Synopsis of Friday Sermon
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In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on Dec 28, 2012

Islam, Iman, and Ihsan (Part 1)

“Those who believe and do good deeds will not be blamed for what they may have consumed (in the past) as long as they are mindful of God (have taqwa), believe and do good deeds, and continue to be mindful of God (having more taqwa) and believe, and grow ever more mindful of God (having even more taqwa) and perfect their faith (Ihsan): God loves the Muhsineen (those who strive to perfect their faith)” (al-Ma’idah, 5:93). What is inferred from this ayah of Surat al-Ma’idah is that there are three different levels of deen (maratib al-deen).

One’s Iman or faith may be (1) at the level of Islam (legal Iman), (2) at the level of personal conviction, i.e., Iman in the heart, or (3) at the level of Ihsan, which is the highest level of Iman.

The Qur’an refers to several inquiries directed by the companions (sahaba) to the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). A few examples of such inquiries are: “They ask you about the phases of the moon.” (al-Baqarah, 2:189), “They will ask you what they should spend on others” (al-Baqarah, 2:215), “They ask you about fighting in the sacred month” (al-Baqarah, 2:217), and so on. However, they never asked the Prophet (SAW) about the different levels of Iman. It took a strange man to come out of nowhere to ask the Prophet (SAW) these very important and fundamental questions.

These questions were answered by Prophet Muhammad (SAW) in a well-known hadith, commonly known as Hadith Jibril that has been narrated by many prominent companions and collected by various collectors of ahadith including Imam al-Bukhari and Imam Muslim. According to the Sahih of Imam Muslim, it is narrated that ‘Umar ibn Khattab (RA) said,

“While we were one day sitting with the Messenger of Allah (SAW), there appeared before us a man dressed in extremely white clothes and with extremely black hair. No traces of travel were visible on him, and none of us knew him. He sat down close by the Prophet (SAW) and rested his knees upon his knees and placed his two hands upon his thighs, and said, ‘O Muhammad! Tell me about Islam.’ The Messenger of Allah (SAW) said, ‘Islam is that you should testify that there is no deity but Allah and that Muhammad is His Messenger, that you should perform salah (ritual prayer), pay the zakah, fast during Ramadan, and perform Hajj (pilgrimage) to the House (the Ka’bah at Makkah), if you can find a way to it (or find the means for making the journey to it).’ He (the man) said, ‘You have told the truth.’ We were astonished at him questioning him and telling him that he was right, he went on to ask, ‘Tell me about Iman (faith).’ He (the Messenger of Allah) answered, ‘It is that you believe in Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers, in the Last Day, and in fate (qadar), both in its good and in its evil aspects.’ He said, ‘You have told the truth.’ Then he (the man) said, ‘Tell me about Ihsan.’ He (the Messenger of Allah) answered, ‘It is that you worship Allah as though you could see Him, for if you can’t see Him then truly He sees you.’ He said, ‘Tell me about the Hour.’ He (the Messenger of Allah) said, ‘the one questioned knows no more than the questioner.’ So he said, ‘Well, tell me about its signs (i.e. of its coming).’ He (SAW) said, ‘They are that the slave-girl will give birth to her mistress, that you will see the barefooted ones, the naked, the destitute, the herdsmen of the sheep (competing with each other) in raising lofty buildings.’ Thereupon the man went away. I waited a while, and then he
(the Messenger of Allah) said, ‘O 'Umar, do you know who that questioner was?’ I replied, ‘Allah and His Messenger know best.’ He said, ‘That was Jibril. He came to teach you your religion (deen).’”

There are different narrations to this hadith, but what it tells us is that the strange man was none other than angel Jibril (AS) who had come to teach the companions their deen. According to one narration the man who had just appeared out of nowhere, also disappeared mysteriously, and could not be traced by the companions who in compliance of the Prophet’s instructions, went out to search for him. Even the Prophet (SAW) did not recognize him until such time that it dawned upon him that the person was Jibril. Another narration says that Umar (RA) kept thinking for three days about this man who had asked the Prophet (SAW) such fundamental and crucial questions which the companions themselves had not asked him. It was then that the Prophet (SAW) informed him that the man was Jibril who had come to teach them their religion, and that whenever Jibril had come earlier as a man, he had recognized him. What was strange about this man was that he would ask the Prophet (SAW) a question and confirm the answer given by the Prophet (SAW) just as a teacher asks his students questions and then gives them his feedback.

