

Sura 49: Al-Hujrat (The Private Apartments)

In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy

This is a short but magnificent Sura. It states a number of the principles of the doctrine and the law, the facts of life, and the rules of etiquette and ethics. One can glean two main features from reading the Sura. The first feature is that it lays down the ethical rules that enable a society that strives to get closer to God and deserves to belong to God, to be established. This is a society whose members enjoy the purity of hearts, the cleanliness of feelings, and the chastity of senses. The second feature of the Sura is that it exhibits the unrelenting effort of the Quran to establish and train a community of believers which represents such a society.

Verses 1 to 18:

1. *Believers, do not put yourselves forward before God and His Messenger; but be conscious of God; God is All-Hearing, Omniscient.*
2. *Believers, do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak aloud to him, as you may speak aloud to one another, lest your deeds be rendered fruitless while you do not perceive.*
3. *Those who lower their voices in the presence of the Messenger of God- God has tested their hearts for piety. Theirs will be forgiveness and immense reward.*
4. *Indeed, those who call out to you from behind the private apartments - most of them lack understanding.*
5. *And if they had been patient till you (could) come out to them, it would have been better for them; God is All-Forgiving, Giver of Mercy.*
6. *Believers, if a transgressing person comes to you with any news, ascertain the truth, lest you harm people unwittingly, and you would become regretful for what you have done.*
7. *And know that among you is God's Messenger. If he were to obey you in much of the matters, you would certainly be in trouble; but God has endeared the faith to you and has beautified it in your hearts, and has made disbelief and transgression and rebellion hateful to you. Such are they who are the rightly guided.*
8. *(It is) a grace and a blessing from God; and God is Omniscient, Wise.*
9. *And if two parties among the believers fall into a fight, make peace between them; but if one of them transgresses beyond bounds against the other, then fight you (all) against the one that transgresses until it complies with the command of God. And if it complies, then make peace between them with justice, and be fair. God loves those who are fair (and just).*
10. *The believers are but a single brotherhood. So make peace and reconciliation between your two (contending) brothers; and be conscious of God, that you may receive mercy.*
11. *Believers, let not some people among you ridicule other people; it may be that the (latter) are better than the (former). Nor let some women ridicule other women; it may be that the (latter) are better than the (former). Neither defame each other nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames. Wretched is the name of transgression after (one had accepted) faith. And those who do not desist are (indeed) the wrongdoers.*
12. *Believers, avoid most of suspicion. Indeed, suspicion in some cases is a sin. And neither spy on nor backbite each other. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead*

brother? You would abhor it. Remain conscious of God; God is Ever-Relenting, Giver of Mercy.

13. *People, We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is (he who is) most conscious of God. Indeed, God is Omniscient, Totally-Aware.*
14. *The desert Arabs say, "We believe." Say, "You did not believe; but rather say 'We submit,' for faith has not yet entered into your hearts. Yet, if you obey God and His messenger, He will not withhold from you any of (the reward for) your deeds; God is all-Forgiving, Giver of Mercy."*
15. *The (true) believers are only those who believe in God and His messenger and do not entertain any doubt, but strive with their wealth and their lives for the cause of God. Those are the truthful ones.*
16. *Say (to them, Muhammad), "Are you going to teach God about your religion, when God knows all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth, and God is Cognizant of all things."*
17. *They consider it a favor to you (Muhammad) that they have submitted. Say, "Do not deem your submission a favor to me; but God does confer a favor on you that He guided you to the faith if you are truthful.*
18. *Verily God knows the unseen of the heavens and the earth; and God is All-Seeing of all that you do." (49: 1 -18)*

The Sura starts with an endearing call to the believers, *"Believers, do not put yourselves forward before God and His Messenger; but be conscious of God; God is All-Hearing, Omniscient."* Qatadah (RA) mentioned that some believers used to suggest topics which they thought the Quran should address. Ibn Abbas (RA) said that this verse admonished the believers not to disagree with the Quran or the prophetic tradition. This verse then outlined the etiquette for speaking to God and His Messenger (PBUH). It outlined and established the rules of receiving admonitions from God and His Messenger (PBUH). The adherence to this etiquette reflected the degree of God consciousness that a believer had. The believers were told not to suggest what should be revealed but accept the Quran as revealed.

The second rule of the etiquette of speaking to the Prophet (PBUH) was the given, *"Believers, do not raise your voices above the voice of the Prophet, nor speak aloud to him, as you may speak aloud to one another, lest your deeds be rendered fruitless while you do not perceive."* The verse commanded the believers to address the Prophet (PBUH) respectfully. Speaking to the Prophet (PBUH) disrespectfully may cause their deeds to become worthless. The believers were quick to abide by these rules. It has been narrated that Thabet ibn Qais (RA) was known for his loud voice. When he heard this verse he thought he was doomed because he used to talk loudly in the presence of the Messenger (PBUH). He was so stressed and dismayed; he stayed home and refused to go to the Mosque. When the Messenger (PBUH) missed him, he asked the other companions about the whereabouts of Thabet (RA). They went to see Thabet (RA) and enquired about his absence, he told them that he was afraid the he was destined to Hell fire because he used to speak loudly in the presence of the Messenger (PBUH). The companions went back and told the Messenger (PBUH) of the reason that kept Thabet (RA) away from the Mosque. The

Messenger (PBUH) told them to go back and reassure Thabet (RA) that this verse was not about him and that he has been destined to paradise.

