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Part 23

﴿وَلا تَجَسَّسُوا، وَلا يَغْتَبْ بَعْضُكُمْ بَعْضًا، أَيُحِبُّ أَحَدُكُمْ أَنْ يَأْكُلَ لَحْمَ أَخِيهِ مَيْتًا؟ فَكَرِهْتُمُوهُ، وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ، إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَوَّابٌ رَحِيمٌ﴾

"And do not spy nor let some of you backbite others. Does one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? But you abhor it; and be careful of (your duty to) Allah, surely Allah is Oft-returning (to mercy), Merciful. (49:12)"

Four evidences which show that backbiting is prohibited

There are four evidences, which prove that backbiting is prohibited: The Book, the Sunnah, consensus and reason.
All the schools of thought and sects in Islam fully agree that backbiting is prohibited. Human wisdom, intelligence and logic also say so. Everything, which becomes a cause of disintegration and disunity, is illegal. Yesterday we came across some verses of the Holy Qur'an showing that backbiting is unlawful. For example:

﴿أَيُحِبُّ أَحَدُكُمْ أَنْ يَأْكُلَ لَحْمَ أَخِيهِ مَيْتًا؟ فَكَرِهْتُمُوهُ، وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ، إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَوَّابٌ رَحِيمٌ﴾

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﴿إِنَّ السَّمْعَ وَالْبَصَرَ وَالْفُؤَادَ كُلُّ أُوْلَئِكَ كَانَ عَنْهُ مَسْئُولاً﴾

"Surely, the hearing and the sight and the heart, all of these, shall be questioned about that."[1]

﴿وَيْلٌ لِكُلِّ هُمَزَةٍ لُمَزَةٍ﴾

"Woe to every slanderer, defamer,"[2]

Fifty narrations regarding backbiting

Some scholar scholars have collected fifty narrations from books. Here I tell you about two or three of them so the seriousness of this sin may be known.

Backbiting eats up religion like leprosy

According to *Usul al-Kafi,* the Holy Prophet said: Backbiting is like 'Kallah'[3] (Majlisi says, most probably it means leprosy, a skin disease which grows beneath the skin and eats up the flesh so much that even bones show up.) In Persian, it is said that leprosy is a disease, which eats up flesh. Sometimes it eats up the nose and then nothing like a nose is seen any more. This is a very dangerous and contagious disease. It is not detected in the beginning but after some months when it is detected, nothing remains of an affected organ.

It is said that backbiting too is similar. It eats up the religion of a Muslim. It means that one who takes up the habit of backbiting his religion also begins to be eaten up simultaneously and continuously and gets eroded till the day when it is known that there is no religion in his heart, that it has become faithless and when he dies, he dies a faithless fellow.

Towards good through good opinion about God

Yet another narration in *al-Kafi* quotes Amirul Momineen that the Prophet said: (This narration is both a good tiding as well as a warning) By God, (This swearing shows that the matter is very important), Who has no partner, and there is no sovereign except He, no person can attain the good of both this world and the Hereafter but by three things. First is to have a good opinion about God.

It means he should hope that if His order is obeyed He will give its reward, also one must hope that if he gives up sinning His Lord will reward him. If man cuts off his relation (His mindfulness) with God he has no other hope of doing any good deed and he will not engage in worship and prayer. If one has no hope that God gives reward of praying, fasting and spending in His path, why will he engage in these good deeds? In short, anyone who reaches anywhere it is dependent upon his good opinion and hope from God. If you see that one spends his wealth for helping the needy know that his hope from God is great and his opinion about God is stronger. If one is found lazy in such good deeds, know that his hope from God is less.

Character building by practice during youth time

The second thing, which is the means of every good is good behavior or manners. It cannot be purchased. It is also not attained merely by prayers. It requires struggle and practice. Practice can make man perfect in character building also. It is not like a dyer's tank wherein if a cloth is dipped it gets colored at once. Reforming character is a very difficult task. Here is the gist of a narration from Imam Sadiq. If it is said that a mountain has moved from its place, it is believable but if someone says that one's habits have changed it is hard to believe. If one builds up a good character by the age of forty it is good. Otherwise, it is very difficult to change after this age.

It is possible only if God helps him and he makes painful efforts. Till he is young it does not require much effort. He can improve his manners easily. It is possible that his ways may improve after some years of struggle. O Youths! Appreciate the value of your youth. Reform you character when you are young. The good of this as well the other world is in a sound and healthy character. It is mentioned that in the balance of measuring deeds nothing is weightier than a nice character.[4] At present we see it rarely.

What is a healthy character?