The above mentioned hadith describes what Islam, iman, and ihsan are. The two terms, Islam and iman are often taken for granted to be the same as they usually appear to be used synonymously in the Qur’an. Would it be correct to say that a Muslim is a Mu’min and a Mu’min is a Muslim? Indeed, at the legal level, every Muslim is a Mu’min and every Mu’min is a Muslim. But at the spiritual level, this may not be so.

In the hadith under reference, The Prophet (SAW) explained that Islam relates to the outward actions of the limbs in words and deeds, the first being the action of the tongue, which declares the testimony of faith, “I bear witness that there is no god except Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.” Then there are the modes of worship that involve one’s limbs. These are, prayers (salah), obligatory charity (zakah), fasting (sawm), and pilgrimage (hajj). The two testimonies of faith (al-shahadatan) are the basis of monotheism (tauhid). Prayers are a means to be constantly connected with Allah (SWT), because a true believer needs Him every moment of his or her life. The concept of monotheism and the need to pray are beautifully blended in the ayah, “Verily, I am God; there is no god but Me. So worship Me and keep up the prayer so that you remember Me” (Ta Ha, 20:14). Zakah entails action pertaining to production of wealth, and its purification through spending in charitable causes as ordained by Allah (SWT). Fasting too is a mode of worship that besides many other benefits raises one’s level of piety, and strengthens one spiritually. Finally, performance of hajj, which is all about sincere repentance, eradicates one’s sins and makes one return, as if it were, to the day one was born.

As far as iman is concerned, it is to believe in Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers, the Last Day, and fate (qadar), both the good and the bad of it. These are unseen realities that a Muslim must believe in. Any Muslim who denies any one of these articles of faith will cease to be a Muslim, even if he or she performs all the prescribed modes of worship.

It is important to understand the fundamental difference between Islam (legal iman) and iman, meaning iman at the level of conviction in the heart (yaqeen fil qalb). This distinction is mentioned in an ayah of Surat al-Hujurat, which says, “The desert Arabs say, ‘We have iman.’ Say: ‘You do not have iman. Say rather, ‘We have become Muslims’ for iman has not yet entered into your hearts. If you obey Allah and His Messenger, He will not undervalue your actions in any way. Allah is Ever-Forgiving, Most Merciful’” (al-Hujurat, 49:14). Here the Prophet (SAW) is told to inform the desert Arabs that they have no iman, because it is not found in their hearts. This means that they do not have the required recognition of the truth and commitment to it. It is God who alone can look into people’s hearts and judge their intentions and thoughts. If people obey God by doing what He asks them to do, and their works follow God’s command, they will be rewarded, even though these works are not necessarily accompanied by recognition of truth and commitment to it. In this case the desert Arabs have come to the Prophet (SAW) and surrendered to Islam. They became Muslims while real faith has not yet matured to the level of personal conviction. In connection with this ayah, Ibn Taymiyyah, a 13th century Islamic scholar and theologian, stated, “God has proved in the Qur’an that there can be Islam without iman.” Ibn Taymiyyah and his student Ibn al-Qayyim (May Allah (SWT) bestow mercy upon their souls) are of the opinion that this particular ayah makes it very clear that while every Mu’min is a Muslim, every Muslim is not necessarily a Mu’min.

This discussion brings us to another point, and that is to know the difference between a Muslim and a
Mu’min. Interestingly, Imam Abu Hanifa (May Allah (SWT) bestow mercy upon his soul), one of the greatest Imams of the legal schools of thought (madhahib), arguing from a purely jurisprudential point of view contends in his work al-Fiqh al-Akbar that every believer is a Mu’min from a legalistic angle. That person, however, sinful or hypocrite he may be, will continue to enjoy all the rights and privileges of a Muslim in an Islamic state. For Imam Abu Hanifa, therefore, iman neither increases nor decreases. It remains the same. On the contrary, Imam al-Bukhari, the leading authority on hadith, argues from a purely spiritual point of view and asserts that iman does increase and decrease.

