

## Core Curriculum

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### 6 Measuring Good and Bad in Islam

#### 6.1

#### **The Effects of Our Actions in this World**

Every single action in this world has an effect. When we walk, our feet press on the ground and disturbs any small creature it touches. When we sit on our chairs and breath, the act of breathing alters the make up the air in our room as we breath in oxygen and breath out carbon dioxide.

Our good or evil acts also work the same way. They not only affect our souls, but they also affect our families, societies and even the environment.

Let's start with the soul. According to a hadith from the Prophet Muhammad (s), every time a person sins, a black spot appears on his or her soul. A sin isn't always or necessarily a pure evil act. One of the words for sin in the Qur'an is khattā, which in old Arabic was an arching term meaning to "miss the mark."

With the context of sin and guidance, sinning is to miss the purpose of life, which is friendship or wilāya with God. When one sins, one chooses a pleasure over friendship with Allah. In this sense, one deviates more and more from God. This distance creates a disturbance in the soul whereby a spiritual black stain appears. Enough of these stains ruins a person's salvation and substitutes heaven for hell.

The personal effects of sin are many. Distance from God's light makes us vulnerable to Shaytān for he comes to fill in the void. As Shaytān or the devil

comes closer, the more susceptible we become to his suggestions. Perhaps the worst of his suggestions or “whispers” or waswasa are those of despair, worry and anxiety which usually come in the form of panic attacks.

## 6.2

### **The Gray Areas of Islamic Law and Morality**

Haram and halal are pretty clear in Islam. Something that is haram is morally wrong to commit. It is morally wrong in one or two ways. The act is either intrinsically wrong, such as murdering an innocent person for the sake of money. At other times, the act is morally wrong in so far as it is an act of disobedience to Allah (swt), like a Muslim eating food that Islamic law forbids.

Other acts, just like haram things, are intrinsically good or circumstantially good. For example, helping the poor and helpless are often intrinsically good acts. Brushing one’s teeth may be circumstantially good if done for the sake of Allah.

These acts are not hard to categorize. There are, however, other categories and deeds that are more difficult to categorize as either good or bad deeds. Most of these deeds fall under the legal category of “mubāh” meaning that something is legally neutral and hence morally neutral.

This lesson overviews the details of mubāh and makrūh in Islam.

## 6.3

### **Heaven and Hell in Islam**

Heaven is a place where everything in life has purpose. It is a place of complete comfort, joy and happiness where all human and divine relationships reach perfection. The Qur’an often describes heaven as a place that is mostly immersed in nature, with rivers, trees and all kinds of fruits. It also describes it as a place where one’s marital relations are in complete harmony.

Allah’s description of heaven in the Qur’an, which by no means exhausts the full reality of it, is meant to entice human beings to be better. If pleasures in this world must be sacrificed for the sake of Islam, that kind of sacrifice will be compensated for with something even greater in the next life. The point,

however, is that in the meantime, one must cultivate oneself spiritually and abstain from sin in order to find salvation.

Hell on the other hand is dark, full of fire and horrors. In the Qur'anic narrative, it is meant to be a warning to people who want to commit evil in this world instead of choosing the proper moral life. The fire in hell is not the same fire of this world, but it is real. It not only puts bodies in pain, but it also burns the souls.

The effect of belief in hell is to make one desist from committing bad deeds in this world. Sometimes people commit evil when they think no one can see them and they think they can get away with whatever they do. However, when a person knows that God looks over everything people do, and that hell exists ... then real and genuine belief in hell will often restrain a person from committing those immoral acts.

## 6.4

### **Life and Death in Islam**

Muslims believe that this life is a trial and test in preparation for the Hereafter. Allah says the following in the Qur'an:

And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me. (Chapter 51, verse 56 of the Holy Qur'an)

The purpose of our creation is not simply belief in Allah. If belief in Allah is all that counts, then there is no reason for Iblīs or the Devil to be cursed by God. The purpose of human existence, and the ultimate preparation for the Hereafter is to establish a healthy and good relationship with God. By purifying our souls and having a good relationship with Allah, we find salvation.

