Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on July 13, 2012

Fulfilling the Objectives of Ramadan

Undoubtedly, the month of Ramadan is a great and blessed month. We are grateful to Allah (SWT) for making us Muslims. We are proud of our identity of who we are. We are the slaves (‘ibad) of Allah (SWT), and have willingly submitted to Him.

One of the ways that the connection between the slave (‘abd) and the Master (Rabb) is kept intact is through the five daily prayers (salat). Another way is through fasting (sawm) once a year, during the month of Ramadan. Fasting helps to regulate the body and the soul. The Arabic word sawm means to abstain from something. Thus, while we fast, we do not only abstain from food, drink, and spousal relations, but also refrain from all evil intentions and activities including vain talk. The meaning of sawm also extends to not talking. We learn from the Qur’an that Maryam (AS) did not speak to anyone when she returned with ‘Isa (AS) to the town. “Eat, drink, and be comforted. Then if you see any human, say, ‘Indeed I have vowed a fast to the All-beneficent, so I will not speak to any human today’” (Maryam, 19:26). There is no imposition on us not to talk. When required to do so, we should engage ourselves only in useful and beneficial talk. The tongue is to be kept moist with the remembrance (zikr) of Allah (SWT).

The maximum benefit can only be reaped from the month of Ramadan if we approach it with the right attitude and the right intention. Fasting is nothing new but a mode of worship that was made obligatory upon all nations (umam). “O you who believe! Prescribed for you is fasting as it was prescribed for those who were before you, so that you may attain taqwa” (al-Baqarah, 2:183). While there may have been differences with different nations in the type and duration of fasting, the fasting in Islam is from dawn to sundown. We are also recommended to have a pre-dawn meal (suhoor) before beginning the fast. The Prophet (SAW) said, “Have suhoor, for in suhoor there is blessing (barakah).”

On an average, the duration of fasting during the holy month of Ramadan this year is 17 hours; apparently quite tough, but easy for those who are conscious of Allah (SWT), and are resolute in their observance of His commands. The attitude of the humble and obedient ‘ibad of Allah (SWT) is to listen to the divine command and obey. “And they say, ‘We hear and obey. Our Lord, forgive us, and toward You is the return’” (al-Baqarah, 2:285). Therefore, despite the interruption in the normal habits of eating, drinking, sleeping, and other lawful activities, Allah (SWT) makes matters easy for such believers who are always mindful of their Lord. “And whoever is mindful of Allah, He shall grant him ease in his affairs” (al-Talaq, 65:4). The rigorous month long routine of Ramadan is most conducive to increasing our mindfulness of Allah (taqwa). The month of Ramadan is all about taqwa. It is the attainment of taqwa, which is the main objective and wisdom of fasting. “O you who believe! Prescribed for you is fasting as it was prescribed for those who were before you, so that you may be mindful of God” (al-Baqarah, 2:183).

Taqwa is a comprehensive Qur’anic term with different nuances, some of which are: God-consciousness, God-mindfulness, God-awareness, Godliness, righteousness, piety, fear, and devoutness. The term taqwa and its
derivatives have to be understood in the context in which it is used in the Qur’an. It is a verbal noun derived from the Arabic root “waqqa,” which means “to be protected from the harmful.” For Imam Raghib al-Asfahani, the Arabic word wiqayah means to prevent or protect something from that which may harm it. As a Shariah term it means to protect oneself from acts that are sinful by leaving what is forbidden. All that is prohibited by Allah (SWT) or acts that He tells us not to do are harmful to us in this life and will have grave consequences on the Day of Judgment if we do not save ourselves from their harm. In this regard, we should pay heed to ayat such as “O you who believe! Save yourselves and your families from a fire whose fuel is people and stones” (al-Tahrim, 66:6), and “O you, who believe! Have fear of God, and give up what is still due to you from usury, if you are true believers” (al-Baqarah, 2:278).

