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Honour And Dignity In Islam, Part 1

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Message Of Thaqalayn, Vol. 18, no. 1, Spring 2017

This series is based on a series of 12 lectures given by the author in the month of Ramadan 2015 at the Islamic Centre of England.

Abstract

An analysis of Islamic traditions displays principles, ethics, and rules that aim to preserve the dignity of humankind. Among the list of ethical principles, dignity is one of the most—if not, the most—important concept in Islam. Using references from the Qur'an and hadith, this series offers the instructions God gave us to appreciate, safeguard, and add to the dignity we were initially given, and then how to extend this dignity to others. Moreover, the life during the time of Imam Mahdi (aj) will be studied, the life in which dignity and honour will be guaranteed for all humankind.

Outline Of This Discussion

Allah is the source and origin of dignity. Absolute dignity belongs to Him, and any other dignity that exists comes from Him. He is absolute dignity from whom every other form of dignity originates. In His act of creation, He has given us all dignity. The fact that we are created by Allah dignifies us, and this holds true for all creatures of God. When a celebrated artist paints a picture, the fact that the painting is produced by that specific artist gives significance to it. However, it is important to note that if that painter has hundreds of paintings, some might be considered as more outstanding. Nevertheless, even the least regarded one is given attention and respect. And all the artist's paintings would be on display in an exhibition, although some works would be regarded as masterpieces.

Hence, everything created by Allah has dignity, down to the smallest insect and plant. But then, among the creatures of Allah, some have more dignity, and this includes human beings.

We are all dignified from birth. Allah has given us some level of honour as our capital:

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ

"Certainly We have honoured the Children of Adam" (17:70).

Our responsibility is to utilise our capital and add to it. If we do not add to it, and lose it instead, then this is a serious loss. We are to appreciate, safeguard, and add to it. We must also pass it in our own social circles. A dignified person treats others with dignity, and never humiliates them. Those who humiliate others lack dignity in themselves. People of dignity never use abusive words. A true believer never descends into dishonour.

Allah Is The Source Of Dignity And Honour

The dignity of Allah is the source for any other kind of dignity. He is the absolute source of dignity just as He is the source of light:

وَمَنْ لَمْ يَجْعَلِ اللَّهُ لَهُ نُورًا فَمَا لَهُ مِنْ نُورٍ

And one whom Allah has not granted any light has no light. (24:40)

In the Qur'an, there are several terms and notions that refer to the dignity of Allah; perhaps the most obvious one is *'izzah*, which appears – along with the derivatives from its root – 119 times, mostly relating to Allah Himself.

When it comes to the terms *al-'aziz* or *'aziz* (with and without alif and lam) then there are 99 instances of this, 92 as *al-'aziz* and 7 mentions of *'aziz*. The very large majority of them are used for Allah, and very rarely these terms are used for others, for example the *'aziz* of Egypt who purchased Prophet Yusuf, or in a somewhat humorous sense for those who will be thrown into hell. Therefore, while there are a few exceptions, most of them refer to Allah.

Verses of the Qur'an

I begin with relating some verses on *al-'izzah*, and the various attributes relating to Allah:

مَنْ كَانَ يُرِيدُ الْعِزَّةَ فَلِلَّهِ الْعِزَّةُ جَمِيعًا ۖ إِلَيْهِ يَصْعَدُ الْكَلِمُ الطَّيِّبُ وَالْعَمَلُ الصَّالِحُ يَرْفَعُهُ

Whoever seeks honour [should know that] honour entirely belongs to Allah. To Him ascends the good word, and the righteous deed elevates it. (35: 10)

That dignity belongs entirely to Allah does not mean no one else can possess it; rather, it means that all 'izzah belongs to Allah as the source and then He gives to others. It is a gift from Him. Creatures do not really own it, but they receive it from Allah. Then the verse goes on saying: ***"To Him ascends the good word, and the righteous deed elevates it."* (35: 10)**

Allah says if you want dignity, you must be aware that it belongs to Him. And the means of ascending to that source is by rising up. You cannot aspire to connect to Him and have 'izzah by being stagnant. You must move and ascend. This is done by having *al-kalim altayyib* which refers to proper beliefs ('*aqidah*), and a proper understanding of your position, where you come from, what your Creator expects of you, and what your future holds.

