

The Virtue of Truthfulness

فضلية الصدق

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“O you who believe! Have fear of God, and be among the truthful.” (Quran 9:119)

Ask the average person to define truthfulness and the answer will most likely be restricted to something about truthful speech. Islam, however, teaches that truthfulness is far more than having an honest tongue. In Islam, truthfulness is the conformity of the outer with the inner, the action with the intention, the speech with belief, and the practice with the preaching. As such, truthfulness is the very cornerstone of the upright Muslim’s character and the springboard for his virtuousness deeds.

The great sage and scholar of Islam, Ibn al-Qayyim, said: “Truthfulness is the greatest of stations, from it sprout all the various stations of those traversing the path to God; and from it sprouts the upright path which if not trodden, perdition is that

person's fate. Through it is the hypocrite distinguished from the believer and the inhabitant of Paradise from the denizen of Hell. It is the sword of God in His earth: it is not placed on anything except that it cuts it; it does not face falsehood expect that it hunts it and vanquishes it; whoever fights with it will not be defeated; and whoever speaks it, his word will be made supreme over his opponent. It is the very essence of deeds and the well spring of spiritual states, it allows the person to embark boldly into dangerous situations, and it is the door through which one enters the presence of the One possessing Majesty. It is the foundation of the building of Islam, the central pillar of the edifice of certainty and the next level in ranking after the level of prophethood.”¹

By practicing truthfulness, a person betters himself, his life is made upright and due to it, he is elevated to praiseworthy heights and raised in ranks in the sight of God as well as the people. As the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, related:

“I order you to be truthful, for indeed truthfulness leads to righteousness, and indeed righteousness leads to Paradise. A man continues to be truthful and strives for truthfulness until he is written as a truthful person with God. And beware of falsehood, for indeed falsehood leads to sinning, and indeed sinning leads to the Fire. A man continues to tell lies and strives upon falsehood until he is written as a liar with God.” (*Saheeh Muslim*)

So, truthfulness is something which is to be cultivated till it becomes implanted in a person's soul and disposition and therefore reflected throughout the person's character. Ali b. Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, mentioned the positive reciprocal effect of behaving truthfully with people in this worldly life:

1 Madarij as-Salikeen.

“Whoever does three things with regards to people, they will necessitate three things from him: whenever he speaks to them he is truthful; whenever they entrust him with something he does not betray them; and whenever he promises them something he fulfils it. If he does this, their hearts will love him; their tongues will praise him; and they will come to his aid.”²

As for the Next Life, through God’s Grace and Mercy, the obedient ones - practitioners of truthfulness - will reach a station in Paradise alongside those most fortunate of souls mentioned in the revelation.

“And whosoever obeys God and His Messenger, such will be in the company of those whom God has blessed: the Prophets, the truthful ones, the martyrs, and the righteous. And how excellent a company are such people!” (Quran 4:69)

In fact, truthfulness is an essential attribute of every single prophet who graced the earth. We are told in the Quran:

“And mention in the Book, Abraham: surely he was a most truthful Prophet.” (Quran 19:41)

“And mention in the Book, Ishmael: surely, he was a man true to his word, and he was a Messenger, a Prophet.” (Quran 19:54)

“And mention in the Book, Enoch: surely he was a most truthful Prophet.” (Quran 19:56)

We also read in the Quran how a man incarcerated alongside the Prophet Joseph addressed him with the words:

“Joseph! O most truthful one!...” (Quran 12:46)

...and that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was also declared truthful in the Words of God:

² Ibn Muflih, *Adaab ash-Shari’a*.

“The Messiah (Jesus), son of Mary, was no more than a Messenger; many were the Messengers that passed away before him. His mother (Mary) was a truthful one, a Believer....” (Quran 5:75)

... and the Companions of God’s Messenger, the “believers” mentioned time and time again in the Quran, also reached the lofty ranks of the truthful ones:

“The believers are but those people who believed in God and His Messenger without ever feeling doubt thereafter, and strove with their souls and possessions in the way of God; those are the ones who are the truthful.” (Quran 49:15)

Hence, to tread the path of truthfulness is to tread the path of the most righteous of God’s creation. And as for ways and means to engender this most noble of virtues into our daily lives, then we have been left an ocean of teachings from God’s Final Messenger to humanity, the Prophet Muhammad, detailing and describing precisely what the virtue, nay!, the *injunction* of truthfulness requires. One from among these vast and numerous sayings of God’s Messenger is his plea:

“Guarantee for me six things and I will guarantee Paradise for you: tell the truth when you speak, fulfill your promises, be faithful when you are trusted, safeguard your private parts, lower your gaze, and withhold your hands (from harming others).”³

And God confirmed the truthfulness of these words of His Beloved Messenger with His Own True Word:

“For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for truthful men and women, for patient men and women, for humble men and women, for charitable men and women, for fasting men and women, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who

3 Reported by Ubaadah, in As-Saheehah.

engage much in God's praise: for them has God prepared forgiveness and a great reward." (Quran 33:35)

Just as truthfulness is the very cornerstone of the upright person's character and the springboard for his virtuousness, falsehood, its opposite, is the foundation of a person's depravity and the launch pad for his wickedness. Just as the truthfulness of a person starts from within - that is, it is a reflection of a state of true faith - a person's dishonesty, lying and deceit is also a reflection of the inner state. This is why God mentions truthfulness as being the opposite of hypocrisy:

"That God may reward the truthful for their truthfulness, and punish the hypocrites if He wills, or turn mercifully towards them..." (Quran 33:24)

...and why He mentions sincerity as a mark of truthfulness.

