

Prying Into the Secrets of People

(Verse 12)

...وَلَا تَجَسَّسُوا...

“...and do not spy on one another...”

In the previous pages, it was mentioned that verse number 12 of Surah al-Hujurat discusses three different negative ethical traits in the following order:

- (1) Pessimism or not having trust in others;
- (2) Prying into the secrets of other people;
- (3) Speaking bad behind someone else’s back.

The reason why the Qur’an has mentioned these three despised traits in this order is that the first trait (distrusting others) leads to one developing the second negative quality – prying into their private lives. Once a person has bad thoughts of another person, he would naturally begin to spy and scrutinize that person in regards to his actions.

Obviously, when one starts to spy and pry into others’ personal lives, he would not be able to prevent himself from speaking to others about what he has seen – in fact, he would openly and frankly discuss with others what he knows and thus, he would have no choice but to speak bad and back-bite them. It is because of this reason that the Qur’an mentions these three negative traits in the order that it has, so that the natural relationship between them is made clear.

In the previous discussions, more or less, the damage that being pessimistic in relation to others was discussed and at this point, we will discuss inquisitiveness or as the Qur’an calls it, spying on others. Being inquisitive about the affairs of other people is a negative trait that brings about both ethical and societal harm which can be summarized in the following points:

1. It was mentioned in our previous discussion that Islam has provided four types of security for the community of believers:

- a. Security of one's life.
- b. Security of one's property.
- c. Security of one's honour and dignity.
- d. Security of one's character and personality within the thoughts and minds of other people.

In addition, in one of his most comprehensive lectures on these four types of security, we see that the Noble Prophet of Islam (blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny) had discussed these in detail.¹

Societal Dangers Brought About by Prying into Others' Lives

1. Ruining the Reputation of Others

One of the major dangers that is brought about by prying into the lives of others is that the third security (that of one's honour and dignity) is put into danger and an irreversible damage is done to one's dignity and status within the society. This is especially true when after a person has spied on another person's actions, and then he goes forth and spreads the secrets and private actions of that person to others.

A very small number of people that pry into the lives of others and come to know the inner state of other people are able to keep the secrets that they find hidden from others. It is these types of people who will never be protected from backbiting and speaking bad about others.

In summary, through spying into the private affairs of another person and then spreading this information to others, the respect and honour of a true believer – which is demonstrated through the security of his life and property within the teachings of Islam – is trampled upon and destroyed.

The essential pre-requisite of religious brotherhood is that a true believer does not spread those things which would result in the loss of a Muslim brothers' character and honour amongst the people.

In relation to people who spy on the actions of others, our great leader, Imam Ja'far ibn Muhammad as-Sadiq (peace be upon him) has said:

أَبْعَدُ مَا يَكُونُ الْعَبْدُ مِنَ اللَّهِ أَنْ يَكُونَ الرَّجُلُ يُوَاخِي الرَّجُلَ وَ هُوَ يَحْفَظُ زَلَاتَهُ لِيَعِيرَهُ بِهَا يَوْمًا

“The furthest state that a person can be from the (spiritual presence of) Allah is when one befriends another person and he remembers whatever shortcomings and weaknesses that person has so that he can dishonour him one day.”²

Just as can be seen from this hadith, the greatness of this sin is such that a person who does this act

would find himself being at the furthest (spiritual) distance away from Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He).

2. Withdrawing and Retreating from Society

Prying into and being inquisitive about the affairs of people is also a form of having bad thoughts about them and in reality, this act is the outcome of being pessimistic about people. When a person spends his time in spying and prying into the affairs of other people, he will also become aware of many of the weaknesses and defects of that person and because of this, he will try to seclude himself from other people as well. Thus in reality, there are very few people that he would actually be able to interact with in his life.

It is highly possible that those defects which he sees in other people do not really play any role in his interaction and contact that he has with them but it will unfortunately take him away from the societal life that he leads amongst the people and thus, he will be dragged towards a life of separation and seclusion from society.