Here we explain the meaning of good character in brief: Sound character means that a man attains an ability from his interior whereby he can behave nicely with all people. He can treat everyone in a good way. He may deal with others honestly. A good behavior with his wife and children, with his neighbors and with everyone with whom he has to do any thing. He does not make anyone sorrowful. He does not harm or hurt anyone either by his words or actions. One example of good behavior is humility. He meets others with a smiling face and an open heart. To remain grim–faced and angry is a bad characteristic and so it is to be harsh and bitter in talking or to interrupt others when they speak.

It is healthy character, which enables one to behave nicely with everyone easily; even with his enemy so that he may forgive him despite having the power to punish or take revenge.
Good behavior in dealings is that he may not be tough and hard. To be extremely mild while buying and to be extremely tough in selling is also an example of bad character.

In the matter of matrimony, if a man seeks the hand of your daughter, do not be hard. See whether he has a religious mind and character or not. Does he offer daily prayer and observe fasts during Ramadhan. He should not have bad manners. If one gives ones daughter in marriage to a drunkard it is like hurling her into vices. There is a narration in this regard.[5]
To befriend and to entertain guests is also good behavior. To respect the elders and to be kind and affectionate to youngsters is also a good trait. Almighty Allah says in Holy Qur'an:

﴿وَلا تُصَعِّرْ خَدَّكَ لِلنَّاسِ وَلا تَمْشِ فِي الأَرْضِ مَرَحًا، إِنَّ اللَّهَ لا يُحِبُّ كُلَّ مُخْتَالٍ فَخُورٍ﴾

"And do not turn your face away from people in contempt, nor go about in the land exulting overmuch; surely Allah does not love any self-conceited boaster;"[6]

Refraining from backbiting, cause of every good

The third thing, which is the means for getting every good is: Restrain yourself from backbiting people. No one has got the good of this world and Hereafter except through three means: First good opinion about God, second good character and third holding oneself from backbiting. It is said: As one (especially women) has to put pressure on one's hearts saying that if you control yourself you will be wiser and get high ranks and your faith will become stronger and your soul more powerful and your heart happier.

But a child and a childish person is unable to control himself as he, at once, speaks up about what he saw and heard. If you also be like that, are you different from a child? Your intelligence has not grown up at all.

Now, the rest of the tradition: By God Who has no partner, chastisement will not touch a believer after he or she believed and repented but because of three things: One, having a bad opinion about God (which has been explained earlier). The second is a bad character and the third backbiting.[7]

Bad behavior brings punishment to Saad in grave

Second, bad behavior or character. Just hear the story of Saad's bad behavior. All deeds of Saad bin Maaz were good. He even becomes one whose prayer is answered. He was hit by an arrow in the Battle of the Ditch. There he had prayed: O Lord! Let me not die until I see Islam and Muslims win over the Jews of Banu Quraiza. As he uttered these, blood, which was gushing from his wound stopped. No drop dripped till the time Islam and Muslims won over Bani Quraiza and the Jews of Bani Quraiza were driven out. Thereafter, the wound opened up again and bled till he breathed his last and became a martyr in the path of God. I want you to learn about him.[8]

The Prophet took two turns around his bier barefoot and said, "My hand was in the hand of Jibraeel. Seventy thousand angels participated in the burial of Saad bin Maaz." The Messenger of God laid Saad to rest in the grave. His mother exclaimed, "Congratulations! Be pleased with the Paradise awarded to you." The Prophet asked, "How do you say that?" According to another tradition, the Holy Prophet shivered. On being asked he replied, "Saad is under squeeze now in his grave."[9]

People asked the holy Imam the reason of such pressure when Saad was a very nice gentleman from the viewpoint of faith, observance of duties and being away from the impermissible things. He replied: Improper behavior with his wife and children.[10] He had no other defect except that he was harsh towards his wife and children. Otherwise, he was just, hardworking, a leader, a jurist. But, at last, one has to account for every kind of behavior.

He says: By God, after repentance and seeking forgiveness, Imam and God do not punish anyone except for bad opinion and secondly, bad behavior be it with one's wife and children or with outsiders or with both which is worse still. The third thing, which invites divine anger is backbiting. Guard your tongue. It is very dangerous.

Backbiting overturns good and bad deeds

I briefly narrate the third thing: The subject of several traditions is that tomorrow, on the Day of Judgment, a faithful will be given his scroll of deeds in his hands. One will observe that though he had done several good deeds, they do not figure in the sheet. O Lord! We fed people went for visiting tombs (Ziyarat), recited Qur'an and did several other good deeds. Some of them are not noted here!