This world therefore acts as a nurturing ground for our souls to be saved in the next life. As the Prophet Muhammad (s) once said, "this world is the farming field of the Hereafter"

In this world, we learn from our mistakes, we face problems and learn to overcome them. By learning to tame our desires and our egos, we purify our souls and open them up to the Light of God. The purified soul or heart is the only thing that counts in the next life.

## 6.5

### **Guidance According to Islam**

Guidance and salvation comes under many names in the Qur'an. The word for guidance is called hidāyah. But perhaps the most all-encompassing term for guidance and salvation in the Qur'an is something called Sirāt al-Mustaqīm, which means the Straight Path.

Being on the Straight Path, that is, being in a state of guidance is not simply a matter of belief. Indeed, one must be strictly monotheistic and not associate any other gods to Allah.

But in addition to belief, what is integral to guidance in this world is also developing moral character, leading the morally good life which above all means to choose what is good and right over wrong and evil no matter how difficult it may be. Without the moral life, one cannot be guided and simple beliefs (no matter how correct the beliefs are) are of little value.

What is the moral life? What are the right choices? What is evil? The verse gives us a few good examples. They are: being good to parents, our families as a whole, treating people with dignity and helping them when they are in need. It is also being kind to those who are weaker than us. When doing the good, avoiding pretentiousness and being sincere is necessary in Islam.

## 6.6

### **Fate and the Consequences of our Choices in Islam**

According to Islam, our free will in this world is limited. Much of what we think is

under our control, such as the results of many of our actions, are actually not in our hands. There are millions of factors that play into how our choices and events unfold in this world.

These include our environment, upbringing and a predetermined set of rules, such as unconscious cultural and social norms that mediate our choices as well as the results of these choices.

For example, we may be raised in such a way that would make us more likely to commit a deed that society would consider a crime (like not paying taxes) and based on that deed, a set of rules (beyond our control) would be applied to us, like imprisonment.

Despite our environment, we still have some limited maneuverability in choosing the direction we want to take in life. Allah sends Prophets and Divine Books in our lives to show us, despite what our environment tells us, what right and wrong is. Based on these teachings, we are given some space in making some form of God-directed, rational choice.

The primary recipient of these consequences are our selves, that is, our souls. Every single choice that we make in this world brings about two things, either they take us away from God, or they strengthen the bond and relationship we have with the Creator of the world.

## 6.7

### **The Effect of Culture and Environment in Shaping our Religious Choices**

Islam acknowledges the large role the environment plays in our religious life and by extension, the choices we make in the kinds of deeds we do, good or bad.

Many hadiths from the Prophet and his Ahl al-Bayt (as) ask us to look at the family backgrounds of those whom we want to marry. It also asks us to be proper role models for our kids and warns us about the kinds of people we choose as friends.

Probably the biggest influence in our lives is our parents. We often think that we

are completely different from them, that they grew up in a different generation than we did. But we are often unaware of how much they've influenced us in terms of our patience, anger control, anxieties or even manners. No matter how strained our relationships are with our parents, we inherit a lot of our attitudes from them.

Much of the teachings of Islam plays on our free will. It teaches us that we are to keep whatever good traits we inherited from our environment and direct them living a God-pleasing life. On the other hand, it teaches us to forgo the negative traits that we inherited from our parents, friends, tribes, culture and so on and so forth.

6.8

### **Major Sins in Islam**

N/A

6.9

### **Why Allah Allows People to Sin**

On this earth, we have the ability to go about in two ways. We may either choose good or moral paths, or we may choose evil and immorality. Allah has given us the ability to do good. However, the ability or choice to do good comes at a price. This price is the ability to do evil as well.

This ability we speak of, that is, the ability to do good or evil is what we call free will. Free will is the ability for us as individuals to make choices. In technical terms, is the power of acting without the constraint of necessity, determinism or fate. It is the ability to act at one's own behest or discretion.

