

The Start of the Journey to Positive Change part 2

The previous article in this series emphasized the importance of having an unaccepting sentiment towards corruption and deteriorating standards, a value that should be a learning outcome in our schools. We want to be a people who unrelentingly strive forward. This article will explore the concept of *islaah* and how it should constitute an essential part of our dogma.

Exploring *Islaah*

Islaah is the opposing word for *fasaad*. A *mufsid* works to corrupt, while a *muslih* works to correct and reform. *Islaah* means to correct or reform something¹ and in the Quran it is used to imply the removal of corruption.² Following is a definition of the relating words. I will use some of these during the article so refer to this table for the accurate meaning:

Arabic word	Meaning	Arabic word	Meaning
<i>Fasada</i>	Became rotten	<i>Salaha</i> ³	Corrected/reformed
<i>Faasid</i>	Corrupt (noun)	<i>Saalih</i>	Righteous/virtuous (noun)
<i>Fasaad</i>	Corruption	<i>Salaah</i>	Righteousness/virtue
<i>Ifsaad</i>	To corrupt	<i>Islaah</i>	To reform
<i>Mufsid</i>	Corruptor	<i>Muslih</i>	Reformer

You will find temptations along your journey through life. The temptation to cut corners, receive favours (that are expected to be repaid), to succumb to pressure, to look for questionable ways to cope. For the Muslim the unaccepting sentiment is a minimum standard. The prophet peace and blessings upon him is reported to have said:

"مَا نَهَيْتُكُمْ عَنْهُ فَاجْتَنِبُوهُ، وَمَا أَمَرْتُكُمْ بِهِ فَافْعَلُوا مِنْهُ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ."⁴

"What I have forbidden for you, avoid. What I have ordered you [to do], do as much of it as you can."

We are instructed to avoid doing wrong, and to do what we can of good. Our approach should ideally include persistent attempts at attaining both *Salaah* (virtue), and *Islaah* (reform). Attempts to reform ourselves, and reform what's around us.

¹ The Dictionary Arabic – English, pg 79. Published by Dar Al Kotob Al Ilmiyah, Beirut, Lebanon. 1st edition, 2003.

² *Mufradaat Alfaaz Al Quran*, in Arabic, by Al Raghīb Al Asfahani, pg. 490. Published by Dar Al Qalam, Damascus, Syria. 5th edition, 2011.

³ All the words in this column have the ح sound where the "h" is. It is like an emphasized "h".

⁴ Narrated in Sahih Muslim: the Book of Virtues.

Reforming the Self

Human beings are vulnerable to the environment around them and their unfolding circumstances. Therefore, the discussion must begin with a discussion of the self. To better understand the self, let us look to the prophetic tradition. The Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings upon him, teaches us to focus on treating the core:

أَلَا وَإِنَّ فِي الْجَسَدِ مُضْعَةً إِذَا صَلَحَتْ صَلَحَ الْجَسَدُ كُلُّهُ، وَإِذَا فَسَدَتْ فَسَدَ الْجَسَدُ كُلُّهُ. أَلَا وَهِيَ الْقَلْبُ⁵

“There is a piece of flesh in the body if it becomes good (reformed) the whole body becomes reformed and if it becomes spoilt the whole body becomes spoilt and that is the heart.”

We learn from the hadith to work on our core; on the part of us that will influence the rest. We sometimes have experiences where we “lose ourselves”. We do things that we believe are uncharacteristic of how we view ourselves. This happens because the heart has become affected. The hadith shows us how to approach change and reform. Focus on the heart; make changes, adjustments, affirmations in the heart and the rest will follow. This is where the effort begins. If the heart reforms the entire body begins to reform. The result is a movement towards Salaah (virtue or righteousness).

Understand your weaknesses and biases

One of the biggest challenges for the seeker of virtue and righteousness is their ego. It is not difficult to identify external threats such as a rival or a dangerous person, but internal threats are often overlooked. Are we aware of such issues as self-sabotage,

avoidance tendencies, delusions of grandeur, the range of biases, succumbing to urges for emotional outbursts, and other self-hindering issues? A good strategy is to always keep in mind there is more to learn, and just as you can identify change and progress in yourself from who you were 5 years ago, 5 years from now you will also be a different person, having been shaped by your new experiences and learnings. Allah helps us to come to terms with this, and we find the following words in certain places in the Quran:⁶

وَأَلَلَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَانْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ – سورة النور 19

Allah knows, and you know not – Al Quran 24:19

A growth mindset will help us further our cause towards righteousness. A growth mindset as mentioned in a previous article is a way of viewing our experiences and approach to the work that we do. With a growth mindset an obstacle is seen as a challenge to be overcome, and a change is seen as an opportunity to be seized. We see that there is always more that we can do, learn, grow and achieve. We don't believe that where we are today is the best that we can do.

⁵ Narrated in Sahih Al Bukhari, the Book of Belief.

⁶ Found in the conclusion to the following verses: 2:216, 2:232, 3:66, 16:74, 24:19.

From *Salaah* to *Islaah*

Just as we like to see improvements in ourselves, we like to see improvements and success in others too. We are invested in the uplifting and betterment of society. The movement towards *islaah* and becoming a *muslih* (reformer) will vary between people, and not everyone will become a reformer at a societal level. There is a science to effective reform, but I will not explore it in this article. Instead, I will just mention a few tips:



Confidence in public is not a requirement to get started. It can be attained during the journey. It is okay to be nervous.



Imposter Syndrome is more common than you think. Reflect on your successes, and use the feeling to improve your work.



