Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on June 21, 2013

Have Taqwa of Allah Wherever You Are – Part 1

A Muslim is supposed to be a humble, obedient slave of Allah. He is required to mold his life, his values, his priorities, and his ambitions according to the command of his Lord. He must practice and preach the ideology and practical guidance of Islam to his fellow human beings. He should enjoin all that is good and forbid from all that is evil. Finally, he is required to try his utmost to establish God’s kingdom of heaven, here on earth, where divine justice reigns supreme.

Islam is a deen or a comprehensive way of life that encompasses the individual as well as the collective spheres of life. In order to fulfill the obligations of our deen, one must be conscious of those duties and must be conscious of Allah (SWT) who assigned those duties to us. This concept of God consciousness is called taqwa, which we are commanded to have wherever we are. In a hadith, the Prophet (SAW) said, “Have taqwa of Allah wherever you are, and follow an evil deed with a good one to wipe it out, and treat the people with good behavior.”

The Qur’an says, “This is the Book, without any doubt. It contains guidance for those who have taqwa” (al-Baqarah, 2:2). What exactly is taqwa? The term taqwa has to be understood in the context in which it is used in the Qur’an because it has different shades of meanings, some of which are: God-consciousness, God-mindfulness, Godliness, righteousness, piety, and fear.

The word taqwa connotes ‘fear of Allah’ when there is an expression of threatening in an ayah of the Qur’an; such as, “O you who believe! Have taqwa (fear) of Allah, and give up what is still due to you from usury, if you are true believers. If you do not, then be warned of war from Allah and His Messenger” (al-Baqarah, 2:278-279).

Words in the Arabic language are made up of mainly three or more root letters. The derivatives of a root word invariably have connection with the root word and its meaning. Taqwa is derived from the root ‘waqa’ made up of the three letters Waw-Qaf-Ya, which means “to protect or to save from harm.” The word wiqayah from the same root means preventing or protecting something from that which may harm it. As a Shari’ah term, wiqayah means to protect oneself from acts that are sinful by leaving what is forbidden. These definitions are offered by Imam al-Raghib al-Asfahani in his work Mufradat al-Fadh al-Qur’an. We are also familiar with the adage, ‘prevention is better than cure’.

There are many ayat in the Qur’an that make reference to the concept of taqwa. One of them is “Our Lord, give us good in this world and in the Hereafter, and protect us (waqina) from the torment of the Fire” (al-Baqarah, 2:201). This used to be one of the most beloved du’as of our beloved Prophet Muhammad (SAW). There is an ayah in Surat al-Tahrim that says, “O you who believe, protect yourselves (qoo anfusakum) and your families from a Fire whose fuel is people and stones” (al-Tahrim, 66:6).
All prophets and messengers of Allah who came before Muhammad (SAW) conveyed the same message of tawhid to the people to whom they were sent, and said, “O my people worship Allah; you have no other god but He” (al-‘A’raf, 7:59). Being the last and final messenger of Allah sent to the entire humanity, Muhammad (SAW) shared the message of tawhid with all peoples of the world for all times to come. “O people, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, so that you may be saved (ta-taqoon)” (al-Baqarah, 2:21). Taqwa involves struggle, here in this world, in order to earn the pleasure of Allah and be saved from His wrath, and that can only be done through complete submission and obedience to Him.

Taqwa is profoundly explained in a discussion between Umar ibn al-Khattab and Ubay ibn Ka’b (RAA). The latter was one of the scribes of the Prophet (SAW) and renowned for his deep understanding of the Qur’an. Ubay Ibn Ka'b gave a comprehensive explanation of taqwa in response to a query from Umar (RAA). Ka’b asked Umar if he had walked through a thorny bush path. Umar replied, “Yes.” Ka’b then inquired, “What did you do?” Umar said, “I tucked in my cloak, (so as not to tear his clothes), and struggled my way through.” Ka’b said, “This is taqwa.” To have taqwa is to protect oneself from the thorny paths of life—the temptations and attractions that lure man toward satisfying his passion and desires through forbidden means. It is a constant struggle against falsehood (batil). There are glad tidings for those who have the taqwa of Allah, “O you who believe, if you taqwa of Allah, He will grant you Furgan (the ability to discriminate between right and wrong), and will forgive you your sins: for Allah is limitless in His great bounty” (al-Anfal, 8:29). Regarding Furgan, Ibn Ishaq says that Allah gives insight to the God fearing person to enable him to differentiate between right and wrong. Ibn Kathir says the same thing, adding that this knowledge of differentiating between truth and falsehood will induce the person’s victory, safety, and relief from the difficulties of this world, and will also ensure his happiness and forgiveness of his sins on the Day of Judgment. Ali ibn Talib (RA) defined taqwa as “fearing Allah, adhering to His commandments, being content with what He provides one with, and getting ready for the Day of Judgment.”

