

Indicators of Piety, Part 4

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This paper is based on the fourth and fifth parts of a series of seven lessons by the author in London, at the Islamic Centre of England in July 2011. This course was an attempt to explore the essence of faith, religiosity, and moral values on which they are based.

Abstract

Indicators of Piety focuses on the advantages of piety (taqwa) in the Qur'an, hadith, and the lives of the Ahlul Bayt. Piety – one of the most important qualities a person can have – is how people are ranked before God as it is related to the intention behind all actions and is required to reach salvation.

Part 1 and 2 delved into the merits of piety in the Qur'an and explored the definition of piety along with the factors that contribute to its formation. Part 3 illustrated the qualities of the pious as those who have faith in the unseen, establish prayer, give charity, believe in the hereafter, and have faith in what has been revealed to the Prophet as well as the previous prophets.

This part further defines the faithful as those who will achieve true success and offers an illustration of who the faithful are, and what they will achieve in this world and the next.

In the previous series we have established that according to the Qur'an, piety is the fundamental quality by which we can achieve success, and anything less will not yield satisfactory results in this world and the Hereafter. To further understand, verse 2:2–5 was cited, in which God describes the pious as those who have faith in the unseen, in the revelation of Prophet Muhammad, and in the revelations of the previous prophets. What follows is an illustration of faith as described in the chapter al-Mu'minoon (The Believers) [1](#)

True Success

The Believers begins with eleven verses that describe the faithful. In the very first verse, God states

Certainly, the faithful have attained salvation. (23 1)

This verse uses a past-tense verb, along with a particle qad for added emphasis, which indicates the definite and guaranteed success of the faithful.

The root of the word employed in the verse for success – falah – originally means 'to open'. A farmer is known as fallah because he opens the ground and sows seeds into the soil. God uses this term for human happiness, perhaps because people are like seeds with the potential for growth, provided they acquire a fertile ground, which is faith. This, in turn, facilitates personal growth, and thereafter offers shade (i.e. security and comfort) and fruit (i.e. benefit). If not, then opportunities are wasted and the person will 'wither' away.

The broader connotation of the term falah is success and happiness in both this world and the Hereafter. According to the famous lexicographer al-Raghib al-Isfahani, the term encompasses three factors of worldly happiness, and four benefits in the Hereafter

Factors of Worldly Happiness

1. To be able to live a sufficient quantity to achieve one's goals
2. To live with honour and dignity
3. To be able to afford the financial expenses of one's life.[2](#)

Factors of Success in the Hereafter

1. Eternal life
2. Honour from God
3. Perpetual wealth without lack or poverty
4. Increase in knowledge

Description of the Faithful

The first 11 verses of the Chapter The Believers include six features of the faithful

1. Those who are humble in their prayers (23 2)

The Qur'an mentions those that pray in different contexts. At times, when simply mentioning those who perform prayer, it laments their position

Woe to them who pray – those who are heedless of their prayers. (107 4–5)

Merely performing prayers does not necessarily cause faithfulness; it is the quality of the prayer that qualifies being amongst the faithful. The faithful are extremely humble in their prayers, and because of their humble and softened hearts, they can concentrate when they pray. There are two terms often used in the context of a person's demeanour during prayers

Khudu' A physical display of humility in which the heart may or may not be in conformity.

Khushu A heart-based state of humility which may manifest physically as well.

The above verse uses the Khushu' to denote the prayer performed by the faithful.

In one narration, Prophet Muhammad saw a man praying whilst simultaneously playing with his beard. He said, "Surely, had his heart felt humility, his limbs would have also been humble."³

Some well-known commentaries such as Majma' al-Bayan and Tafsir al-Kabir report that before the revelation of these verses, the Prophet would sometimes look humbly at the sky during prayer, but after the revelation of these verses he would always cast his eyes down.

2. Avoiding vain talk (23 3)

The faithful refrain from vain and useless pursuits, conversations, or even thoughts. Anything that is vain (laghw) is not beneficial, although not necessarily forbidden. The faithful, however, do not engage in it because they are motivated by a clear purpose in everything they do. They value every moment of their lives because they see death as something real and imminent.

3. Carrying out their duty of charity (23 4)

This verse refers to a broader act of charity. The above verses were revealed in Mecca, before the compulsory alms-tax (zakah) was legislated. Thus the term mentioned in this verse cannot be the obligated alms-tax. Moreover, the Qur'an often mentions prayer and charity together.