Therefore for such a person who is inquisitive about other people and who also inherently entertains bad thoughts about others, it would not be possible for him, while in this (mental) state, to analyse and investigate (each individual person). Therefore, he would not be able to accept the faults, inner weaknesses and problems that other people have and this would cause him to not have any relations at all with others.

In any case, it is very difficult to find people who are perfect and are completely without any defects. Obviously, through one's own inquisitiveness, each and every person would be able to find the hidden defects and covered faults of other people and because of this, such a person will – within himself – feel a need to observe some sort of seclusion and distance from others.

Thus, in addition to having bad thoughts about other people and prying into the affairs of others, this group of people will also become reclusive and seclude themselves and will not be able play a constructive role within society.

3. Loss of Freedom

One of the greatest blessings for a person is to have freedom in his or her actions and by Islam introducing the concept of *element of general overseeing*, it has appointed the responsibility of the control (of society) and the freedom of humanity in the general overview to the laws of intelligence and the religious regulations.

Thus, the freedom that one has within a society is within the framework of the firm, determined laws of Islam and as a result, the members of a society are free (to do what they want) so long as their own happiness (in the next life) and the freedom of other people is not encroached upon and as long as they

do not go towards any of the prohibited acts and refrain from performing the obligatory acts.

Islam has limited the internal (intellectual) freedoms of a person by giving him a hidden police force (within himself), and by establishing the governance of true faith, and has placed limits and guides (on his thoughts).

However from the point of view of the intelligence and the religious regulations, there are a series of actions which can be performed with no problem and it is these acts that the religion has referred to as permissible (Mubah) and discouraged (Makruh). However, a person would never perform these sorts of things in the presence of other people, nor would he be pleased if others are made known of him performing such acts.

If other people were to have complete knowledge of the specific events in a person's life, then the pleasure of life that comes about through the freedom of doing as one wishes in his privacy would be taken away. In the view of the Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny), those people who are inquisitive about the affairs of other people and their personal life are not true Muslims and thus, the Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon him and his family) has said to them:

يَا مَعْشَرَ! مَنْ أَسْلَمَ بِلِسَانِهِ وَ لَمْ يَخْلُصِ الْإِيمَانَ إِلَى قَلْبِهِ لَا تَذْمُوا الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا عَوْرَاتِهِمْ

“O’ people! One who gives lip service to Islam but does not have true faith in his heart, do not disparage the (other) Muslims and do not pursue people’s short comings and private matters.”³

Although the religion of Islam has tried to put a stop on spying and prying into the lives of others and has classified these things as being very dangerous and of no benefit, however at the same time in limited circumstances in which the preservation and maintenance of the society is clearly at stake and rests on making known the particular aspects of the lives of people and their hidden deeds and acts, the religion has given the permission that in certain areas of a person's life, it is permissible to conduct investigations.

For example, if there is a young boy and girl who wish to get married to one another, or if two adults wish to enter into a business partnership with one another, or other such scenarios and it is imperative that the other side know the particulars of the life and actions of the other person, then as far as those things which are related to how the person would make his or her final decision are concerned, one is able to gather more information about the other party.

A person can attain knowledge and information in regards to the spiritual qualities and specific issues of the other person's life only to that limit where a decision or work with them is dependent upon such knowledge. If this research is not done, then later on in the future, he may develop a sense of remorse in his work or dealings with the person or he may even come face to face with other forms of corruption due to his choices.

In addition, the people who one asks for advice in these types of scenarios must speak the truth and they must keep in mind the saying:

المُسْتَشَارُ مُؤْتَمِنٌ

“The one whom a person seeks advice from must be a person who is reliable.”

By this we mean that the person who we are taking advice from in relation to the goodness of a specific act, must himself possess the internal spiritual qualities and must offer the advice in this way.

[1.](#) al-Muhajjat al-Baydha, Volume 5, Pages 162 and 268.

[2.](#) Al-Kafi, Volume 2, Page 355.

[3.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, Volume 75, Page 214 (as related from Shaikh Saduq, Thawab al-A`mal, Page 216).

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