

Permissible Backbiting

Be informed that mentioning one's wrongdoing is a sound objective according to the *Sharʿa* in order to achieve one's objective for the removal of such wrongdoing. Thus, the sin of backbiting is voided, but this is limited to ten situations:

First: One seeks redress. If someone mentions the name of a judge as being unjust, treacherous and accepting bribes, he is one who backbites while being a transgressor. As far as a judge is concerned, one can complain about him to someone who he hopes can remove his injustice. He will be attributing injustice to such a judge who is the only person who can grant him what rightfully belongs to him.

The Messenger of Allāh (ص) has said, "One with a [usurped] right has the right to complain about it" (*Ihyāʾ Ulūm ad-Dīn*, Vol. 3, p. 144).

He (ص) has also said, "A rich person commits injustice if he looks down at others" (*Al-ʿAwālī*, Vol. 4, p. 45).

Second: One seeks help to correct a wrongdoing. One has the right to seek help to correct a wrongdoing and bring an aggressor back to the path of righteousness. In the achievement of this sound objective, the matter is alright but is prohibitive otherwise.

Third: One seeks someone's opinion, such as you may say this to someone: "My father—or brother—has been unfair to me; so, what is the way out of it?" In this regard, it is safest if one refrains from identifying the oppressor. For example, one may say, "What would you say about a man whose father or brother has oppressed him?"

It has been narrated that Hind said to the Prophet (ص), "Abū Sufyān is a miser man; he does not give me money to meet my needs and those of my children. Should I take some of his money without his knowledge?" He said, "Take only what suffices you and your children fairly" (*Ihyāʾ Ulūm ad-Dīn*, Vol. 3, p. 144). She complained about not having enough to spend on herself and her children, so the Messenger of Allāh (ص) did not rebuke her since her objective was to seek his opinion.

Fourth: One warns another Muslim against falling in danger, in evil, and how one seeking counsel is to be advised. If you see someone pretending to be a *faqīh* (jurist), pretending to be someone whom he is not, you have to attract people's attention to his shortcoming and inability to rightfully qualify himself. You must alert them about the danger that may fall upon them if they obey him. Also, if you see a man making too frequent visits to the house of a debauchee who is covering up for him, and if you are concerned about this man falling down on account of such companionship in a way which violates the *Sharʿa*, you have the right to attract his attention to this person being a sinner no matter what motive you have, whether it may be concern about the dissemination of an innovation in the creed or the spread of corruption.

This may be prompted by conceit and Satan's foolhardiness, for your motive may be envy of that man because of the status which he enjoys. Satan will then confuse you when you pretend to have compassion for people. Also, if you see a man buying a slave, and if you know that this slave has defects, you can mention these defects to the buyer, for if you remain silent, you will be harming the buyer. Your stating these faults harms the slave, but the interest of the buyer ought first to be taken into consideration.

And you have to mention only the defect which is relevant to the matter and not mention anything relevant to anything else that may undermine the partnership, the contract, or one's trip. Rather, you must mention in each situation what is relevant to it and not go beyond it aiming at advising rather than harming. If a man shies away from getting married when you advise him that marriage will not be good for him, you will be doing what you ought to be doing. But if one is not dissuaded except when explicitly told about something, let it be so.

The Prophet (ﷺ) has said, "Do you hesitate to name a corrupt person before people find it out? Say that against which people ought to guard themselves" (*Iḥyāʾ Ulūm ad-Dīn*, Vol. 3, p. 144).

He (ﷺ) has also said to Fātima daughter of Qays when she consulted him about men seeking her for marriage, "As regarding Muʿwiyah, he is a penniless pauper. Regarding Abū Jahm, he never lets the [whipping] baton descend from his shoulder" (*Al-ʿAwālī*, Vol. 1, p. 155).

Fifth: Slandering and making amends for both an eyewitness and a narrator: Scholars have written about narrators of traditions, dividing them into "trustworthy" and "doubted", often mentioning the reasons behind their being doubted. A sincere advice is shared in this situation, as we have stated above, when it is meant to protect the Muslims' wealth, control over what they say and protect them all from telling lies.

