

Speaking Bad Behind Someone's Back

(Verse 12)

وَلَا يَغْتَابَ بَعْضُكُم بَعْضًا أَيُحِبُّ أَحَدُكُمْ أَنْ يَأْكُلَ لَحْمَ أَخِيهِ مَيْتًا فَكَرِهْتُمُوهُ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَوَّابٌ رَحِيمٌ...

“...and do not back-bite one another. Do any of you (who back-bite) love to eat the flesh of your dead brother? Rather, you detest this act, therefore have consciousness of Allah. Certainly Allah is the One who is Oft-Turning to you in repentance, the Merciful.”

In this part of the verse, one of the worst ethical traits has been mentioned. This destructive trait is regarded as being so despicable and appalling that the Qur'an offers a comparison as it has never done before by stating that speaking bad about someone behind his back is just like eating the flesh of one's dead brother!

The most disgraceful act that can be done is that a person attacks the body of a dead person, and it is especially bad if the deceased happens to be his own brother, and even more so if his method of attack is that he begins to eat from his flesh! This action is so despised and wicked that very few people would ever do such a thing.

Why has backbiting and talking bad about others behind their back been compared to eating the flesh of one's deceased brother? It is possible that it is for this reason that such a person who eats the flesh of his own brother and the one who back-bites other people destroy the respect and honour of that person.

The indecency of this act is divided such that both people – the one who is speaking the bad words and the one who is listening to them – are both classified as launching an attack against a person who is not able to defend himself.

The one person is eating the flesh of a dead person who is unable to defend himself, while the other person (who is listening to such talk) is aiding in the attack on someone who is not present in the gathering so as to be able to defend himself. Thus, to attack a person who does not have the ability to

defend himself is something that is considered as a shameful act.

In other words, the Qur'an draws this similitude and parable that the one who talks bad about a person behind his back is equivalent to the one who eats the flesh of his own deceased brother. Thus, the following four points have been taken into consideration:

1. One's religious brother is the same as one's biological brother.
2. A person's dignity and respect are the same as his physical flesh.
3. Speaking bad words about a person behind his back and causing harm to his character or disrespecting him is equivalent to eating his flesh.
4. Since this person is not present in the gathering and is unable to defend himself against these cowardly attacks, it is said that he is dead and has been attacked upon in such a state.

It is possible that in order to explain the fourth point, Amir al-Mu'minin `Ali ibn Abi Talib (peace be upon him) referred to the person who back-bites and speaks ill of others behind their back as being lowly and weak (since they are attacking a person who does not have the ability to defend himself) when he said:

الْغَيْبَةُ جَهْدُ الْعَاجِزِ

*"Backbiting another person is (equivalent) to fighting a person who cannot defend himself."*¹

The Motives that Lead to Backbiting

One of the reasons and motives of a person backbiting is jealousy and envy that one has which makes him speak ill of another person. It is the person's position and status that are upsetting him and through this act (of speaking ill of him) he wishes to lower the status and worth of him or her.

In his speech to Mufaddhal ibn `Umar, Imam Ja`far ibn Muhammad as-Sadiq (peace be upon him) has referred to this motive as follows:

مَنْ رَوَى عَلَى مُؤْمِنٍ رَوَايَةً يُرِيدُ بِهَا شَيْنَهُ وَ هَدَمَ مَرْوُوثَهُ لِيُسْقِطَهُ مِنْ أَعْيُنِ النَّاسِ أَخْرَجَهُ اللَّهُ مِنْ وَلَايَتِهِ إِلَى وَلَايَةِ الشَّيْطَانِ

*"A person who talks about a believer's conduct hoping that through this act, he is able to lower the other person's value and worth in the eyes of others will be taken out of the guardianship of Allah and will be placed in the guardianship of the Shaitan."*²

In this hadith, Imam Ja`far as-Sadiq (peace be upon him) has mentioned one of the motives behind

backbiting which is the jealousy, envy and the status that a person may feel for another person within the society. Sometimes however, feelings such as anger, rage, pride and conceit also compel a person towards this negative, ethical trait.