There are numerous hadith that tell us who a Muslim is and who a Mu’min is. For example, there is a hadith that says, “A Muslim is one from whose tongue and hands the Muslims are secure; and a muhajir (emigrant) is one who abandons what Allah has forbidden.” Another hadith tells us who a Mu’min is, Umar bin al-Khattab (RA) addressed Allah’s Messenger saying, “Messenger of Allah! You are dearer to me than everything except myself.” Thereupon, the Prophet (SAW) said, “By the one in whose hand is my life, your iman will not be complete until I become dearer to you than your own self.” Then Umar said to him, “You are now dearer to me than my own self.” The Prophet (SAW) said, “Now! Umar your iman is complete.” Would it then make one if one loves oneself or someone else more than the Prophet (SAW) or perhaps if one is mischievous to others a non-believer (non-Muslim, or one without iman)?

These hadith have to be understood in their context. It is not proper to label a Muslim as a disbeliever (kafir) unless that person outright rejects any of the articles of faith or modes of worship. As long as he does not deny them, he will be treated as a Muslim in an Islamic State even if he is not a practicing Muslim. While Islam has more to do with the outward actions and is a legal status, iman is a state of the heart that is known only to Allah (SWT).

In a well-known incident, the Prophet (SAW) admonished Osama ibn Zayd (RA) for killing a man who had got the best of the Muslims in battle and then when Osama approached him to take off his head, he pronounced the kalmia (profession of faith). Thinking this was just an attempt to spare his life, Osama killed him anyway. When he mentioned the incident to the Prophet (SAW), he was very angry at Osama and told him, “Did you kill him in spite of his professing La ilaha illallah (There is no god but Allah).” And Osama replied, “O Messenger of Allah! He said it out of fear of our arms. The Prophet (SAW) said, “Why did you not cut his heart open to find out whether he had done so sincerely or not? ….”

It is also learnt from a hadith that the iman leaves the heart when a person is in the act of committing certain major sins, and comes back to the heart after the act has been committed, and the person repents. The hadith says, “No adulterer is a believer (mu’min) at the time when he is committing adultery; no thief is a believer at the time when he is stealing; nor does the one who drinks wine do so while he is a believer. Yet, (the gate of) repentance is open thereafter.” Another version of the hadith says, “If a man commits zina (fornication/adultery), faith comes out of him and hovers over him like a cloud, then when he stops, faith returns to him.” It is evident from these prophetic sayings that a believer who commits sins remains a Muslim or a legal mu’min.

There is a hadith which says, “What lies between a man and disbelief (kufr) is the abandonment of prayer.” The Ulama’ interpreting this hadith say that such kufr does not relate to the kufr of aqidah (belief) but is more related to fisq (transgression of a divine law).

A politico-religious sectarian group of fanatical and radically extremist Muslims called the Kharajites (Kharijites) had emerged in the early history of Islam, just after about thirty years of the Prophet’s demise. According to their beliefs any Muslim who committed a major sin (fornication, intoxication, murder, stealing etc.) was regarded as a disbeliever, and hence an apostate. Accordingly that person could never re-enter the faith and had to be killed for his apostasy along with his wives and children. The Kharajites were defeated by Ali ibn Talib (RA) in the battle of Naharwan. Scholars of Islam consider such Muslims as fisiqs (transgressors of a divine law) and not kafirs (disbelievers).

Even the hypocrites (munafiqs) during the Prophet’s blessed life were not declared to be outside the pale of Islam because they continued to remain Muslims in the legal sense and continued to enjoy full citizenship of the Islamic State despite the Qur’an’s stern warning about their ultimate fate: “The hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of Hell, and you will find no one to help them” (al-Nisa’, 4:145).
Hence it is important that we understand these concepts and avoid being judgmental by calling or treating Muslims as disbelievers by questioning their faith.

Edited by Dr. Munawar Haque
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