

Identity, Empowerment and Change, Handout 17

Stories from Tradition

God does not wish me to be apart

While on a journey, the Prophet asked his companions to prepare a sheep for food.

'I will perform ritual slaughter on it,' said one man.

'I will skin it,' said another.

'And I,' said another, 'will cook it.'

And the Prophet said: 'I will gather the firewood'.

'O messenger of God,' they exclaimed, 'there's no need for you to work. We will do everything that needs to be done'.

'I know,' said the Prophet, 'that you are happy to do all the work. But God does not wish me to be apart from you'.

The obligations of the street

The noble Prophet came upon a group of people sitting on the street, gossiping, joking, jeering and arguing amongst themselves.

'You surely have better things to do,' he said, 'than sitting around on the street'.

'Messenger of God,' they pleaded, 'we don't have a choice. There's nowhere else for us to go'.

'In that case,' advised the wise Prophet, 'observe the obligations of the street – restraining of looks, removal of obstructions, reciprocating greetings, enjoining good and forbidding evil'.

Let their mother be with them

A man once came to the Prophet, carrying a bundle. 'O Messenger of God,' he said, 'I was passing through the forest when I saw some young chicks. I captured them and put them in this bundle, and ever since I have been troubled by their mother. She keeps swooping down at me and trying to peck me'.

'Open the bundle and put them down,' said the noble Prophet. The man did so, and the mother immediately joined her little ones.

'Do not be surprised or annoyed,' said the noble Prophet, 'by the mother's love for her chicks. Return them to the place where you took them, and let their mother be with them'.

The body has rights

The young Abdullah, son of the famous Amr ibn al-Aas, and a companion of the Prophet, was known for his extreme self-denial. The Prophet came to hear about the punishing regime he was inflicting on himself. 'I hear,' he said, 'that you fast all day every day, and that you stay awake all night'.

'Yes, O Messenger of God,' replied the young man. 'I love God so much.'

'Such zeal is not required of you,' said the Prophet, 'breaking one's fast is essential. Sleep is essential. Your body has rights over you. Your eyes have rights, and so do members of your family, and visitors who come to your home'.

The milker of the sheep is here, mother!

Abu Bakr as-Siddiq would go to the homes of the old, the widows, the weak and needy, to help them in any ways he could. He milked the sheep of some, and kneaded flour and helped bake bread for others. After the death of the Prophet, when Abu Bakr became the Khalifah and the head of the Muslim state, many people feared that he would no longer be able to give them his loving care. He overheard a widow saying 'Today our sheep will not be milked'. He assured her that he would call at her house later in the day to do the milking.

As soon as he could he went to her house. He knocked on the door and a little girl opened it for him. She took one look at him and shouted to her mother: 'The milker of the sheep is here, mother!'

The rights of the child

A man once came to Umar ibn Al-Khattah, the second Khalifah of Islam, complaining that his son was disobedient. Umar summoned the boy and rebuked him. 'But do not children have rights?' asked the boy.

'Certainly,' said Umar. 'A parent should show respect and love, and should teach children the Book [the Qur'an].'

'My father did none of these things,' replied the boy.

Turning to the father, Umar said: 'You have come to complain about the disobedience of your son. But you failed in your duties towards him before he failed in his duties to you. You wronged him before he wronged you'.

Concern for the poor and needy

Ali ibn Abu Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Mohammed, became the fourth Khalifah of Islam. He was particularly concerned for the poor and the needy – irrespective of their religion or belief. He once wrote a letter to his Governors in the following words:

‘Let me remind you once again that you are made responsible to guard the rights of poor people and to look after their welfare. Take care that the conceit of your position and vanity of wealth may not deceive you to lose sight of such a grave and important responsibility. Yours is such an important post that you cannot claim immunity from the responsibility of even minor errors of commission and omission with an excuse that you were engrossed with the major problems of the State which you have carried out diligently. Therefore, be very careful of the welfare of poor people. Do not be arrogant and vain against them. Remember that you have to take particular care of those who cannot reach you, whose poverty stricken and disease ridden sight may be hateful to you, and whom society treats with disgust, detestation and contempt. You should be the source of comfort, love and respect to them.... You should pay more attention to young orphans and old cripples. They neither have any support nor can they conveniently come out begging. They cannot reach you, therefore you must reach them. Each man is either your brother in religion or your brother in humanity.’

My Lord will question me

Umar ibn Abd-al-Aziz returned home sad and downcast after attending the funeral of his predecessor, the Khalifah Sulayman ibn Abd-al-Malik, and began to cry. ‘Why?’ ‘What is wrong?’ asked his wife. ‘You are now the ruler of this land. This is not a time for tears.’

‘I am thinking of the poor and hungry, the sick and the lost, those without clothes, orphans with no future, widows with no friends, those who are in prison, those who cannot get on with others. There are so many such people throughout the land, I know, and I know too that on the Day of Judgement my Lord will question me about them. I shall be asked what I did to help them and care for them.’

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