"So that God might recompense the truthful for their truthfulness...."

Little wonder then that the most righteous and truthful of people, the Prophets of God⁴ and their true followers, were not belied, denounced, opposed, oppressed and rejected except by those who were given to dishonesty, deceit and hypocrisy.

"It is only those who believe not in the Signs of God, who fabricate falsehood, and it is they who are the liars." (Quran 16:105)

That is regards to falsehood in faith. As for falsehood in deed, God states in the Quran.

"...that He may try you, which of you is the best in deeds." (Quran 67:2)

4 The Companion, Anas b. Malik, reported that the Prophet even mentioned how: **'A Prophet does not (even) wink!'** (Abu Dawud, Nisaa'ee, Hakim, Ahmad)

A scholar from the early period of Islam, Fudail bin Iyaad, commented on this verse, explaining:

“which of you is the best in deeds’ means ‘the most sincere and correct.’ If the deed is sincere and not correct, it will not be accepted, and if it is correct and not sincere, it will not be accepted. It will not be accepted until it is both sincere and correct!”

One everyday example of where sincerity and correction of action are often subverted by falsehood is in the buying and selling of goods. Hence we find the Prophet saying:

“If they (two parties meeting to trade) are truthful and clarify (any and all deficiency in their goods), their transaction will be blessed. But if they lie and conceal (any deficiency in their goods), the blessings of their transaction will be eradicated.”⁵

And what of falsehood in speech? Falsehood of the tongue, or what is more commonly referred to as lying, is a characteristic roundly rejected by the entire world – even if its inhabitants may fall into it from time to time. After all, if God would punish his last and greatest Prophet in case he were to lie...

“If he (Prophet Muhammad) had invented false sayings concerning Us, We would surely have grasped him firmly, and then cut off the artery of his heart, and none of you could have withheld Us from doing this.” (Quran 69:44-7)

...then how could lying be acceptable from anyone else besides His Prophet?! And he, the Prophet Muhammad, the Truthful One, said:

“A slave’s faith will not be upright until his heart is upright, and his heart will not be upright until his tongue is upright, and a

5 Reported by Hakim b. Hizam, in Saheeh Al-Bukhari and Saheeh Muslim.

man whose neighbor is not safe from his harm will not enter Paradise.”⁶

The Prophet said: **“A person lies and lies, until he is written with God as a habitual liar.”** (*Saheeh Al-Bukhari*)

Thus, the habitual liar is despised, truly and thoroughly despised, by all – even his own kind – as no-one can trust a liar, not even other liars. And just as clarity in speech is a sign of truthfulness, so then ambiguity, innuendo, sarcasm and every other form of deception and trickery of the tongue is denounced in Islam. Even lying in jest has been condemned by the Prophet when he said:

“I guarantee a house in the middle of Paradise for the one who leaves off lying even if it be in jest.”⁷

...and his saying:

“Woe to the person who lies to make people laugh! Woe to him, woe to him!”⁸ The Prophet’s closest friend and immediate temporal successor, Abu Bakr *as-Şiddeeq* (i.e. the truthful - so named by the Prophet due to the truthfulness of his faith), further said:

“Beware of lying, for lying opposes (true) faith.”⁹

And the daughter of Abu Bakr, Aisha, who was the beloved wife of the Prophet, mentioned that:

“There was no trait more abhorrent to the Messenger of God, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, than lying.”¹⁰

6 Reported by the Companion, Anas b. Malik in *As-Saheehah*.

7 Reported by Abu Umamah, in *At-Tirmidhi*.

8 Reported by Mu’awiyah b. Jaydah al-Qushayri in *Abu Dawud*.

9 Bayhaqi, *Shu’ab al-Iman*.

10 Ahmad.

Suffice as a deterrence from lying is its being listed as a trait of that most wretched of conditions: hypocrisy. The Prophet Muhammad said:

“The signs of the hypocrite are three: when he speaks he lies; when he makes an oath he breaks it; and when he is entrusted with something he betrays that trust.”¹¹

Not only do we learn about the abhorrence of directly lying itself, but Islam also mercifully educates us as to the dangers of all that which *indirectly* leads to lying.

Again from Aishah we learn that the Prophet would invoke his Lord, praying: **“O God! I seek refuge with you from all sins, and from being in debt.”** When asked: **“O Messenger of God! You frequently seek refuge with God from being in debt!”** The Prophet of God replied: **“If a person is in debt, he tells lies when he speaks, and breaks his promises when he promises.”**¹²

In the same vein, the Prophet explicitly ordered his followers:

“Leave that which causes you doubt for that which does not cause you doubt. For in truthfulness lies tranquility, and in lying lies doubt.”¹³

Striving for truthfulness then, in spirit, word and deed, is a matter which requires the utmost steadfastness from the believer, as well as the utmost vigilance against the dangers of falsehood, insincerity, deceit and hypocrisy:

“That God will reward the People of Truth for their truth, and punish the hypocrites if that be His Will, or turn to them in Mercy; for God is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful.” (Quran 33:24)

11 Reported by the Companion, Abu Hurayrah, in Saheeh Al-Bukhari and Saheeh Muslim

12 Saheeh Al-Bukhari.

13 Reported by Al-Hasan b. Ali, in At-Tirmidhi.

