Successor of the Prophet Muhammad, a certain man was giving evidence before him. 'Umar told him to bring someone who knew him. So the man brought another person, who praised him highly.

'Umar said to the second man: "Are you this man's nearest neighbour, to know his comings and goings?"

"No."

"Have you, then, been his companion on a journey, whereon he gave evidence of nobility of character?"

"No."

"Have you perhaps had dealings with him in money matters, wherein he showed himself a man of self-control?"

"No."

"Then I suspect," said the Caliph, "that you have only seen him in the mosque reciting the Qur'án, and now and then lowering and raising his head in prayer."

"That is so," the man replied.

"Away, you do not really know him."

And turning to the first man, 'Umar said, "Go, and bring hither someone who really knows you."⁴

This little incident shows what, in fact, is the concept of righteousness in Islam. Outward form of prayer, worship and sacrifice cannot be called righteousness unless we are
fair in our dealings with those among whom we live, unless in practical life charity is shown towards our fellow-men.

This verse lays down a few more conditions as to the significance of true faith.

The Qur'án says that true righteousness or goodness of a high order does not lie in the outward form. Some form is, of course, needed to give expression to our righteous deeds. We face towards Mecca while praying, but this act in itself is not an act of righteousness. Even our ritual prayer cannot make us righteous, unless it is accompanied by certain deeds of kindness. The mainspring of such deeds should be the thought of God, that is why faith in God is the first condition of true piety. With belief in God is mentioned our belief in the Last Day, the angels, the Divine revelation and all the prophets of God. But the Qur'án does not stop here. Mere outward profession and expression in certain spiritual and theological doctrines cannot lead us anywhere.

"You cannot attain to righteousness unless you spend out of what you love." ⁶

Man is mostly absorbed in collecting the goods of this world, and in amassing wealth for himself and his family. Therefore the first test laid down by the Qur'án for righteousness is to spend one’s wealth in the way of God for the near of kins, the orphans, the needy, etc. But this spending should be done out of love of God and with no other motive.

"And they give food, out of love for Him, to the poor and the orphan and the captive. We feed you for God’s pleasure only — We desire from you neither reward nor thanks." ⁷

Again, the spending of one’s wealth should not be confined to the near of kin but it should also include the wayfarer, i.e., Ibn al-Sabil (Son of the Road). A traveller, or a person far away on a journey from home or one stranded on the way, all are Sons of the Road.

The ransoming of the captives or the slaves has also been mentioned as a righteous deed.

Slave trade is un-Islamic

Islam is, in fact, the only religion which has made the emancipation of slaves a matter of great virtue, thus laying
down the foundation for the entire abolition of slavery. But strangely enough, it is the only religion which is being accused of upholding this institution. The Greeks, the Romans, the ancient Germans all accepted and practised slavery. Just 200 years ago Liverpool, London, Bristol and Lancaster were the principal towns from where this trade was carried on. Out of 40 European factories busy in this trade, 14 were British. The slave trade in Muslim countries is not the result of Islamic teaching but a sequence of the practices of European nations for carrying out the slave trade on the African coast. Abyssinia, the most ancient Christian land, shares the responsibility with some of the Muslim countries in failing to take effective steps to stop this abominable trade in human beings. However, the time has come when the rulers of the Muslim States should completely erase this dark page from the history of the Muslim people.

The Qur’án, of course, talks of war prisoners but does not style them as ‘abds (slaves):

“A Muslim’s bondsman is not a slave, but a fallen foe, otherwise his equal, and he should either be ransomed or set free out of favour.”

There is no third course left open in this matter.

The United States fought and won the battle against slavery, but the struggle still goes on in another form. Sometimes it is Little Rock and sometimes it is Alabama. Man has yet to learn that the Blacks and the Whites are brothers to one another.

Zakat signifies purifying one's self as well

The other part of the verse recited by me in the beginning deals with prayer and Zakat. The definition of Faith and righteousness has not yet been completed. Believers in God should also keep up their prayers and pay the Zakat. The word Zakat has generally been translated as alms-giving or poor rate, but this has another significance. Purification of the self also falls under this category. At one place the Qur'án says:

"Woe to the polytheists who pay not the Zakat (or purify themselves of the disease of shirk and kufr, i.e., polytheism and disbelief)."
Finally we are reminded of the fulfilment of our promises and pledges and the display of patience in distress, poverty, hardship, misfortune, calamity, periods of panic and war. If we can show such fortitude and courage with a pure heart and faith in God, we have rightly understood the message of Islam. It is not mere formalism, or mere belief, it is something with which one has to live all the days of one's life. The approach is individual, but it is also connected with social organization. The believers must realize these truths in their private lives, as well as public, before the words of the Qur'an can be truly applied to them:

"These are they who are truthful; and these are they who fear their Lord (or keep their duty)."¹³

Muslims should surpass Christians in welfare work

What I have said just now would make it clear that Islam not only needs our verbal acceptance but some social revolution in our ranks which could better the lot of our suffering people. Reports in the Pakistan papers that Christian missions are active in spreading the message of the Gospel among Muslims have alarmed the Pakistani Ulama, who are demanding State interference in the activities of the Christian missions.¹⁴ Such a demand is absurd and betrays the lack of inner confidences of these Ulama. If our Ulama want to combat the Christian missions effectively let them surpass them in social and welfare work. Let them help establish better schools, better colleges, better hospitals and better missionary organizations. All the law-abiding citizens of Pakistan, whether Hindus, Buddhists, Christians or Muslims, should have equal opportunity for practising and preaching their faiths.

