

The Spirit of Fasting

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The spirit of any action lies in the fulfillment of the objective of that action. One can identify if a certain task has been fulfilled by testing to see if that objective has been achieved. With that in mind, how can we test to see if our fasting in the month of Ramadan has been carried out properly? What is the objective and spirit of fasting? We find that Allah ﷻ has stipulated that the purpose of fasting in the month of Ramadan is to acquire Taqwa:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ
تَتَّقُونَ ﴿١٨٣﴾

Translation: “Oh you who believe! Fasting has been prescribed upon you just as it was prescribed upon those who were before you so that you may acquire Taqwa.”

But what is Taqwa? How can we define Taqwa? The second khalifah, Umar ibn Al Khattab ؓ once asked Ubayy ibn Ka'b ؓ to define Taqwa. He asked,

“Have you ever walked down a thorny path?”

Umar ؓ responded, “Of course.”

Ubayy ibn Ka'b ؓ said, “What did you do?”

He replied, “I roll up my garment and I endeavor (to avoid the thorns).”

Ubayy ؓ said, “That is Taqwa.”¹

The word Taqwa is derived from the word *wiqayah*. Imam Raghīb Al Asfahani ؓ defines *wiqayah* and *taqwa* in his dictionary of Qur'anic words, *Mufradat Alfadh al-Quran*, as:

“*Wiqayah* is to guard something from that which will harm it... *Taqwa* in the confines of Islamic law is defined as protecting one's self from sinning.”²

Imam al-Hasan al-Basri ؓ defines the people of Taqwa, “They abstain from that which has been prohibited for them, and they fulfill that which has been mandated upon them.”³

¹ *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, 1:92, al-Risalah al-'Alamiyyah

² *Mufradat Alfadh Al Qur'an*, p. 564, Dar Nashr al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah

³ *Tafsir ibn Kathir*, 1:91, al-Risalah al-'Alamiyyah

Hafiz Jalaluddin al-Suyuti رحمته الله defines Taqwa as:

“Fulfilling that which has been commanded and abstaining from that which has been prohibited, so that they may be safeguarded from the fire.”⁴

Imam Muhammad Murtada al-Zabidi رحمته الله quotes Ibn Durayd in his *Taj Al ‘Uroos* as having defined a man of Taqwa as:

“He protects himself from the (divine) punishment and sin by engaging in good deeds.”⁵

It is apparent from the above that Taqwa has two essential ingredients:

- 1) Carrying out good deeds
- 2) Abstaining from bad deeds

The benefits of carrying out good deeds are instilled into the human mind. Everyone understands and realizes that there are clear benefits to carrying out good deeds. However, not everyone realizes that abstaining from sin is in itself a good deed. It is not just any ordinary good deed, but it is from among the most important things that a Muslim can do. Abstaining from sin is of such great importance that it takes priority over everything else after fulfilling our obligatory deeds.

The great Imam, Abdullah ibn Al Mubarak رحمته الله, transmits an incident in his *Kitab al-Zuhd* wherein a man once presented himself before Abdullah ibn Abbas رحمته الله and asked him regarding two people. He mentioned that one person is engaged in an abundance of optional (*nafl*) forms of worship yet he is drowned in sin. Then he mentioned another person who abstains from sin, but does not engage in abundant forms of optional worship. Abdullah ibn ‘Abbas رحمته الله responded:

لا أعدل بالسلامة

“I do not equate anything to being safe from sin.”⁶

In other words, the second person is superior because he is able to abstain from sin.

The hadith of the *Musnad* of Imam Ahmad states,

اتق المحارم تكن أعبد الناس

“Abstain from sin and you will become the greatest worshipper.”⁷

⁴ *Tafsir al-Jalalayn*, Surah Baqarah Ayah #2

⁵ *Taj al-‘Uroos*, 40:230, Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah

⁶ *Kitab al-Zuhd* 66

⁷ *Musnad Ahmad* 8095

When the Messenger of Allah ﷺ described the standard with which Allah ﷻ has taught the angels how to record each person's deeds, he said:

وإن هم بسيئة فلم يعملها كتبها الله عنده حسنة كاملة

“When he (the servant of Allah) thinks about perpetrating a sin but does not carry it out (out of awe of Allah), then Allah writes for him a complete good deed.”⁸