He will be told: God never forgets anything. The deeds, which you mentioned, are now there in the sheet of the one whom you backbited. On the other hand, a believer will see the mention of several readings of Holy Qur'an in Ramadhan whereas he had not recited anything. He will be informed: In Ramadhan, a fellow had backbitten you. The reward of his good deed is transferred to your scroll of deeds. Understand this matter properly. It is absolutely correct. Narrations regarding this are found in many books of Shias and Sunnis. You make efforts, you toil a lot and then, with one word, give it away to another person by backbiting him. How sad! Is there any loss greater than this? Woe unto you if the other party is your enemy. When you backbite your enemy, you give him whatever you have earned. Tomorrow, on the Day of Judgment, you see that your good deeds are listed in the scroll of your enemy. This is your friendship with him!

Gifts in exchange of backbiting and cursing

Especially people of knowledge are all the more caught in the habit of backbiting as jealousy in them is more than other classes. The only exceptions are those who have purified themselves. The same jealousy is one of the causes of backbiting and false allegations. Briefly speaking, it is written in the events of one of the great scholars that this gentleman had become very jealous of one whom he was backbiting daily. No day passed in which he did not backbite that person. And that person used to send him (the backbiter) a new gift, like various fruits, daily. The receiver of these gifts also was also not totally devoid of justice. He realized that he was wrong in backbiting him. So, by and by, he stopped backbiting him. The other person thereafter stopped sending gifts to him.

The former asked: "How was is that when I was talking bad of you were you were sending me gifts but since I stopped doing the prohibited deed you stopped your gifts?" That person replied, "Formerly you were serving me daily by giving away your good deeds to me so I was compensating you. Now that you have stopped giving me your rewards, I have also stopped sending you gifts."[11]

There are many narrations indicating that tomorrow, on the Day of Judgment, the reward of the good deeds of a backbiter will be snatched from him and transferred to the scroll of deeds of the backbitten

one.[12] Therefore, it is necessary to clear the account in this world. The backbiter should, if the backbitten one is alive, go to the latter and apologize so that he may forgive him (in case the backbitten one had heard bad words). If it was not heard by him, praise his virtues. If the one who was backbitten is dead, the backbiter should pray for his forgiveness and give charity on his behalf. Otherwise, the result will be very difficult. There is a lot to be talked about this. But it is enough for the time being. Now I may say something about the exception.

Admonition by an adviser is not backbiting

This is about a situation wherein one's advice is sought who wishes well of the former and tells what is true so that one may not fall in trouble. For example, one asks another: Is there any problem if I take this girl in marriage? Now, if he or she knows about the defects of that girl and describes them, it amounts to backbiting. It harms and defames her. If he does not say anything, the one who sought his advice is likely to fall into trouble. In this case, it is a must for you to do something whereby neither the seeker of advice is put to loss nor the other party is defamed and disgraced. Say: I do not know what is good for you. If they ask: Why? Then say: Please excuse me. If you say, "It is not advisable" or "I do not see good" it is over. You have neither backbitten anyone nor put anyone to trouble.

Yes, scholars have said that if the seeker of advice is not satisfied with your short reply and you feel that if you do not explain that person will fall into trouble, reply in such a manner that the other party is not disgraced and defamed. If you know ten defects, mention only one, not all. Briefly speaking, try your best to avoid backbiting.

No Backbiting in open sins

As regards other situations in which backbiting is allowed is: If there is a fellow whose sins are open[13] and who has thrown away the veil of shame and modesty and who is not at all afraid of sinning, describing his sins is not backbiting as it is not "showing what God hid". You have not told any secret or hidden thing. You have said what is open to all and before the eyes of all. That fellow has himself torn down the curtain of shame. Relating his open crimes is not backbiting. Of course, it is sinful to disgrace one who goes secretly to a wine shop and drinks. Another fellow arrives in a cinema house with a dancer in public view. You have no right to talk of the first fellow's drinking, as it was in secrecy.

But as for the dancer, it is also better not to talk, but no harm if you have to mention it sometimes.

Seeking justice is not backbiting

Another exception: It is in the situation of oppression and injustice. Someone is oppressed. His property is snatched. He has no alternative but to claim his due and approach anyone who can help in compensating his loss. If he says that such and such person did such and such injustice, it is not wrong.

But care must be taken that your cry for justice should not be for exposing that fellow's hidden sins. You can say about the injustice done to you, not about the defects known to you other than with which you are concerned. One of the things which makes one fall in backbiting is enmity.