And it is conditional upon one having neither animosity nor fanaticism nor stating anything that violates his testimony and narrative, and he does not stand hostile to others such as being a man of taunting or casting doubts except, perhaps, when he openly commits transgression as we will state later.

Sixth: The object of the statement must deserve it because he is a pretender on its account such as a

sinner who openly shows his sin, so much so that he does not hesitate to talk about the sin which he commits. He must be referred to with regard to what he admits and nothing more.

The Messenger of Allāh (ﷺ) has said, "One who puts down the covering of modesty from his face, to backbite him is not a sin at all" (*Al-`Awqā'i*, Vol. 1, p. 105). From this, it is quite obvious that to backbite him is permissible even if the sin is not mentioned. Regarding the permission to absolutely backbite the debauchee, the possibility stems from this statement of the Prophet (ﷺ): "A debauchee is not backbitten" (*Al-`Awqā'i*, Vol. 1, p. 438, tradition No. 153).

It is stated that the tradition must be understood as applicable to a particular debauchee or to [backbite him in order to] force him to stop his committing sins. Such is better except when the matter is attached to a religious objective and a sound goal which goes back to the backbiter who hopes the individual will on its account stop committing his sin. It will then enter the category of preventing a wrongdoing.

Seventh: One must be widely known by a name whereby his defect is identified, such as "the lame" or "the blear-eyed", etc. There is no sin if one identifies him by it. Scholars have done so due to the need for identification and because it has become so common, the individual himself no longer hates it, having come to know that he has become famous on its account.

In fact, what the reliable scholars have indicated can be relied upon with regard to their narrative.

As regarding identifying those who are still living, it is conditional on the acceptance of the individual to whom it is attributed as a general criterion for prohibition. In that case, it is not categorized as backbiting. How can it be since when one can be identified by some other way, it would have been better?

Eighth: If the number of individuals, according to whom a penalty is to be exacted for a sin, are eyewitnesses to the committing of that sin, it can be mentioned to the rulers as a testimony even in the presence of the doer or in his absence. It must not be mentioned in any other situation except if it meets other criteria.

Ninth: It has been said that if two persons witness a transgression committed, and one of them stated it in the absence of that transgressor, it is permissible because mentioning it has no impact on the listener although he ought to protect himself and his tongue from mentioning it for any other purpose especially with the possibility of forgetting the statement or out of concern it will be disseminated because of them.

Tenth: If someone listened to someone else backbiting another without knowing the rights of the person being backbitten or whether what is being said does not actually exist, the speaker cannot be prevented from articulating it due to the possibility it could be true, and the speaker may be accepted as factual unless he is known to be otherwise.

Deterring him from such talk requires the violation of his own sanctity, being one of the individuals involved. It is better to draw attention to such a situation unless general evidences surface that have no

room for rebuttal. It is evident that the general will is to be cautious about ignorant folks being tempted in its regard. If this is done to those whom you know, the general evidences would not have surfaced, and they would not have been taken into consideration with regard to the listener due to the speaker perhaps knowing how to make his statement plausible, and it undermines the principle of prohibiting backbiting.

This individual is held as exceptional with regard to hearing backbiting, and it has already been stated that he is one of those who take part in backbiting.

Generally speaking, a virtuous soul takes precaution against backbiting although sometimes it is preferred that one tells what he knows so others may take their own precaution against a particular individual or action.

The testimony for its absolute prohibition, as has already been stated, is this statement of the Prophet (ص): "Do you know what backbiting is?" They said, "Allāh and His Messenger know best." He (ص) said, "It is saying something about your brother which he does not like" (*Tanbīh al-Khawātir*, Vol. 1, p. 118).

As regarding its permissibility, such as the response to innovations and the shaming of the debauchees from among them, getting people to stay away from them and taking precautions against following them, this is described as obligatory: It is possible and is preferable, and it is relied upon to achieve all these objectives. So, a vigilant person must not overlook the objective and the reform it contains, and surely Allāh is the One Who grants success.

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