Therefore, abstaining from sin is an independent source of acquiring the mercy of Allah ﷻ. Simply carrying out good deeds is not enough. One must learn to carry out good deeds **and** abstain from sins. The month of Ramadan trains the believers to engage in both of these things, especially abstaining from sins. When a person learns to stay away from that which is normally permissible for him (i.e. food and drink), then it will become that much easier for him to abstain from that which is normally impermissible for him. If he can learn to discipline his desires to abstain from those basic human necessities without which he cannot live, then he can certainly learn to discipline those desires which merely call him towards temporal enjoyment. If our fasting does not compel us to abstain from sin and we see no change in our lives, then we need to take a step back and examine the state of our connection with Allah ﷻ. The following statement of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ should echo in our hearts:

“Whoever does not stop telling lies and acting upon it, then Allah is not in need of his leaving his food and drink.”⁹

While commenting on this hadith, Hafiz ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani رحمه الله says that what is meant by “Allah is not in need of his leaving his food and drink,” is that such a fast will not be accepted, but it does **not** mean one should take it as an excuse to stop fasting altogether. He quotes Imam Baidawi رحمه الله,

“The purpose behind the legislation of fasting is not mere starvation and thirst. Rather, the purpose is to achieve the (desired) effect of weakening the base animalistic desires, and to discipline the soul which normally commands one towards evil (*al-Nafs al-Ammarah*), thereby transforming it into the content soul (*al-Nafs al-Mutma'innah*). If this has not been achieved, then Allah will not accept his fast.”¹⁰

The great 5th century Hanafi Jurist, Imam Abu al-Layth al-Samarqandi رحمه الله says,

“Piety in its purest form is to refrain one's gaze from looking at that which is Haram, to refrain one's tongue from lying and backbiting, and to refrain the entirety of one's body and limbs from perpetrating that which is Haram.”¹¹

⁸ *Sahih al-Bukhari* 6491, *Sahih Muslim* 207

⁹ *Sahih al-Bukhari* 1903, 6057

¹⁰ *Fath al-Bari*, v. 6, p. 280-281, Ar Risalah Al ‘Alamiyyah

¹¹ *Tanbih al-Ghafilin*, p. 250, Dar Al Kitab Al ‘Arabi

This is further supported by the following statement of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ,

كم من صائم ليس له من صيامه الا الظمأ

“There are many who fast who gain nothing but hunger.”¹²

If we want our fasts to be effective and leave a lasting impact on our lives, then we must engage in good **and** abstain from bad. Take the example of a person who aspires to get in shape. If he continues to exercise but does not abstain from eating junk food, then he will have a difficult time becoming fit, even if he does benefit from his exercise. In order to become physically fit, one needs to diet **and** exercise.

Hafiz Ibn Kathir ؒ narrates the following poem from Ibn al-Mu'tiz, which summarizes the definition and purpose of Taqwa,

خَلَّ الذَّنُوبَ صَغِيرَهَا وَ كَبِيرَهَا ذَاكَ التَّقَى
وَ اصْنَعْ كَمَا شِ فَوْقَ أَرْضِ الشُّوكِ يَحْذَرُ مَا يَرَى
لَا تَحْقِرَنَّ صَغِيرَةَ إِنَّ الْجِبَالَ مِنَ الْحَصَى

“Stay away from sins, both the minor ones, and the major ones for that is Taqwa
Be like the one walking upon a thorny path, cautious of what he sees
Never underestimate a minor sin, for indeed, mountains are made of pebbles.”¹³

May Allah ﷻ allow us to fast from deplorable behaviors, and take advantage of the coming Ramadan.

¹² *Sunan al-Darimi* 2749; similar wordings can be found in *al-Sunan al-Kubra* of al-Nasai 3333, *Sunan Ibn Majah* 1690, *Sahih ibn Khuzaimah* 1997, *al-Mu'jam al-Kabir* of al-Tabarani 13413, *Mustadrak al-Hakim* 1571. The narration has been authenticated by Imams Hakim, Munziri, Zahabi, and Haythami (see: *Mustadrak Hakim* 1571, *al-Tarhib wa al-Tarhib* 1609, *Majma' al-Zawaid* 5232).

¹³ *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*, 1:92, al-Risalah al-'Alamiyyah