Man wants to show himself as clean and makes the other party tainted. For example, one who wants to sell his commodity says: I am not like such and such gentleman who sells mixed scents oils. We do not want to be like such and such person who sells mixed tea. We have promised to our God to be clean and honest. This makes one fall into the sin of backbiting. Sometimes it also so happens that one wants to remove an allegation from himself and disgrace another. You do not lie. You want to prove your cleanness. But you open the closed fist of another one. You open up his secret sin. For example: They ask you: Why did you do this? Your reply: That man has also done this. His deed was hidden. In such a case, one wants to belittle the evil of his own misdeed and, for it, he opens the secret of others. Here one backbites another with an intention of showing himself innocent. He also makes a false allegation and tells untruth.

Ahmed the orphan and Ibn Tolon's slave girl

Summary of the story: Ahmed bin Tolon was a king of Egypt. One day, he saw a child by the roadside. Someone had abandoned it. But the baby's face had signs of nobility. Tolon was impressed by it. So he ordered the child be brought home. They brought it to Ibn Tolon's harem. A nurse was provided for the baby for taking care of it. It grew up. They also named him Ahmed. With growth in his age his intelligence also rose and so also his relation with Tolon. When Tolon felt that he was about to die he recommended to his son, Abdul Jaish, about this boy Ahmed. He told him that this youth (Ahmed) was an orphan. "I reared him up. I have seen no defect in him. He will be of use to you, so treat him nicely.

Then Tolon expired and his son followed his late father's will and loved the youth (Ahmed) nicely and gave him responsible posts without obtaining security or guarantees. They saw only honesty and truth in him. One day, Abul Jaish wanted a Tasbih (rosary) of pearls from his pocket, but he remembered that he had placed it near his bed last night. So he asked Ahmed, who had now become a grown up youth, to go to the harem and bring his rosary. Ahmed said: All right, I obey. Then he went to the harem of the king. When he opened the door he saw that a male servant of the palace was lying dishonestly with the king's slave girl. The dishonest servant ran away. The slave girl fell at the feet of Ahmed and begged him to do what the runaway fellow had done with her but not to disclose the matter and disgrace her.

But Ahmed was not at all prepared to be dishonest. So he rejected the evil offer firmly. The overlooking of this youth is very important, in such conditions. He did not extend his hand towards the slave girl. He took up the king's rosary and came out. He did not tell anything about what he had seen. How strong is the character of this youth. He saw such an evil incident but did not expose it to disgrace anyone. He did not disgrace that servant or the slave girl. This is a highly great character. Now see, how Almighty God rewards him for this noble behavior.

A more beautiful slave girl had arrived for Abul Jaish. The king became less inclined to the former slave girl who was dishonest. The latter thought that Ahmed the orphan had complained against her misdeed to the king. The king had always loved her so she told herself: Let me go to the king and make an allegation against Ahmed before anything happens. So she went to the king and said: I want to tell you a secret. This Ahmed, with whom you are so friendly, do not rely on him. He had grabbed me and wanted to rape me. I have not been dishonest to the king and I never wanted to do so, but he did not release me and finally he committed dishonesty with the king. As she said this, Abul Jaish believed it to be true.

I have said earlier: Almighty God says: Do not believe in every word you hear but make inquiries. Abul Jaish believed in what the slave girl said and decided to kill Ahmed, who was a pious and righteous youth. The king told his adviser, “When I send you a tray along with a letter, asking you to fill that tray with musk. Cut off the head of whoever brings it (the tray), and send that head in the same tray to me.” When this righteous youth, Ahmed the orphan came to the king, the king told him, “I want to send a gift.” He wrote a letter and gave Ahmed a tray asking him, “Take this tray to the adviser and bring to me whatever he gives.” Ahmed said, “Most willingly, Sir.” Then he brought out that tray and the letter. When he was about to leave the palace God Almighty prepared a plan in his favor. Some outsiders close to the king were busy in an entertainment game.

They requested Ahmed to join them. Ahmed replied, “I am on an errand. The king has ordered me to take this letter and this tray to the adviser.” They said, “Please entrust it to someone else and have some pastime with us.” Then his eye fell on the slave who was found sometime back in the bed of the king with his slave girl. Ahmed told him, “I give you an order. Will you carry it out?” That slave who was afraid of Ahmed, replied, “Yes, I will at once carry it out.” Ahmed told him, “Take this letter and this tray and hand both over to the adviser and bring here whatever he gives, so that I may hand it over to the king.” That dishonest slave took up both the things and went to the adviser.

Ahmed joined the entertainment. When the slave reached the adviser, the latter, at once, cut off his head, put that head in that tray and called another servant telling him to carry it to the king. On his way, Ahmed the orphan saw that servant. He stopped him and said, “I must carry this to the king.” But he did not open it to see what was in it. He came to the king. When the king saw Ahmed, he astonishingly asked Ahmed to uncover the tray to see what was therein. He saw that there was the head of someone else. His amazement multiplied and he asked Ahmed, “Tell me truly what did you do?” Ahmed said, “By God! The truth is that I sat for entertainment for a while and gave this tray to this man whose head is in the tray now. I never knew that they wanted to cut his head like this.” The king fell in deep thought.