If we do not follow Islam ourselves, if we neglect the duties enjoined upon us by the Qur'an, if we lack self-sacrificing workers to run our institutions, in short, if we only profess our faith by the words of our mouth and do not show it in practical deeds, any legislation and State interference is not going to help us much. The challenge must be met in the field of social and missionary work. To clamour for State interference is easy, but to help Islam through sacrifices and deeds of charity is an uphill task. But the future of Islam in Pakistan and elsewhere depends only on following the latter course.

Every Muslim should contribute his share

Every one of us has to contribute his or her share in the present situation with which Islam is faced today. Every
one of us should ask himself, What can I do to further the cause of Islam in the world? The Qur‘án says:

“You are the best nation raised up for men: you enjoin good and forbid evil and you believe in God.”

The basis of ummah (nation) is neither race nor colour, but the love of righteousness and enmity towards evil, as the Prophet expressed it. In the language of the Qur‘án it is enjoining good and forbidding evil. This serves a two-fold purpose. It helps others, but primarily it helps us. The minimum Islam requires from us is to acquaint ourselves with the teachings of Islam and acquaint others with this message.

Last time I requested you, and I repeat this request again.

Let every one of you contact at least two persons during the coming year and make them interested in Islam. Tell them something about the Prophet and his message, give them something to read, and pray for them so that they may see the light of truth. If you have succeeded in removing one small misunderstanding about Islam from the minds of people among whom you live you have helped the cause of truth. If you have failed you have failed in a noble cause. But in the sight of God you have not failed, you have your reward with Him.

Let those who promise to do so raise their hands.

(At this the whole congregation raised their hands.)

Thank you. If you need literature or my help in any other way I am at your service.

Let us all say together:


“God is Supreme, God is Supreme. There is no god (whatsoever) except God. And God is Supreme, God is Supreme and all praise is due to Him.

I wish you all a glorious ‘Id.

REFERENCES

1 The ‘Id al-Adha (Festival of Sacrifices) sermon delivered at the Shah Jehan Mosque, Woking, Surrey, England, on 25th May 1961.
2 The Qur’an, 2:177. An interesting comparison could be made with references from other Scriptures and a proper emphasis on this point could bring better understanding among the followers of different religions. Burnt offerings and rivers of oil cannot please the Lord according to Micah, a contemporary of Isaiah: “He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?” (Old Testament, Micah, 6:8).

“You have faith enough to believe that there is one God. Excellent! The devils have faith like that, and it makes them tremble. But can you not see, you quibbler, that faith divorced from deeds is barren” (New Testament, James, 2:19-20).

“In its inspection of men below, Heaven’s first consideration is of their righteousness” (Shu Ching IV, Book VI, ii, 53, The Chinese Classics iii, Part 1, 1865, p. 216).


6 Ibid., 3:91.

7 Ibid., 76:8-9.

8 Encyclopaedia Britannica. The following references about slave trade from Anthony H. Richmond’s The Coloured Problem (Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1961) are also interesting to note:

“It was not until the middle of the seventeenth century that the trade became one of the most important branches of overseas commerce on which the prosperity of Liverpool was founded; Bristol and London also had a considerable share of the trade. Between 1680 and the abolition of the trade in 1807, somewhere between two and three million slaves were imported into all the British colonies in America and the West Indies” (p. 218) (references quoted from G. R. Meller, British Imperial Trusteeship 1783-1850, p. 434, Faber, 1951).

“In 1772 Rev. Thomas Thompson published a paper entitled The Trade in Negro Slaves on the African Coast in Accordance with Humane Principles and the Laws of Revealed Religion; in 1796 a paper read to the Manchester Philosophical Society was entitled An Account of the Regular Gradations in Man in which the author argued that the Negro was ‘nearer to brute creation than any other human species’. In 1852 A Bible Defence of Slavery by Rev. Josiah Priest was published” (The Coloured Problem, p. 353).


10 The Qur’an, 47:4.

11 Reference is made to the racial riots between the Whites and the Negroes in the United States of America.

12 The Qur’an, 41:7.

13 Ibid., 2:177.

14 Dawn, Karachi, Pakistan, 22nd, 23rd and 24th February 1961.


16 See Ref. No. 3.