4. Those who guard their private parts (23 5)

The faithful are those who remain within their conjugal boundaries and have physical relationships with their legitimate spouses only.

5. Those who keep their trusts and covenants (23 8)

The faithful observe their promises under all conditions, and if entrusted with any property, then they deliver this with utmost reliability. Imam Zayn al-Abidin declares that were he entrusted by the killer of Imam al-Husayn with the very sword that brutally murdered his father in Karbala, he would return it to its owner.

Similarly, before Prophet Muhammad undertook the migration from Mecca to Medina, he was in possession of a number of trusts of the Meccans due to his renowned honesty. He ensured he returned their trusts by leaving his deputy, Imam Ali, in his place in Mecca with the clear conditions to proceed to Medina only after he had returned the people's property. The Prophet did not abuse their trusts despite their enmity towards him.

Regarding covenants, the faithful also sense their deep responsibility in discharging the covenant they have made with God:

Fulfill God's covenant when you pledge, and do not break [your] oaths after pledging them solemnly and having made Allah a witness over yourselves. Indeed Allah knows what you do. (16 91)

Thus, the concept of discharging one's promises is very broad and is a responsibility of which the faithful are constantly aware of.

6. And who are watchful of their prayers (23 9)

The mention of the prayer twice in this passage highlights its fundamental importance. In addition to their humble state in prayers, the faithful are mindful of the timings, etiquettes, and recommended acts of their prayers. They protect their prayer from any external or internal challenge or problem.

The Faithful will inherit Heaven

At the end of this description, God states:

It is they who will be the inheritors. They shall inherit paradise, and will remain in it forever. (23 10-11)

Curiously, the Qur'an employs the term 'inherit', and in this regard we can cite three opinions. Some scholars of Islam say that in the same manner as someone benefits from inheritance without having worked for it, heaven is so magnificent it is granted to the faithful out of God's kindness, and is much more than a recompense for their efforts. The doers of good do not deserve heaven; it is more like an unexpected gift.

This concept can be further seen in the Qur'an's descriptions of heaven and hell:

And paradise will be brought near for the Godwary. And hell will be made manifest for the perverse. (26 90-91)

The pious have made a gesture towards heaven with their deeds in their lives, but are still in need of God's kindness to bring it close to them. God vows to grant heaven to the righteous by bringing it closer to them. With regards to hell, the wrongdoers are already dwelling there; it simply remains to be unveiled for them.

The second opinion states that everyone has a place in heaven, but through their actions they can lose this position. Prophet Muhammad said:

Each of you has two houses one house in heaven and one house in hell. If someone dies and enters hell, then others will inherit that house in heaven.

Heaven will not remain empty, and no space will be wasted. Some spaces in heaven will be inherited from those that failed to claim their positions. Interestingly, a quality of hell and heaven is that they can accommodate all human beings. Hell has the ability to expand its capacity and accommodate more people:

The day when We shall say to hell, 'Are you full?' It will say, 'Is there any more?' (50:30)

Thirdly, the term 'inherit' is used to emphasise that heaven is something that only God creates. However, control of this paradise is granted to its inhabitants who reside therein, not as tenants whose future occupancy may be jeopardised, but rather as owners with full control.

Description of the Faithful in Hadiths

Now that we have covered the Qur'an's description of faith, we turn our attention to the relevant hadith, which are replete with references to faith. In order to keep our discussion focused, we will suffice with hadiths that are concerned with the signs of a faithful person.

Some hadiths refer to the external signs of faith while others refer to internal signs. For example, this famous narration from Imam Hasan al-Askari mentions five external signs:

The signs of a faithful person are five Performance of fifty-one units of prayer [daily], recitation of Ziyarat al-Arba'in, to wear a ring on the right hand, to prostrate upon dust, and to recite Bism Allah al-Rahman al-Rahim loudly [in prayer].⁴

The word used in this saying for signs ('alamat) comes from the root 'ilm (knowledge). A sign is defined as 'that which assists in understanding'. For example, the sign of a fire is smoke, and when smoke is witnessed, it assists the observer in understanding that a fire is present.

Though the narration mentions five signs of a faithful person, it is not limited to these five. Imam al-Askari mentions these five in particular due to their importance. Furthermore, the term 'faithful' in this narration refers to a follower of the Ahlul Bayt and mentions signs particular to the way they practice Islam.