Afterwards, the verse mentions a very subtle point: when it comes to beliefs, Allah says that our '*aqidah* ascends. But when He then mentions righteous conduct (*al-'amal al-salih*) He says that good deeds help lift the '*aqidah* higher. '*Aqidah* rises up and then *al-'amal al-salih* acts like a lift, taking it to a high position.

This is because we are our '*aqidah*. Our beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes – which are more important than our actions – are what shapes the way we understand God and the world. What is in our minds and hearts is crucial, and then our actions help us to move forward.

In a sense, every person is identical to his or her '*aqidah*, and the actions are helpers enabling one to move upwards. Like a person who lives in a building with 100 floors; to access the top floor he will go into the lift, press the button, and go up. What is rising is the person; it is the lift that helps him rise. His beliefs are the key to that rise, and righteous conduct help the beliefs rise further. We must therefore invest in our '*aqidah*, and then our *imaan* will produce righteous conduct.

Do Not Join The Dishonourable

الَّذِينَ يَتَّخِذُونَ الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ۚ أَيْبَتُغُونَ عَنْهُمْ الْعِزَّةَ فَإِنَّ الْعِزَّةَ لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا

Those who take the faithless for allies instead of the faithful Do they seek honour with them? [If so] indeed all honour belongs to Allah. (4: 139)

In this verse, Allah refers to people who associate themselves with those who are against the faith and the truth. In the Qur'an, the term *kafir* in most cases refers to those whom deliberately deny and reject the truth.

Allamah Tabatabai, in his *al-Mizan*, says there are different types of *kufr*, one of which is *kufr al-juhud*, the most commonly-mentioned type in the Qur'an; such as the rejection of truth by people such as Abu Sufyan, Abu Jahl, and Abu Lahab.¹ Therefore, *kafir* does not simply mean 'non-Muslim'. Those strong

verses against the "kuffar" must be understood properly.

Allah says that some people try to associate themselves with those who deny and reject the truth. This does not mean simple friendship; rather, wilayah means to associate and belong to their camp, to join them and to work with them for the same aims and objectives. Allah asks: 'Do they seek honour and dignity?' It is a mistake for people to join gangs and suspicious groups because they are concerned with the low numbers in their own groups and feel a lack of a sense of belonging.

The kuffar who reject the truth deliberately may have many assets such as power and wealth, but they do not have dignity. Do not think that you will get dignity by joining them. Truly, dignity in totality belongs to Allah, and He is the ultimate source of it. Of course, He will give this to others as a gift, but no one owns dignity as He does.

Remain Steadfast With Honour

وَلَا يَحْزُنْكَ قَوْلُهُمْ ۚ إِنَّ الْعِزَّةَ لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا ۚ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ

Do not grieve at their remarks; indeed all might belongs to Allah; He is the All-hearing, the All knowing. (10:65)

Sometimes people break our hearts, especially when they do not appreciate a great mission we seek to attain. Some show fervent interest and passion, and some ridicule instead. Allah tells us not to allow their words and mockery to affect us. They cannot reduce our honour, nor add to it. We must do our work, and if they do not appreciate it, or even abuse us, we must not worry, for all honour is with Allah.

The way the prophets were treated is very disturbing. They were ridiculed, tortured, exiled, and killed. But they maintained honour and sought it from its source. And today it is they who have honour.

Today no one respects the likes of Fir'awn and Namrud. Those who were ridiculed, tortured, and killed have honour today: Musa has honour, Ibrahim has honour, Nuh has honour. In the long-term, honour is only for those who perform good deeds, even if people of their time do not appreciate them and do not understand them and what they say. In the long-term, it is only truth that will prevail; only good intentions, actions, and beliefs will determine who has dignity.