The verses continued to praise those who speak softly in the presence of the Messenger (PBUH), *“Those who lower their voices in the presence of the Messenger of God - God has tested their hearts for piety. Theirs will be forgiveness and immense reward.”* God consciousness is a great gift from God. God bestows this gift on those whom are deemed well deserving.

The following verse narrates an event that occurred on the ninth year of Hijra, when a delegation from the tribe of Tameem came to announce their acceptance of Islam. They stood outside the Messenger’s private apartments and started calling him loudly, asking him to come out to meet them. This annoyed the Messenger (PBUH), *“Indeed, those who call out to you from behind the private apartments - most of them lack understanding.”* The verse accused them of being lacking in understanding. Then they were admonished to be more patient, *“And if they had been patient till you (could) come out to them, it would have been better for them.”* It would have been better for them to have had patience. However, they were given the opportunity to repent and ask for forgiveness, *“God is All-Forgiving, Giver of Mercy.”*

The Sura started by calling on the believers to understand clearly who their leader was. Then the verses established the etiquette of addressing the leader respectfully. These two principles paved the way for the commands that followed. The first of these commands was how to deal with news, especially when such news may cause harm to someone, *“Believers, if a transgressing person comes to you with any news, ascertain the truth, lest you harm people unwittingly, and you would become regretful for what you have done.”* News narrated by a transgressor is likely to be false. One should ascertain the veracity of such news before acting upon it. This verse refers to a specific incident. The Messenger of God (PBUH) sent Al-Waleed ibn ‘Uqbah (RA) to collect the poor-due from the tribe of Bani Al-Mustalq. When Al-Waleed approached their town he saw a gathering on the outskirts of the town. He thought that they were waiting to hurt him, so he went back to the Messenger (PBUH) telling him that the tribe of Bani Al-Mustalq were coming to fight the Messenger (PBUH). The Messenger (PBUH) sent Khaled ibn Al-Waleed (RA) to ascertain the veracity of the news which ‘Uqbah claimed. The Messenger (PBUH) advised Khaled (RA) to be careful in assessing the situation, he asked Khaled (RA) not to enter the town by night but to wait till the morning so he would have a good chance to assess the situation. Khaled (RA) came back with the good news that ‘Uqbah was mistaken in assessing the situation. However, the verse establishes a fundamental principle in ascertaining the facts before a rash reaction to a situation is embarked upon.

The believers were then reminded that the Messenger of God (PBUH) always acted according to God’s revelation. They should not pressure him to follow their opinions, *“And know that among you is God’s Messenger. If he were to obey you in much of the matters, you would certainly be in trouble; but God has endeared the faith to you and has beautified it in your hearts, and has made disbelief and lewdness and rebellion hateful to you. Such are they who are the rightly guided. (It is) a grace and a blessing from God; and God is Omniscient, Wise”* The verse reminded them of the blessings that God has bestowed upon them. They should then submit to

God and be satisfied with His decrees and accept His verdicts.

Another fundamental principle that the Sura established deals with how to settle disputes between two contending Muslim groups, *“And if two parties among the believers fall into a fight, make peace between them; but if one of them transgresses beyond bounds against the other, then fight you (all) against the one that transgresses until it complies with the command of God. And if it complies, then make peace between them with justice, and be fair. God loves those who are fair (and just). The believers are but a single brotherhood. So make peace and reconciliation between your two (contending) brothers; and be conscious of God, that you may receive mercy.”* This verse may have been revealed to deal with a specific event but it establishes a general principle. It stipulates that a disagreement may arise between two Muslim groups as a result of an injustice inflicted by one group on another. This disagreement may develop into full-fledged fight between the two groups. Muslims who do not belong to either group are obliged to mediate between the two groups to stop the war and establish peace. If one of the groups refused to come to peaceful terms and continued its transgression against the other group, then the other Muslims are obliged to fight the transgressors until they listen to the voice of reason and accept God’s rules. The verse establishes the principle that in settling these disputes Muslims should refer to God’s law and should practice equity and objectivity. During any conflict Muslims should remember that they share a single bond of brotherhood. They should always remain conscious of God. This is the way to gain God’s mercy.