Focus on the work more so than the approval of your expected audience. If what you are doing has value, people will take notice and will benefit.



Remember your principles.



Get comfortable saying "I don't know", and accepting that you are sometimes wrong.



Your job is to tell people what they need to hear. Sometimes it's the same as what they want to hear, and sometimes it's not.

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⁷ Imposter syndrome can manifest in different ways and as such the definition can vary, but generally it refers to: an internal experience of believing that you are not as competent as others perceive you to be. You can learn a bit more about this phenomenon here: <https://www.verywellmind.com/imposter-syndrome-and-social->

The best embodiment of both *salaah* (virtue) and *islah* (reform) is the situation of the prophets, may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon them all. They were a people chosen by Allah for their impeccable virtue, and prior to delivering their message they were known for this virtue and were already inspiring to others as a result.

Once they receive divine revelation their lives enter a new phase. The phase of bringing some of those values to their people and challenging some of the entrenched norms. During this phase, the phase of *islah*, or reform, they are met with resistance, ridicule and worse. Allah mentions the struggle of Prophet Shu'aib peace and blessings upon him:

((قَالَ يَاقَوْمِ أَرَأَيْتُمْ إِنْ كُنْتُ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّي وَرَزَقَنِي مِنْهُ رِزْقًا حَسَنًا وَمَا أُرِيدُ أَنْ أُخَالِفَكُمْ إِلَىٰ مَا أَنهَلَكُم عَنْهُ إِنْ أُرِيدُ إِلَّا الْإِصْلَاحَ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُ وَمَا تَوْفِيقِي إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ عَلَيْهِ تَوَكَّلْتُ وَإِلَيْهِ أَنِيبُ)) – سورة هود 88.

He said, “my people, consider if I stand on a clear proof from my Lord and He has blessed me with a good provision from Him. I do not want to do what I am forbidding you (from doing). I only intend reform to the best of my ability. My success comes only through Allah. In Him I trust and to Him I turn.” – Al Quran 11:88

He was however anticipatory of the resistance he might receive and further stated:

((وَيَقَوْمِ لَا يَجْرِمَنَّكُمْ شِقَاقِي أَنْ يُصِيبَكُمْ مِثْلُ مَا أَصَابَ قَوْمَ نُوحٍ أَوْ قَوْمَ هُودٍ أَوْ قَوْمَ صَالِحٍ وَمَا قَوْمُ لُوطٍ مِنْكُمْ بِبَعِيدٍ. وَأَسْتَغْفِرُوا رَبَّكُمْ ثُمَّ تُوبُوا إِلَيْهِ إِنَّ رَبِّي رَحِيمٌ وَدُودٌ)) – سورة هود 89-90

“My people. Do not let your opposition to me lead you to a fate similar to that of the people of Noah, or Hud, or Saalih. And the people of Lot are not far from you. So seek your Lord’s forgiveness and turn to Him in repentance. Surely my Lord is Most Merciful, All-Loving.” – Al Quran 11:89-90.

Despite the comprehensive and well-meaning address, the response was one of rejection, ridicule and threats:

((قَالُوا يَشْعُوبُ مَا نَفَقَهُ كَثِيرًا مِّمَّا تَقُولُ وَإِنَّا لَنَرُّكَ فِيْنَا ضَعِيفًا وَلَوْلَا رَهْطُكَ لَرَجَمْنَاكَ وَمَا أَنْتَ عَلَيْنَا بِعَزِيزٍ)) – سورة هود 91.

They said, “O Shu'aib! We do not comprehend much of what you say, and truly find you powerless among us. Were it not for your clan, we would have certainly stoned you, for you have no status among us.” – Al Quran 11:91

From this story we learn a few of the qualities of a reformer. These include:

- Perseverance
- Leading by example
- Clearly communicating your cause
- Anticipating and being prepared for resistance.

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We see further evidence of an understanding that the path of a *muslih* (reformer) will be met with, at times, harmful resistance. The Quran quotes Luqman as he explains to his son:

((يَبْنِيْ اَقِيْمِ الصَّلَاةَ وَاْمُرْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَاَنْهَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَاَصْبِرْ عَلٰى مَا اَصَابَكَ ۗ اِنَّ ذٰلِكَ مِنْ عَزْمِ الْاُمُوْر)) – سورة لقمان 17

“My son. Establish prayer, encourage what is good and forbid what is evil, and endure patiently whatever befalls you. Surely this is a resolve to aspire to” – Al Quran 31:17.

When attempts at *Islaah* go wrong

It is possible for attempts at reform to be misguided. I will not address this in any detail in this article. Instead, I will just draw the reader’s attention to the verses found early in the second chapter of the Quran:

((وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ لَا تُفْسِدُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ قَالُوا إِنَّمَا نَحْنُ مُصْلِحُونَ. أَلَا إِنَّهُمْ هُمُ الْمُفْسِدُونَ وَلٰكِن لَّا يَشْعُرُونَ)) – سورة البقرة 11-12.

When they are told: “Do not spread corruption in the land,” they reply: “We are only reformers!” Indeed, it is they who are the corruptors, but they fail to perceive. – Al Quran 2:11-12.

In this context the saying of the second Khalif Umar bin Al Khattab is highly appropriate:

تفقهوا قبل أن تسودوا

Learn before you find yourself in positions of influence.

Conclusion

I think it’s a good idea to view the matter of reform as relative to corruption, as you would a spectrum. There is tension generated by competing agendas, some pushing towards a deterioration and others towards reform and improvement. When we remain mindful of Allah, we will *in shaa Allah* (God-willing) ensure we are working for continued reform and improvement.

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