

Dialogue on enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil

. It could be said that you now know the demarcations of right and wrong, halal and haraam, wajib and mustahab. Therefore, the time has come to act upon the injunction of God Almighty,

“And among you there should be a group who invite to good and enjoin what is right and forbid what is wrong, and these it is that shall be successful”. (3/104).

* How should I do it?

- Invite people to good deeds and make them stop committing the acts that you know are wrong.

* What has this to do with me, i.e. meddling in other people’s affairs? Does it not suffice that I adhere to what is required from me by the Islamic injunctions?

- Beware, o son! You shouldn’t say that. In certain circumstances, this obligation is a collective one imposed on the Muslim community (wajibun kifa’i, by contrast to wajibun aini - the obligation that falls on every adult Muslim i.e. individual duty): In other words, when you, I, and others do not discharge such a duty, all of us shall be rendered sinners. If only one of us takes it upon themselves to uphold the obligation, the rest shall be absolved of the responsibility.

Beside the clear injunction contained in the Qur’anic verse I have just recited, it has been reported that the Prophet (s.a.w.) said, “My umma ‘Islamic community’ shall be in good condition they enjoin that which is good, forbid that which is wrong, and co-operate in righteousness. If they hesitate, they shall be denied bliss, be dealt high-handedly with each other, and will have no helper on the earth, nor in the heavens!”.

In this regard too, Imam Ali (a.s.) has been quoted as saying, “Do not abandon the obligation of enjoining right and forbidding wrong. If you do, your bad folk shall reign supreme over you, and then you will implore God’s grace, yet your prayer would not be answered”.

And finally, probably you are aware of the Prophetic hadith, “You, all, are charged with the responsibility and should, therefore, take care of those who are in your charge”.

* Yes, I am aware of this tradition.

- You are, therefore, a responsible person. As such you have certain duties and rights; the task is very grave. Since this is the case, I do not think you can still cling to your earlier notion of “not meddling” in other people’s affairs, for upholding this religious ritual cannot be described as poking one’s nose in other people’s business. This obligation is akin to prayer, fast, hajj, and khums.

* However, I am not a clergyman so that I can advise people to do good or encourage them to abstain from committing bad deeds.

- Who told you that the discharging of this obligation is the exclusive domain of the clergy? It is the duty of every one of us, irrespective of our backgrounds.

* Well, when would this obligation cease to be wajibun kifa’ie, (i.e. so long as there are other Muslims who take it upon themselves to discharge it), and become the responsibility of every individual Muslim (wajibun aini), in the same way prayer is?

- In certain circumstances, enjoining good and forbidding evil becomes obligatory. It could explicitly be demonstrated by your aversion to the actions of those who disregard this obligation to desist from committing sins. On this occasion, I recall Imam Ali’s words, “The Messenger of God (s.a.w.) ordered us to face up to (avowed) sinners, through expressing our disapproval of their wrongdoings”.

* Is upholding this divine obligation paramount at all time?

- No, certain conditions must be present:

1. The person exercising the obligation of enjoining good and forbidding evil must be aware of what is good and what is bad, albeit in a general manner.

2. The probability that his advice shall be heeded. Conversely, there is no point in trying to guide those who you know will not take your advice. Having said that, [it becomes obligatory at times that you show indignation at their flagrant commissioning of evil deeds and turning away from that which is good].

3. The wrongdoer, or the one turning away from good, must be intent on committing the act. In the event, however, of even a glimpse of hope that they may ameliorate their stance, they must be counselled accordingly.

* If the person was not bent on commissioning the act?

- they should not be counselled.

* How should I know that a person is intent on committing the vile deed?

- If you are aware of any indication that may lead you to believe they have mended their ways, this is a proof that they are no longer intent on committing the misdeed.

Should they abandon the action, or show remorse after they had done it, this is a sufficient confirmation that they are no longer bent on habitually committing evil deeds. You are, therefore, not required to tell them off, or urge them as the case may be.

* At times it occurs to me that a person may be in the process of committing a sin, or turning away from good, is it incumbent on me to act to thwart their bid or urge them to join in what is good as the case may be?

- Yes, you are duty-bound to prevent them from doing that which is vile and sinful, and extol them to embark on that which is good and rewarding.

4. The person committing the sin or turning away from what is virtuous should not be unmindful of the nature of their action, in that they are not aware what they are doing contravenes the sublime injunctions of religion. Otherwise, giving them advice is not compulsory.

5. The person giving the counsel should not fear the consequences of his word or deed, be it to his person, honour, property, or fellow Muslims. Conversely, championing the obligation can be waived, except if the thing enjoined or forbidden falls within those grave matters in the eye of the Divine Lawgiver. In those circumstances, striking the right balance, between the expected action and the core injunction, becomes paramount. Accordingly, the obligation may or may not be discharged.

* If I want to practise the enjoining of good and forbidding of evil, how should I go about it?

- It could be done in levels; the first is expressing your innermost irritation and revulsion for the violation.

* Is there a particular way of demonstrating my anger and resentment?

- This could take many forms of reactions, showing disapproval of the wrong act that was being committed. You could turn away from the person who committed it, showing your fury at their deed; and you could stop talking to them.

The next level is that you go about propagating enjoining good and forbidding evil by word.

* How should I go about this type of action?

- By counselling the wrongdoer, reminding him of the severe punishment Allah, the Most High, has in store for those who disobey His injunctions; you could advise him of the reward God has promised those who obey His commandments.

The third level is taking practical action to enforce this divine injunction.

* Could you expand on that?

- It is by physically punishing the transgressor of the bounds of Allah, the Omnipotent, such as wrenching his ear, and smacking or interning him, in a bid to make him desist from future violations.

However, for every type of the aforesaid actions, there must be room for manoeuvre commensurate with the circumstances prevailing at the time of committing the sin.

* Do I have to adopt these methods in the same order of priority, i.e. in the way you have just explained?

- Not at all, you could start with the type of response, you believe would yield good results. You should not, though, lose sight of the fact that you should, at the outset, resort to using the manner that is least harmful or insulting.

* Should this prove fruitless, can I use a tougher approach?

- You may move to the ultimate stage. That is after you have secured the permission of the Marji'. You should, however, start with the action that is least harmful, without endangering the wellbeing of the person

being reprimanded, i.e. barring inflicting a wound or a fracture on him, let alone endangering his life in any way.

However, commands and interdictions are two obligations that become more demanding to enforce, if the person who is turning away from what is good, or committing the sin is among your household.

You may find some members of your family who are apathetic towards discharging certain obligations, or committing cardinal sins, lying, encroaching upon other people's rights, and this or that of vile deeds.

*** Suppose, I found such a lacking conduct, what should I do?**

- Then, your duty shall be to uphold the obligation of enjoining good and forbidding evil in the same manner we discussed earlier..

*** What if the situation did not warrant an obligatory action?**

- It shall be mustahab to act upon. If you so did, you shall be rewarded. Should you abandon it, you shall not be penalized. The criterion here is that he who leads to good deeds is in the same rank of the doer.