The first sign: The performance of fifty-one units of prayer on a daily basis. Those fifty-one units are made up by the seventeen units of the mandatory daily prayers and thirty-four units of supererogatory prayers (nawafil), which are eight units before the midday prayer, eight units before the afternoon prayer, four units after the dusk prayer, one unit after the evening prayer, eleven units as the night prayer, and two units before the morning prayer. These supererogatory prayers hold great significance, and if one is not able to perform all of them then at least some of them should be performed, especially those of the midday and the night. Furthermore, they are the only supererogatory prayers that can be performed even after their time has passed as lapsed prayers (qadha).

Imam Zayn al-Abidin once taught his companions that when a person prays the obligatory daily prayers, only those parts of the prayers are accepted that were performed with the presence and concentration of the heart. When his companions retorted that this was a very difficult proposition, the Imam assured them that the performance of the supererogatory prayers helps compensate the lapses of the obligatory prayers.

The second sign: Recitation of Ziyarat al-Arba'in, a well-established visitation prayer recited on the fortieth day following the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn. From other Islamic references, we know that the number forty has a special significance. It is hoped that the performance of any act for forty days makes it an established habit and transforms it into the person's second nature. A person who begins the visitation of Imam al-Husayn on the day of his martyrdom, and then continues the visitation prayers for forty days thereafter, culminating on the fortieth day, builds a firm and immovable relationship between them and Imam al-Husayn. This relationship is hoped to remain as a heartfelt bond. However, for someone that merely recites the visitation prayers on the day of his martyrdom, or for one day in isolation, he or she will not be able to form such a bond.

The third sign: To wear a ring on the right hand. This would be a very swift and easy manner of identifying a follower of the Ahlul Bayt.

The fourth sign: The faithful perform their prayers by prostrating upon dust or other natural (earthy) substances⁵. The adherents of the Sunni sect of Islam have many narrations regarding this practice, but they confine them to a specific time in history and do not apply this injunction outside of that time.

The Shi'a scholars do not endorse claims that the Prophet allowed his companions to prostrate upon cloth or their own clothes. History shows that the companions would carry sand with them and when they would prostrate, they would put the cool sand down and prostrate upon it, instead of the floor that had become scorching hot due to the sun. Had the Prophet permitted his followers to prostrate upon

cloth or their clothing, then this practice of carrying sand holds no meaning.

In another narration, Suhayb, a nephew of Umm Salamah, one of the wives of the Prophet, would blow the sand away when he would prostrate to avoid becoming dusty. She told him, "O son of my brother! Do not blow, because I heard the Prophet telling his servant Yasar who had blown, 'For the sake of God, let your face become dusty,⁶' because the dust upon one's face encourages humility and displays utter servitude.

Other reports describe the companions prostrating upon date leaves, and only a few reports state that they used the sides of their turbans. Thus, the stance taken by followers of the Ahlul Bayt is at least a precautionary stance and is a practice that is undisputed and accepted by all Muslims, whereas prostration upon cloth is disputed by some Muslims and is therefore a possible error.

The fifth sign: The recitation of the Bismillah ('In the name of God') in the prayers. Of the five daily mandatory prayers, the chapters of the Qur'an recited in the first two units of prayer of the morning, dusk, and evening prayers are recited loudly. In the midday and afternoon prayers, these sections are recited in a whisper, but it is recommended that the Bismillah be recited loudly.

Regarding the Bismillah, Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq says, "It is the most magnificent verse stolen by Satan." Today, the majority of Muslims read their prayers without reciting Bismillah, although the verse is so important that God revealed it 114 times. The Ahlul Bayt regard this verse as part of the beginning of each chapter except chapter nine, but it is then included twice in chapter twenty-seven⁷. The repetition of this verse shows that God wishes His servants to remember His names, especially the three mentioned in the verse Allah, Rahman (Compassionate), and Rahim (Merciful). Prophet Muhammad has said, "Every important matter not begun with Basmalah will remain fruitless."

From these teachings, we can extract two points:

1. God wishes us to understand Him as a Lord who is merciful and compassionate. Despite his hundreds of names, He wishes us to identify Him primarily with these qualities. The name Rahman signifies His general compassion to all His creation and is a proper noun for Him alone. The name Rahim signifies His special mercy reserved for the faithful. God's mercy is the closest thing to His unfathomable essence. When mentioning His mercy He states:

"Said He, 'I visit My punishment on whomever I wish, but My mercy embraces all things' (7 156)."