The Hypocrites

يَقُولُونَ لَئِنْ رَجَعْنَا إِلَى الْمَدِينَةِ لَيُخْرِجَنَّ الْأَعَزُّ مِنْهَا الْأَذَلَّ ۚ وَلِلَّهِ الْعِزَّةُ وَلِرَسُولِهِ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَلَكِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

They say: "When we return to the city; the mighty will surely expel the abased from it." Yet all might belongs to Allah and His Apostle, and the faithfuls, but the hypocrites do not know. (63:8)

This verse refers to the opinion of the hypocrites who were under the leadership of Abdullah ibn Ubayy. They would say to one another that there is no reason to fear the Prophet, as they regarded themselves as honourable, and their plan was to expel from the city of Medina those that they deemed to be devoid of dignity. They felt that Prophet Muhammad and the Muslims did not have honour.

This verse makes it clear that the opposite is true. Honour and dignity belong to Allah, then to the Prophet, and then to the believers. Allah is the Source, and whoever is closer to the Source has more of it. Hence, Prophet Muhammad, being the closest to Allah, has a very high level of honour, and then the believers. Non-believers also have honour, as they too are created by God, but the closer a person is to the source, the more they will have.

However, people like Abdullah ibn Ubayy did not understand this. Not only did they not have honour, they also suffered from ignorance (jahl). They wrongfully thought that they possessed honour and that the Holy Prophet lacked it.

The Meaning Of 'Aziz

Now we should delve further into the meaning of *'izzah* and as well as the characteristics of Allah considering His *'izzah*. We will also discuss how Allah has granted dignity to everything He created, especially human beings, and how we can preserve and even add to this dignity that we have received from Him. Furthermore, we will look at how we can interact with each other based on dignity and honour.

Regarding the definition of *'izzah* and its derivatives, we find a number of statements by renowned scholars in major sources of the Arabic language. For example, Lisan al-'Arab, which is one of the most important and respected sources for linguistic matters and is frequently consulted and cited by scholars of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) and exegesis (*tafsir*), quotes from Zajjaj: "Aziz is the one who refuses to be overcome." According to this, *'aziz* is strong and admits no external pressure or influence.

Some have said that *'aziz* is the strong one, the one who can defeat everything, and nothing can defeat it and that the root al-'izz means power, strength, and the ability to overcome. For example, in his Mufradat, another reliable source of Arabic language, Raghīb al-Isfahani says that when *'izzah* is used for a person, it refers to a "condition that prevents a person from being defeated."

Hence, it is a kind of internal strength. It comes from a term Arabs of the earlier times used for a specific type of soil. When they would describe a soil as *'azaz*, they meant a soil that is solid and strong, into which nothing can penetrate. Then Raghīb says, "*al-'Aziz* can defeat but can never be defeated."

Fakhr al-Din ibn Muhammad Turayhi, in Majma' al-Bahrayn, says that *'aziz* is one of the names of Allah, and that it has no similar, i.e. nothing resembles it. He dominates and overcomes other things, but

nothing can overcome or defeat Him.

When we reflect on these authoritative opinions, we find a common denominator in all these statements: 'aziz is one that has internal, essential, and intrinsic strength, and this strength is not from any external source. At times, when a particular thing is weak, it requires something else to give it strength. For example, when a sapling is planted, it is often propped up and supported by sticks for it to be held upright and grow. This is a strength given to the sapling from an external source. But when a tree is well-rooted and grown, then even the strongest winds will not be able to move it. That tree is therefore 'aziz and strong. The sapling however was not 'aziz, as it required something external to give it strength.

Allah Is 'Aziz

Allah is 'aziz because He is self-subsistent. He has all the power, all the strength, all the might, and all the greatness. Everything else receives the strength and power from Him. He is the source; all else is given strength depending on how much He has given them.

When we compare them with one another, we see that some of them are stronger than others, but at the end of the day everything has some kind of strength to allow them to exist.