If Allah were to take away our ability to do evil, then He would have to take away our free will. In other words, the price of taking away evil is to take away good. Now few people would think that that is a good thing!

There is another way of looking at the matter as well. God's intervening in our sinful behaviors and oppression of others is a total package. When we ask the question of why God doesn't intervene when people commit sins or evil acts in

this world, we should be careful as to what we are wishing for. For example, why doesn't God zap our mouths when we lie? Why doesn't He twist our wrists when we cheat in our exams or taxes? Why doesn't God zap us when we insult and belittle our spouses or children or when we gossip about others?

In a world like that, people would essentially be robbed of their own free will, or at the very least, the world would lose its purpose of being a testing grounds for us and a place that nurtures our spiritual growth.

## 6.10

### **Repentance and Forgiveness of Sins in Islam**

The Arabic word for repentance is tawbah. Tawbah literally means to "return" or to "turn back." In other words, when we sin and disobey Allah, what we're doing is that we're turning away from Him instead of moving towards Him. The act of tawbah is to know that one made a mistake and by acknowledging that mistake, one turns around to God and seeks His forgiveness.

Allah forgives us as He knows that we are weak and fallible. He knows that we get distracted and we make wrong choices. He knows that we make mistakes, sometimes out of ignorance and sometimes out of selfishness whilst knowing better. By giving us the opportunity to repent, and the opportunity to be forgiven, Allah demonstrates that He is not interested in punishing us or throw us in hell, He is interested in reforming us and making us better people who live moral lives and are God-conscious in all that they do.

When Allah sees that we have repented and have tried to change, He even takes our sins and turns them into good deeds. This is proof that punishment and hell is the last thing Allah wants for us.

## 6.11

### **The Three Kinds of Rights in Islam**

In Islam, we have three kinds of rights, the right of the self, the rights of others and the rights of God. The rights of the self is to dignify oneself. This means that

one should respect one's body, and how one utilizes one's time. Our fourth Imam said in this regard:

And the right of yourself incumbent upon you is that you employ it in obeying God; then you deliver to your tongue its right, to your hearing its right, to your sight its right, to your hand its right, to your leg its right, to your stomach its right, to your private part its right, and you seek help from God in all that

The rights of others is to be kind to them, in their absence, in their periods of difficulty and when they make mistakes. Our fourth Imam said the following about the rights of our neighbors and friends:

The right of your neighbor is that you guard him when he is absent, honor him when he is present, and aid him when he is wronged. You do not pursue anything of his that is shameful; if you know of any evil from him, you conceal it. If you know that he will accept your counsel, you counsel him in that which is between him and you. You do not forsake him in difficulty, you release him from his stumble, you forgive his sin, and you associate with him generously. And there is no strength save in God.

The rights of God is to believe that He is the absolute sustainer of everything and that nothing or no one has independent power or ability to do things outside of God's prerogatives. Our fourth Imam said in this regard:

The greatest right of God against you is that you worship Him without associating anything with Him. When you do that with sincerity (ikhlas), He has made it binding upon Himself to give you sufficiency in the affair of this world and the next.

## 6.12

### **Sinning Against Others and their Delayed Punishment**

If Allah hates injustice and evil, why doesn't He punish it immediately? Why the delay? Doesn't this encourage people to do more bad deeds?

This question can be answered on two levels. The first level is that when Allah punishes a sin to its full extent in this world, it is an act of mercy for punishment in the next world is much, much worse. If a person fails to see much of a punishment vetted out against him or her in this life, you know that he or she is in real trouble.

The second level is that all sins are punished in this world. What we call delay is a delay in "full punishment".

People are punished in this world for all the misdeeds they do. First, the punishment comes through the pollution and darkening of one's soul. Second, God is often subtle in His punishments where it comes to us in ways we don't expect or notice.