Struggling to save oneself from the wrath of Allah is induced by the fear of His punishment, and this is positive fear. This is complemented by positive hope which comes from staying away from that which displeases Allah and doing what He commands us to do, thus becoming successful on the Day of Judgment. After all, the ultimate goal and objective of Muslims should be to live in this world for the next world. We are here in this world on a journey; to be tested by Allah. We are returning back to Him. If we are conscious of this fact, then we should do whatever we can within our means to go back to Allah in a state where He is pleased with us and we are pleased with Him. “Allah is well pleased with them and they are well pleased with Him. Thus shall the God-fearing be rewarded” (al-Bayyinah, 98:8).

Having taqwa of Allah does not have to do only with the mode or place of worship, or the mere pretense of one’s piety. A hadith warns us, “The one who prays and wants people to see him has committed shirk. The one who fasts and wants people to know about his fasting has committed shirk. The one who gives sadaqah (charity) and wants people to know about his charity has committed shirk.” One has to sincerely and keenly assess oneself in light of this hadith and see if he or she is on the threshold of hypocrisy (nifaq) or shirk, however hidden these may be.

While Islam has to do with one’s outward manifestation of faith, iman has to do with one’s inward state of faith and resides in the heart. It is only Allah who knows the state or degree of an individual’s iman. Similarly, the seat of taqwa is the heart. On one occasion the Prophet (SAW) pointing his finger toward his heart said, “Taqwa is here.” Only Allah knows what is in the heart of a person. “Surely, He is All Aware of what lies in the hearts” (Hud, 11:5). Real piety or righteousness (taqwa) is to be practiced in whatever situation one may be. For example, honoring one’s contracts and covenants with people or paying employees their wages in time are also manifestations of taqwa.

The companions of the Prophet (SAW) were so mindful of Allah that they got genuinely concerned when ayah 103 of Surat Aal ‘Imran was revealed. The ayah says, “O you who believe, have taqwa of Allah as
is His due, and do not die except as Muslims” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:102). They expressed their inability to the Prophet (SAW) to abide by this divine command, saying that because of their worldly preoccupations, they simply could not be mindful of Allah all the time to a degree that He merited. In His infinite mercy Allah (SWT) revealed the ayah, “So be mindful of Allah as best as you can; and listen, and obey; and spend in charity: it is for your own good” (al-Taghabun, 64:16).

There is another ayah that says, “Allah does not burden any soul with more than it can bear” (al-Baqarah, 2:286). While such ayat provide tremendous relief to the believers, they also imply that one’s effort toward achieving taqwa should be stretched to the utmost. Allah knows the potential and the capability of each one of us. Each one of us has to exert his or her level best. “Race with one another towards forgiveness from your Lord and towards a paradise the width of which spans the heavens and the earth. It has been prepared for the (Muttaqeen) God Conscious” (Aal Imran, 3:133).

Taqwa is an advice (wasiyyah) given by all of Allah’s prophets and messengers to their people. “We have commanded those who were given the Scripture before you, and We command you to be mindful of Allah” (al-Nisa’, 4:131). We should know that if we are doing something good for Allah’s sake, He will not abandon us. “Allah is with those who have taqwa of Him and who do good” (al-Nahl, 16:128). Another ayah tells us, “Allah is with the believers” (al-Anfal, 8:19).

The most precious advice that can be given to anyone is to have taqwa of Allah. Every Friday during the sermon, the Imam following the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW) recites a few Qur’anic ayat that admonish and advise people to have taqwa of Allah. These include ayat such as, “O you who believe, have taqwa of Allah as is His due, and do not die except as Muslims” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:102); “O you who believe! Be conscious of Allah, and let every soul consider carefully what it sends ahead for tomorrow; be conscious of Allah, for Allah is well aware of everything you do” (al-Hashr, 59:18); and “O you who believe, be conscious of Allah, and speak the right words. He will put your actions right for you and forgive you your wrong deeds. Whoever obeys Allah and His Messenger has certainly achieved a great success” (al-Ahzab, 33:70-71). ‘Right words’ (Qaulan sadida) in this ayah refers to saying the truth to uphold justice under all circumstances. “O you who believe, be upholders of justice, bearing witness for Allah alone, even against yourselves or your parents and relatives” (al-Nisa’, 4:135). People of taqwa who do that are promised forgiveness from their Lord.

In shà’Allah, the subject under discussion will be continued.