Hence, everything receives some kind of 'izzah from Allah, and those who are closer to Him receive more:

يَقُولُونَ لَئِنْ رَجَعْنَا إِلَى الْمَدِينَةِ لَيُخْرِجَنَّ الْأَعَزُّ مِنْهَا الْأَذَلَّ ۚ وَلِلَّهِ الْعِزَّةُ وَلِرَسُولِهِ وَلِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَلَكِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

They say: "When we return to the city; the mighty will surely expel the abased from it." Yet all might belongs to Allah and His Apostle, and the faithfuls, but the hypocrites do not know. (63:8)

This kind of strength is seen when a person perseveres and does not succumb to defeat. The Prophet started his mission while almost completely alone. Imam Ali believed in him, then Lady Khadijah, and then several other supporters. The people in the group of the Prophet were few in number for thirteen years and were faced with immense trouble created by the Quraysh and their allies, who could not make the Prophet change, compromise, or withdraw.

They attempted through various means such as luring with money, power, and material riches, as well as with threats, but they failed to change the Prophet's attitude as he remained strong. They sent a message with Abu Talib, who delivered it out of trust and not because he agreed with their ideas; the message was a promise to offer the Prophet an array of worldly riches if he agreed to abandon his message. He replied that even if they were to put the Sun in his right hand and the Moon in his left, he

would not abandon his message.²

Where does such inner strength come from? Such strength cannot be imitated. It must be cultivated and nurtured by internal power and strength, otherwise such external pressures can break a person to pieces. You must be connected with Allah in such a way that even if the whole world comes together, you will not compromise nor withdraw. According to a hadith from Imam Ali, a believer is "like a mountain, which even storms cannot move (affect)."³ Might, power, and strength belong to Allah, and He grants them to those close to Him.

Allah's Attributes

In many verses that refer to Allah as 'Aziz, the verse ends with the mention of one or more of His qualities. This is a very important Qur'anic point. As a kind of reference and support for what He says in the beginning and middle of the verse, Allah mentions two of His qualities. And when the name al-'Aziz is mentioned with another name, al-'Aziz is always mentioned first. The only exception is when the name al-qawi is used.

Al-'Aziz And Al-Hakim

In twenty-nine cases, the Qur'an mentions al-'Aziz and then alHakim.

رَبَّنَا وَابْعَثْ فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِكَ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ ۚ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

Our Lord raise amongst them an apostle from among them, who should recite to them Your signs, and teach them the Book and wisdom, and purify them. Indeed You are the All-mighty, the All-wise. (2: 129)

This is the du'a of Prophet Ibrahim and Prophet Isma'il when they were building the Ka'bah. At the end of the verse, as a kind of reference and support for what they said and to show why they believe they can make this du'a, they say:

إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

Indeed You are the All-mighty, the All-wise.

These names of Allah are like a key or a password that can be used to open a gate and access many things. The mention of these names shows that we know Whom we are asking and why we are asking. Truly, He is All-mighty and All-wise and that is why we are asking Him to grant our request. In another verse, Allah says:

وَمَا جَعَلَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا بُشْرَىٰ لَكُمْ وَلِتَطْمَئِنَّ قُلُوبُكُم بِهِ ۚ وَمَا النَّصْرُ إِلَّا مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ

Allah did not appoint it but as a good news for you, and to reassure with it your hearts, and victory comes only from Allah, the All-mighty, the All-wise. (3: 126)

No one can force Him to withdraw from His plan. He is al-Hakim; He has plans and a purpose, and does not do things in vain.

Another example of when Allah mentions al-'Aziz and then al Hakim is the following:

تَنْزِيلُ الْكِتَابِ مِنَ اللَّهِ الْعَزِيزِ الْحَكِيمِ

The [gradual] sending down of the Book is from Allah, the All-mighty, the All-wise. (39: 1)

Al-'Aziz and al-Rahim

Another combination of the names of Allah is the mention of al 'Aziz and al-Rahim together, of which there are thirteen instances in the Qur'an. The mention of al-Rahim, as with other names, is to suit the context of the verse. For example:

يَوْمَ لَا يُغْنِي مَوْلَىٰ عَنْ مَوْلَىٰ شَيْئًا وَلَا هُمْ يُنصَرُونَ إِلَّا مَنْ رَحِمَ اللَّهُ ۚ إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ

The day when a friend will not avail a friend in any way, nor will they be helped, except for him on whom Allah has mercy. Indeed He is the All-mighty, the All-merciful. (44:41-42)

Because this verse speaks about people being unable to do anything without the mercy of Allah, the names of Allah that are mentioned at the end reflect this context, and hence both al-'Aziz and al-Rahim are mentioned.