We learn from a beautiful story that Umar ibn al-Khattab (RA) asked Ubay ibn Ka’ab (RA), a well-known scribe of the Prophet (SAW) whose knowledge of the Qur’an was praised by the Prophet (SAW) himself: “How would you describe taqwa?” In reply Ubay asked, “Have you ever had to traverse a thorny path?” Umar replied in the affirmative and Ubay then continued, “How do you do so?” Umar said that he would carefully walk through after first having collected all loose and flowing clothing in his hands so nothing gets caught in the thorn. Ubay said: “This is the meaning of taqwa.” The example of taqwa, therefore, is like that of thorny path. When you see a thorn, you keep away from the thorns because of the fear of getting pricked by it. Similarly when you see a sin, you keep away from it because of the fear of Allah. Taqwa is put into the hearts of the true believers to cause them to fear the punishment of Allah (SWT).

The central message of all God’s prophets and messengers was: “O my people! Worship Allah! You have no other god besides Him” (al-‘Araf, 7:59). With the advent of Muhammad (SAW), the last and final messenger of Allah (SWT), The proclamation of the earlier messengers was now addressed by him to the entire mankind. “O mankind! Worship your Lord, who created you and those who were before you, so that you may save yourselves” (al-Baqarah, 2:21). Now that there will be no more messengers sent to us, and we being the messengers of the final messenger, the onus of responsibility of carrying on this universal message lies on our shoulders.

Among numerous benefits of fasting, both for body and soul, we are also trained to sympathize and empathize with the poor and the deprived. At least for some time we experience what it means to go through the pangs of hunger and thirst. This feeling encourages us to share and care for God’s sake alone. “We feed you only for the sake of Allah. We do not want any reward from you nor any thanks” (al-Insan, 76:9).

Taqwa and faith (iman) go hand in hand. One cannot rise above just being a Muslim without having taqwa. Ayah 93 of Surat al-Ma’idah verifies the fact that “taqwa” is the driving force that makes believers move from a lower state of iman to a higher state of iman. “Those who believe and do good deeds will not be blamed for what they have consumed [in the past], so long as they have taqwa (are mindful of God), believe and do good deeds, then they have (more) taqwa (awareness of God) and believe, then they have (even more) taqwa and devoted themselves to excellence (in worship). And God loves al-Muhsineen (those who reach the state of spiritual excellence)” (al-Ma’idah, 5:93). This ayah was revealed after the revelation of the ayah (5:90) that completely prohibited the believers from consuming intoxicants (khamr). Those believers who came to learn of this divine command stopped drinking alcohol immediately and gave up all other things that were prohibited in this ayah. However, there were some other believers who being far away from the Prophet’s mosque in Medina got the news about this prohibition late and kept consuming alcohol even after the revelation of the ayah. When the news of the prohibition reached them, their mindfulness of Allah (SWT) made them deeply concerned about their spiritual wellbeing and about the fact that they had violated a divine injunction. It was then that Allah (SAW) absolved them of any blame for what they may have consumed in the past as long as they were mindful of Him. Thus the bottom line is to raise one’s level of taqwa or consciousness of Allah (SWT). We should not settle just for Islam but strive for raising ourselves to higher states of iman. There is yet a higher state of iman, which is ihsan, which according to a Prophetic tradition is “to serve Allah as though you could see Him, for though you cannot see Him yet He sees you.” This is the highest level of faith, and we should struggle our level best to achieve that.

In contemporary times, most Muslims can be said to be at the level of Islam; not at the level of real
This is because the Qur’an says, “Do not lose heart or despair— if you are true believers you have the upper hand” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:139). Let alone having the upper hand, the Muslim ummah is being subjected to humiliation and disgrace almost everywhere. This is a clear indication that most Muslims have settled for being at the level of Islam and are nowhere near the level of real iman. Improving upon one’s iman is a constant struggle and does not come about just by wishing for it. The holy month of Ramadan should give us considerable leverage in raising our taqwa, and hence our iman.

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