2. The verse encourages those who have faith in such a God to espouse these qualities within themselves. By remembering Him regularly with these qualities they should display the same within their own merits, otherwise the recitation of this formula becomes hypocritical. The faithful therefore have utter compassion and mercy for all other beings, although especially towards fellow believers, since they are more deserving of this, albeit in a non-discriminatory manner. This is like loving all children, but having extra love and concern for one's own children.

These five signs are external and each of them can be easily seen in the external behaviour of a person. This can help quickly decipher those who are not faithful. However, it does not necessitate that those who do possess these signs are necessarily faithful. For this, we are in need of further signs. Imam al-Baqir has said

Of the signs of a faithful person are three good management of the economy of his family, patience upon calamity, and deep knowledge of religion."⁸

This hadith refers to three additional signs of the many signs of a faithful person:

The first sign: A faithful person will be able to manage and plan the economy of their household. This means they are neither miserly, nor do they indulge in waste and extravagance. Avoiding waste and valuing their possessions is also a quality the faithful practice in their homes.

Once a baker told his preteen son he would consider him an adult when he earned his first dirham⁹. So the boy effortlessly took a dirham from his mother, and when he showed it to his father, his father said it was not accepted and threw the coin into the oven. This repeated for the following few days, and the boy grew increasingly perplexed as to how his father knew that he had not earned the dirham. His mother then advised him to try and actually earn the dirham to present it to his father. The boy finally agreed and worked hard to earn it, and when he showed it to his father, the dirham was once again tossed into the oven. This time, the boy frantically reached into the oven and drew the coin out, despite the danger of being burned. The father then acknowledged that this coin was earned, and said that he had known the previous coins were not earned due to his son's nonchalant reaction. This lesson was to teach his son the worth of money and that it should be spent wisely.

The second sign: To have patience during problems. Difficult situations of life act as a sifting processes where a person's character and resolve is tested. In hadith it is said that patience is a fundamental requirement for a person's success, just as the head is to a body.

The third sign: They are deeply fascinated with and attached to religion, and strive to dig deep into it. Their lives are so consumed with pleasing their Lord and learning the ways of their religion. It is noteworthy to mention that the knowledge spoken about in this tradition (tafaqquh) refers to a deep understanding rather than superficial knowledge.

From these two sayings it has become obvious that faith has both an external manifestation as well as internal signs that involve the personality, interests, and skills, and will ultimately rest in the heart. Each hadiths refer to one set of signs.

¹. Chapter 23 of the Qur'an.

². Whilst it encourages simplicity in lifestyle, Islam is firmly against financial poverty, and an Islamic government is tasked with eradicating poverty from society. Interestingly, the Qur'an states that faith plays a role even in material wealth (7 96)

³. For example, see Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 68, p. 228.

⁴. Tusi, Tahdhib al-Ahkam, vol. 6, p. 52; 'Amilii, Wasa'il al-Shi'ah, vol. 4, p. 58.

[5.](#) According to Shi'a jurisprudence, it is not valid to prostrate in the ritual prayers on anything except on earth and those things which grow on it and are not used for food or clothing. Other schools of jurisprudence may allow prostration on rugs and carpets or any other thing including even a part of one's turban, provided it is ritually clean (tahir).

[6.](#) Musnad by Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Baqi Musnad, Hadith of Umm Salamah, hadith number 25360.

There is also a similar hadith in the same source (hadith number 25519) which indicates that Umm Salamah said to her nephew, "Do not blow, because the Messenger of God told a servant of us, known as Ribah, 'Let your face become dusty. O Ribaah.'" A similar hadith can be found in many other sources. For example, refer to Sunan of Tirmidhi, the Section of Salat, hadith number 348.

[7.](#) Chapter nine of the Qur'an contains stark warnings to the pagans, and hence does not begin with this verse.

Interestingly, God does not choose any alternative, for example 'In the name of the Avenger' or 'In the name of the Enforcer'. Perhaps this is because He wishes to be known as compassionate and merciful, or nothing at all.

[8.](#) Tusii, Tahdhib al-Ahkam, vol. 7, p. 236

[9.](#) A silver coin.

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