Other Combinations

Other examples where al-'aziz is mentioned alongside other attributes are as follows:

إِنَّ رَبَّكَ يَقْضِي بَيْنَهُمْ بِحُكْمِهِ ۚ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْعَلِيمُ

Indeed your Lord will decide between them by His judgement, and He is the All-mighty, the All knowing. (27:78)

Here, Allah describes His role as a judge, who requires both power and knowledge; hence, the mention

of the name al-'Alim.

تَدْعُونَنِي لِأَكْفُرَ بِاللَّهِ وَأُشْرِكَ بِهِ مَا لَيْسَ لِي بِهِ عِلْمٌ وَأَنَا أَدْعُوكُمْ إِلَى الْعَزِيزِ الْغَفَّارِ

You invite me to defy Allah and to ascribe to Him partners of which I have no knowledge, while I call you to the All-mighty, the All-forgiver. (40:42)

كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا كُلِّهَا فَأَخَذْنَاهُمْ أَخَذَ عَزِيزٌ مُقْتَدِرٌ

Who denied all of Our signs. So We seized them with the seizing of One [who is] all-mighty, Omnipotent. (54:42)

أَمْ عِنْدَهُمْ خَزَائِنُ رَحْمَةِ رَبِّكَ الْعَزِيزِ الْوَهَّابِ

Do they possess the treasures of the mercy of your Lord, the All-mighty, the All-munificent? (38:9)

As mentioned earlier, the only name mentioned before al-'Aziz is alQawi:

فَلَمَّا جَاءَ أَمْرُنَا نَجَّيْنَا صَالِحًا وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَعَهُ بِرَحْمَةٍ مِنَّا وَمِنْ خِزْيِ يَوْمِئِذٍ ۖ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ الْقَوِيُّ الْعَزِيزُ

So when Our edict came, We delivered Salih and the faithful who were with him by a mercy from Us, and from the [punishment and] disgrace of that day. Your Lord is indeed the All-strong, the All-mighty. (11:66)

اللَّهُ لَطِيفٌ بِعِبَادِهِ يَرْزُقُ مَنْ يَشَاءُ ۖ وَهُوَ الْقَوِيُّ الْعَزِيزُ

Allah is all-attentive to His servants. He provides for whomever He wishes, and He is the All-strong, the All-mighty. (42: 19)

Therefore, in tens of verses the stress is upon Allah as al-'Aziz, but then in some cases He adds another quality to show that His 'izzah strength is often accompanied by another quality, depending upon the context. If knowledge is a requirement, then al-'Aziz is accompanied by al-'Alim; if wisdom is required then al-Hakim is mentioned; if generosity is a requirement then al-Wahhab is used; if revenge suits the context, then Dhu Intiqam is found; all is dependent upon what best suits the context of the verse.

We can surmise that His strength is not merely brute force, but it is a wise, intelligent, and generous

power, that which does not cause mischief or harm. Power in itself is positive, however there are times when – if power is not guided and steered properly – it can be destructive. A volcano has power, a nuclear bomb has power, tyrants also have power, but this is not necessarily good or productive. Allah is al-Ghaniy al-Hamid – He is self-sufficient and praiseworthy.

Allah's power is real power, and therefore it comes with mercy, wisdom, generosity, and knowledge. In the next article, inshallah we will discuss how Allah has extended 'izzah to His creation in His legislation, and how we can add to the 'izzah that we have already received.

[1.](#) Al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Qur'an, vol. 1, p. 52, commentary on verses 2:6&7.

[2.](#) Al-Tafsir by Ali ibn Ibrahim, vol. 2, p. 228.

[3.](#) For example, see Bihar al-Anwar. Vol. 39, p. 351.

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