In another hadith, it has first been mentioned that envy and then anger lead a person towards backbiting. It is possible that these attributes have been mentioned in this particular order since envy and anger are two reasons and motives that lead a person to speak bad about others behind their back, just as it has been stated:

لَا تُحَاسِدُوا وَلَا تُبَاغِضُوا وَلَا يَغْتَبِ بَعْضُكُمْ بَعْضًا وَكُونُوا عِبَادَ اللَّهِ إِخْوَانًا

“Do not have jealousy for one another and do not have hatred for another and do not back-bite others and be servants of Allah, brothers to one another.”³

Dangers of Backbiting

Speaking ill behind a person's back has many negative consequences related to both the individual and the society. In relation to the individual, backbiting has been referred to as oppression against one's believing Muslim brother – and what kind of oppression can be worse than when a person tramples upon the respect and character of another believer, such that there is nothing that can make up for this act?

Some of the consequences that affect an entire society come about from backbiting, and the dangers that come about from these two negative traits of having pessimism and speaking bad behind another person's back have been mentioned in brief in the previous discussion and which are common between the two, include:

1. A society that becomes contaminated with backbiting will never see agreement and unity and there will never be closeness and love amongst the people. They will never become a society that has matured in humanity, such that love and affection will rule over everyone.
2. Cooperation and teamwork, with the aim of reaching the sacred goals of the society, can only be realized through confidence and trust of one another will never be achieved. The society in which the defects of the people are openly talked about and one in which the curtains that conceal private acts and deeds are lifted and one in which the feeling of confidence gives birth and produces the good opinion that people have of one another, will be destroyed.
3. Speaking bad behind a person's back is something that ignites the fire of hatred and enmity. The person who has been spoken bad about and has had his secrets spread out for everyone to know and has had his respect and dignity taken away will be extremely upset and will obviously resort to taking revenge.

4. Lifting the curtains that cover the sins and transgressions of the people would result in them performing these disgraceful actions in the future openly since other's respect and dignity normally prevent one from committing sins.

If a person commits sins, one would do so in private where no one can see him with complete fear (of others). Therefore, if due to speaking bad about others behind their back, we remove the curtains that cover their secrets, and by doing so we destroy their character and dignity, then who is to say that they would not commit these sorts of sins openly in the presence of others (due to our actions)?

Due to the fear of losing respect and honour, a great number of people stop themselves from committing sins and evil deeds and if this obstacle – which in reality is the spiritual worth of a person – was to be taken away, then there would remain no barrier for one to refrain from sinning.

In addition to this, not only does spreading the secrets of the people lead to added courage of the person doing this act, but also those who are listening to such things and who may be weak of faith may also develop the courage to commit this (and other) sins as well. Thus, this act of backbiting other people will actually be a source for the spread of corruption and wickedness.

Imam Ja'far ibn Muhammad as-Sadiq (peace be upon him) has said:

مَنْ قَالَ فِي مُؤْمِنٍ مَا رَأَتْهُ عَيْنَاهُ أَوْ سَمِعَتْهُ أُذُنَاهُ فَهُوَ مِنَ الَّذِينَ قَالَ اللَّهُ عَزَّوَجَلَّ: إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يُحِبُّونَ أَنْ تَشِيعَ الْفَاحِشَةُ فِي الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ

*“A person who tells others the actions of another believer that he has seen or heard with his ears is of those people about whom Allah (the Glorious and Noble) has said: **Unquestionably those people who love to spread evil words around, regarding those who have faith have a perpetual punishment awaiting them.**”⁴*

¹. Ghurur al-Hikm, Page 36.

². Al-Mahajjat al-Baydha, Volume 5, Page 155.

³. Ibid., Page 251.

⁴. Usul al-Kafi, Volume 2, Page 357.

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