## 6.13

### **Kufr in Islam**

Among Abrahamic religions, particularly with Christianity and Islam, there is a popular approach to salvation. This approach states that in order to enter heaven, you need to have believed in a particular set of religious doctrines. To disbelieve in them means to enter Hell in the next life.

The word *kufr* is used ubiquitously in the Qur'an. Just a moment ago, we mentioned how *kufr* is often translated as disbelief and *kafir* as disbeliever. However, we said that according to the Qur'anic world view, this understanding of *kufr* is highly problematic.

Let's look at the verse that we quoted just now. It said that "there came to them that which they recognized, they disbelieved in it". The word used for disbelieve is *kafarū* which comes from the root word *kufr*.

Kufr literally means to bury or cover something. In its religious sense, it means to cover up the truth. If one is covering up the truth, doesn't mean that you believe in it on some level if you've acknowledged it's the truth? In this sense, kufr is much more than just disbelief.

6.14

### **Trivializing the Harām**

We live in society. We are all brought up within particular cultures. These cultures teach us a variety of dos and don'ts, virtues and taboos. Some of what is culturally learnt is in sync with Islam, but others are not. An unfortunate reality is that the sins that we consider culturally unproblematic are often taken lightly.

Some of our cultures, for example, may not consider backbiting or having intimate relationships with the opposite gender as a moral problem. Unfortunately, this is not unheard of among some Muslim communities nowadays.

Although Islam condemns backbiting and fornication, sometimes these sins are trivialized as they are culturally accepted. A common approach is to play on God's mercy where it is argued that God is so infinitely merciful that He will forgive these sins in the Hereafter.

The first and most obvious problem with this view is that it assumes that God will forgive these sins. Although He is merciful, there is no guarantee that He will not take us up to task on the harām acts we've committed. This approach is as presumptuous about God as it is naïve. It assumes a false certitude that we know what God will do.

To learn more about this subject, please tune in to the full version of the lesson.

6.15

### **Benefits of Islamic Law in this World**

Everything we do in this world, every action we undertake inevitably affects our souls. Directly or indirectly, it plays a role in our salvation. The purpose of our

lives is to worship Allah.

The Qur'an says:

And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me

(Chapter 51, verse 56 of the Holy Qur'an)

This verse does not mean that the reason Allah created us was to have people worship Him, it means that the goal of our life in this world is to worship Allah. In other words, the goal of our lives is not simply believing that God exists, but it is to have a good relationship with Him.

As Allah is our Creator and Nurturer, He also wants us to live good lives in this world. A good life does not necessarily mean a life of luxury, but it does mean a life of dignity and honor. These are characteristics which either poor or rich can assume. Living a dignified and honorable life requires a certain degree of harmony in all aspects of our lives and in all our relationships.

Allah's commands to us isn't just there to purify our souls and ensure success in the Hereafter, but it is also to bring harmony in our lives so that we may have dignity and honor in this world as well.

Three of the areas this lecture looks at are marriage, having children and not drinking alcohol.

6.16

### **Good and Bad Deeds: The Spiritual Consequences of our Choices**

It is often thought that a person can refrain from making choices. Perhaps nowhere is this more common than with the question of right and wrong, or religion itself. Being irreligious is a choice in itself.

Similarly, by not choosing right and wrong, one does make a choice and that choice is not only acquiescing to what is wrong, but it is also choosing to live a life of heedlessness. Heedlessness is a life of indifference and negligence towards one's duties with Allah.

Avoiding choice is thus impossible unless one is dead, unconscious or afflicted with some serious condition that robs us of a normal life. Choice is an essential part of being a human being.

All of our choices play a direct role in shaping our hearts. By hearts we mean our souls. If everything in life is centered on choice, then everything affects our hearts. They can either purify our hearts, or corrupt them.

How is the soul or heart purified and how is it corrupted? A pure heart is a heart that has nothing in it except for God. It is a heart that is focused on pleasing God and doing good for humankind.