



Hadith 20: Modesty is from Faith

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عَنْ أَبِي مَسْعُودٍ عُقْبَةَ بْنِ عَمْرِو الْأَنْصَارِيِّ
الْبَدْرِيِّ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ قَالَ : قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ
وَسَلَّمَ : إِنَّ مِمَّا أَدْرَكَ النَّاسُ مِنْ كَلَامِ النَّبِيِّ الْأُولَى إِذَا لَمْ
تَسْتَحْ فَاصْنَعْ مَا شِئْتَ - رَوَاهُ الْبُخَارِيُّ .

Abu Mas'ud 'Uqbah bin 'Amr al-Ansari al-Badri(ra) reported that the Messenger of Allah(sas) said:

“The Messenger of Allah, peace be upon him, said: ‘Among the early prophetic teachings that have reached people is this: if you do not feel shame, do what you wish.’ ”

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Commentary Summary

In society, there remains some faint traces of the earliest Prophetic teachings. Prophet Muhammad (sas) in this hadith reminds us of one of those teachings, while also conveying an important message about heeding our internal compass of haya’.

The Arabic word used here is haya’, and is often translated as modesty. However, Haya’ is more complex and dynamic than just modesty and encompasses many shades of meaning, including humility, sensitivity, shyness, apprehensiveness, and shame.

We know that all of the Prophets are interconnected. They came with the same message, a universal call to worship the one true God. The concept of haya’ is neither new and invented, nor exclusive to Islam. The Prophet (sas) said, “I was sent to perfect good character.” From this, we learn that good character and manners is a component of society, and earlier prophets also emphasized good moral character.

Several Meanings

The statement, “If you do not feel shame, do what you wish,” can be understood in several ways. The scholars give several explanations. It is interesting to consider that all of these meanings are true, and all of the meanings are possible simultaneously.

One way to understand it is as a threat. Do whatever you want, but be prepared to face the consequences. Those who do not have a sense of shame may as well do whatever they want, since that

haya' is an indispensable condition of good character and piety. It can also be understood as a statement of fact. People who lack haya' will simply do as they please. They have no internal limitations or barriers to engaging in whatever they want. This problem can manifest on two levels: on an individual level where someone is openly indecent and sinful, and one a community level where society as a whole normalizes and embraces immorality.

The hadith can also be interpreted as a prescription from the Prophet. Believers can use their internal haya' as a barometer to measure their actions. For actions that are not clearly forbidden, one way that we can check is by paying attention to our internal state. The Prophet (sas) said, "A sin is what becomes lodged in your chest, and what you hate for people to see you doing." When a believer is faced with a choice, he or she can check for the feelings of haya'--shyness, shame, apprehensiveness, and worry. Would you feel ashamed if you were caught doing the action? If so, then refrain. If not, then do it hoping for Allah's mercy.

It is important to remember here that the reference is Islam, not necessarily the norms of the general public. Society may try to promote something as acceptable or not, but our core values are shaped by the word of Allah and the example of His Prophet. The interpretations and standards of morality may differ based on the environment, but the underlying principle never changes.

Haya' in Front of Allah

Haya' is a compulsory and core value that should permeate our lives. It may be expressed in different ways depending on the context, but we should hold to the essence of this keystone quality. Haya' should be a part of our relationship with Allah and should extend to all of our interactions.

Allah says in the Quran, "Do whatever you will. Indeed, He sees all that you do." ([Al-Fussilat 41:40](#)) We worship Allah as though we see Him, because we know that although we can't see Him, He sees us. Truly and deeply knowing Allah as Al-Baseer, the All-Seeing, should instill a deep sense of haya' in front of Him. This is especially true of deeds that we perform when no human sees us. Many times, the company of other people suffices as a restraint in our actions. We worry about our image and what people think of us. The true test of haya' lies in those actions which no one but Allah witnesses.

Allah created human beings with fitrah, natural inclinations. Our inborn fitrah can direct us towards haya' and good morals. Our fitrah is programmed to feel an uneasiness when codes of morality are violated. The believer is most in touch with his or her fitrah, and is keen to act in accordance with this natural disposition. Haya' is a quality that for some people comes naturally, and some may need to struggle to instill it in some aspect of their life. It's possible to revive and kindle this great quality of haya', just as it is possible to ruin by consistently neglecting it. Nurturing haya' in our hearts is part of the process of our spiritual development and building our relationship with Allah.