Then he asked Ahmed, “There must be something strange behind all this. Tell me had you any encounter with this dead youth in the past?” Ahmed replied, “Yes, the truth is that on that day when you had sent me to fetch your rosary from your harem, I had seen this youth lying in bed with your slave girl, but I did not report about them so that the two unlucky fellows may not be disgraced. Except this I did not have anything with this man.” The king cursed the dead youth and that dishonest slave girl saying:

This righteous youth (Ahmed) did a favor to her by not disgracing her but in return, she comes to me and slams a false allegation against this innocent Ahmed![14] It is just like the story of Yusuf and Zulaikha.

Yusuf and Zulaikha, a lesson of the time

Zulaikha ran after Yusuf who had fled from her. She caught hold of his shirt, which got torn from behind. Yusuf ran away. In the meantime the Aziz of Egypt arrived there. When Zulaikha saw her husband, she, in order to ward off allegations from herself and to escape trouble, hurled an allegation against Yusuf and blamed him.

﴿قَالَتْ: مَا جَزَاءُ مَنْ أَرَادَ بِأَهْلِكَ سُوءًا إِلاَّ أَنْ يُسْجَنَ أَوْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ؟﴾

"She said: What is the punishment of him who intends evil to your wife except imprisonment or a painful chastisement?"[15]

Looking at her husband. She said, "Yusuf intended to be dishonest with me. I wanted to catch and punish him so I ran after him." Thus she turned the matter upside down and said that Yusuf had a bad intention about her and she ran after him. Now what could Yusuf do? God always helps an oppressed person, especially in the event of a false allegation because no oppression is severer than a false allegation. Imam Sadiq says: It is heavier than a mountain.[16] In short God helped the helpless Yusuf. What could Yusuf do? Should say: No? Who would believe him? But the Lord of the Universe exposed the piety of Yusuf. A baby in the cradle testified and produced two evidences. The whole world has testified to it. It said: Look at the shirt of Yusuf. If it is torn from the front it means Yusuf was guilty of embracing Zulaikha. But if it is torn behind it shows that Zulaikha was at fault.[17] Almighty Allah absolved Yusuf and produced a testimony to his truthfulness and piety. The Aziz of Egypt also looked at Zulaikha and said, "Repent over your sin as you are an offender."

﴿يُوسُفُ: أَعْرِضْ عَنْ هَذَا، وَاسْتَغْفِرِي لِذَنْبِكِ، إِنَّكِ كُنتِ مِنْ الْخَاطِئِينَ﴾

"O Yusuf! Turn aside from this; and (O my wife)! Ask forgiveness for your fault, surely you are one of the wrongdoers."[18]

He also asked Yusuf, "Drop the matter here, let it go. Ignore it."
Now, we are not dealing with the story of Yusuf except the aspect that man must not blame others for hiding his error or sin and for proving his innocence or piety. Accountability is there for sure. Be sure that if the matter is not compensated in this world, there is the Hereafter for doing justice. In fact, this world is not a place for compensation.

The place for such compensation is the Hereafter, on the Day of Judgment. It is not without a motive

when He says that every man will be raised in the Grand Gathering on that Day so that all can see him and an announcer will announce: O people! Whoever has to take back his trampled right from this person may come up and ask for it.[19] The rightful persons will be those who were backbitten, whose wealth was snatched, who were made helpless. Amirul Momineen says, “O My Shias! If possible die in such a state that your hands are not dirtied with blood or property of a Muslim. Your tongue must also not be dirty due to insulting and disgracing a Muslim.” It is correct; Ali wants this from you.

1. Surah Isra 17:36
2. Surah Humazah 104:1
3. Kafi, vol. 2; pg. 357
4. Kafi 2:99
5. Fiqahur Reza (a), Chapter of Drinking Wine
6. Surah Luqman 31:18
7. Kafi 2:72
8. Safinatul Bihar, 1:621
9. Bihar 3:132
10. Bihar 3:143
11. Layaliyal Akhbar
12. Kashfur Reebah
13. Makasib, Shaykh Ansari
14. Mustatraff, pg. 206
15. Surah Yusuf 12:25
16. Biharul Anwar, vol. 6, 170
17. Surah Yusuf 12:26-27
18. Surah Yusuf 12:29
19. Layaliyal Akhbar pg. 548

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