Islam endeavors to establish a society that is guided by the Quran. It is a society that espouses high ethical standards. Each member of this society enjoys a secure dignified position. People are protected against any kind of slander, assault, or harassment, *“Believers, let not some people among you ridicule other people; it may be that the (latter) are better than the (former). Nor let some women ridicule other women; it may be that the (latter) are better than the (former). Neither defame each other nor call each other by (offensive) nicknames. Wretched is the name of transgression after (one had accepted) faith. And those who do not desist are (indeed) the wrongdoers.”* The Quran provides guidance so that a highly moral society can be established. In this society people should not defame or slander each other. People should not mock each other. People should understand that God’s standards in evaluating people are different from their human standards. It may be that God values someone that they consider of a lesser value than themselves. Believers should then refrain from defaming, ridiculing, or calling each other names. Those who commit such transgression are considered wrongdoers.

“Believers, avoid most of suspicion. Indeed, suspicion in some cases is a sin. And neither spy on nor backbite each other. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would abhor it. Remain conscious of God; God is Ever-Relenting, Giver of Mercy.” This verse sets another level of protection for people living in an Islamic society. It sets the standard for dealing with doubts that may arise as a result of hearsay. Muslims should not harbor bad feelings towards their fellow Muslims on the basis of unsubstantiated information. The verse confirms the principle that people are innocent until proven guilty. Islam even goes beyond this rule to a higher standard. The Messenger of God (PBUH) has been quoted to have said, *“A doubt is not*

acceptable reason to investigate.” Investigations should be done on the basis of concrete evidence, not on the basis of a probable cause. People should not spy on each other. Muslims have the right to lead a secure, peaceful, and protected life. Exposing the secrets of people is a sin. The Messenger (PBUH) has been quoted to have said, *“Whoever protected the secret of believer it is as if he was able to resurrect a victim of infanticide after its death.”*

The verse continued to establish these high ethical standards that a Muslim society should espouse. It admonished against backbiting. It drew a parallel between a person who backbites and the person who commits the abhorrent action of eating the flesh of his brother alive. No decent human being would want to see himself in that position. The conclusion of the verse reminded people of the main thing that will guard them against all these evils: God consciousness. However, if one sins, then one should not despair because the door to repentance is always open, *“God is Ever-Relenting, Giver of Mercy.”*

“People, We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is (he who is) most conscious of God. Indeed, God is Omniscient, Totally-Aware.” This verse addresses all humankind. The Creator tells all people that they were all created from a single source. The whole human race came from one pair: a male and a female. They were then spread into different nations so that they can get to know each other; work, and collaborate with each other. The standard against which people should be evaluated is God consciousness. People should not be valued according to their race, language, color, or nationality. All people have equal worth in the sight of God. The only standard that determines their individual worth is the level of their God consciousness.

“The desert Arabs say, ‘We believe.’ Say, ‘You did not believe; but rather say “We submit,” for faith has not yet entered into your hearts. Yet, if you obey God and His messenger, He will not withhold from you any of (the reward for) your deeds; God is all-Forgiving, Giver of Mercy.” It is narrated that this verse was revealed in reference to a tribe by the name of Bani Asad. They accepted Islam and bragged about it. They indicated that they did the Messenger (PBUH) a favor by accepting Islam. This verse was revealed to set the record straight; informing them that they were actually the recipients of God’s favor who guided them to Islam. They should express gratitude to God. God’s reward is available for those who obey God and do good deeds. The verses continue to list the traits of the true believers, *“The (true) believers are only those who believe in God and His messenger and do not entertain any doubt, but strive with their wealth and their lives for the cause of God. Those are the truthful ones.”* Faith constitutes full acceptance of God and His Messenger (PBUH) in the heart of a believer. Such acceptance is not marred in any way by a shred of doubt. Such acceptance renders the sacrifice of wealth and life in the way of God easy. People who enjoy these traits are the true believers, who are truthful in their covenant with God.

Going back to desert Arabs, the query is posed, *“Say (to them, Muhammad), ‘Are you going to teach God about your religion, when God knows all that is in the heavens and all that is in the earth, and God is Cognizant of all things.’”* Do they really think that God does not know what is

in their hearts? God knows everything in the heaven and earth. God's knowledge encompasses everything.

"They consider it a favor to you (Muhammad) that they have submitted. Say, 'Do not deem your submission a favor to me; but God does confer a favor on you that He guided you to the faith if you are truthful.'" The fact that the desert Arabs thought they were doing the Messenger (PBUH) a favor by accepting Islam is an indication that they did not understand the meaning of true belief. They did not taste the sweetness of faith. They should be grateful to God that He bestowed His guidance on them. Faith is the most valuable bounty of God that a human being could be blessed with. Faith shapes the outlook of people and how they deal with life and its changing conditions. It is the light that guides people during their journey on earth from birth to death.

"Verily God knows the unseen of the heavens and the earth; and God is All-Seeing all that you do." The final verse concludes the Sura with the fundamental fact that describes God's encompassing knowledge.