

Seerah is the answer: Equality & Non-discrimination

We like to talk about non-discrimination, non-racism, non-sectarianism and the need for unity among the Ummah. It is fashionable, politically correct and the alternative, to face what we really do, is uncomfortable to nasty. But that is exactly what Islam decreed and Muhammad ﷺ implemented. He freed and adopted his African slave as his son and gave him his own name, Zaid bin Muhammad, until Allah ﷻ decreed adopted children must maintain their biological father's name, from which point he was called Zaid bin Haritha (RA). Later he married Zaynab bint Jahash (RA), a cousin of Muhammad ﷺ a marriage arranged by Rasoolullah ﷺ.

In Madina when Rasoolullah ﷺ paired the Muhajiroon with the Ansar, he paired off widely disparate people who then exemplified Islam's principles of non-discrimination and non-racism. This was no easy task as the Arabs were highly tribal and racist. Yet when he paired Salman al Farisi (Persian) and Abu'd-Dardaa (Arab), they became closer than real blood brothers. He paired Bilal bin Rabah (freed Abyssinian slave) with Abu Ruwaim al-Khathami (Arab). [*Others who were made brothers by Rasoolullah ﷺ were: Abu Bakr and Kharijah Ibn Zayd, Omar bin Khattab and Atban Ibn Malik Abu Ruwaim Al-Khath-ami and Bilal; Oseid Ibn Hudheir and Zayd Ibn Haritha, Abdul-Rahman Ibn Ouf and Saad Ibn Al-Rabi (RadhiAllahu anhum ajmaeen)*]

Yet, despite the disparities in race, culture, language, and economic position, these Sahaba became true brothers. They recognized and honored the real brotherhood that Allah ﷻ formed, the brotherhood of faith; the brotherhood of Islam and gave it precedence over the brotherhood of race, tribe and clan. Today we like to talk about the need for unity among Muslims, while simultaneously focusing on our differences and creating new boundaries every day. All we need to do is to look at the Seerah and do what the Sahaba did; their differences were as, if not more, marked than ours. They gave precedence to the commonality of Islamic brotherhood over petty differences of race and culture. When will we do the same? How long do we want to continue to live like hypocrites, talking about the need to unite but doing nothing about it and instead doing the opposite by reinforcing divisions? How will we answer Allah ﷻ about this?

Allah ﷻ mentioned the differences in race, color and origin and clearly established the criterion of real superiority of one over another. A standard that joins, not divides. Allah ﷻ said:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

Hujuraat 49: 13. *O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know (recognize, honor) one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has the most At-Taqua [i.e. one of the Muttaqun]. Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware.*

It is piety, good character, behavior and consciousness to please Allah ﷻ, that distinguishes, not race, color, tribe, family or name. Our differences are for us to recognize, honor and appreciate one another. Islam teaches something a step higher than tolerance. Tolerance implies dislike because you only need to tolerate that which is unpleasant. Islam teaches appreciation and acceptance, which creates love and friendship. It is on this that the Brotherhood of Faith is based.

See how the Sahaba dealt with their ancient prejudices and racist tendencies. On one occasion, AbuDhar Ghifari (RA) was angry with Bilal bin Rabah (RA) and called him 'You son of a black woman.' Bilal (RA) was Abyssinian and so his mother was black, but AbuDhar (RA) used the word disparagingly. Bilal (RA) complained to Rasoolullah ﷺ, who summoned AbuDhar Ghifari (RA) and said to him, 'Ya AbaDhar, have you gone back to the ways of your Jahiliyya (days of ignorance, pre-Islam)?' AbuDhar (RA) apologized to Rasoolullah ﷺ and then went in search of Bilal bin Rabah (RA). When he found him, he said to him, 'I apologize to you for what I did. Now I am going to lie down on the ground and lay my cheek on the earth, I want you to stamp on my face with your shoe.' Bilal (RA) refused. AbuDhar (RA) said to him, 'I want you to do this as a compensation for what I said to you. And if you don't do what I am telling you to do, I will complain to Rasoolullah ﷺ.' Bilal (RA) was too decent a human being to stamp on anyone's face, much less on the face of one of Rasoolullah ﷺ's favorite Sahaba and one of the earliest in Islam.

Eventually he managed to persuade AbuDhar (RA) not to insist on his 'remedy'. Racism is not easy to rid from ourselves, but those who were serious about ridding it made some very serious efforts. They realized that it was the secret of brotherhood.

About the Brotherhood of Islam, Allahﷻ said:

إِنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُونِ

Anbiya 21: 92. Truly! This, your Ummah [Islamic Brotherhood] is one Brotherhood, and I am your Rabb, therefore worship Me (Alone).

وَإِنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاتَّقُونِ

Muminoon 23: 52. And verily! This your Ummah [Islamic Brotherhood] is one Brotherhood, and I am your Rabb, so keep your duty to Me (have Taqwa).

The first Ayah relates to our relationship with Allahﷻ and our Ibaadah (worship, Aqeeda, Huqooqullah – Rights of Allahﷻ on us) and the second one relates to our behavior which is based on pleasing Allahﷻ first and above all else (Taqwa). This translates to our relationship with people (Huqooq-ul Ibaad – Rights of People on us). See how beautifully the Qur'an encapsulates our life and conduct. Allahﷻ declared that we are One Brotherhood based on our faith and honored us by defining Himself as the One we worship and the One we try to please. That is the only criterion for brotherhood that is acceptable in Islam. Allahﷻ ordered us to hold fast to our relationship with Himself, which is common to all and not divide ourselves.

وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا وَكُنْتُمْ عَلَى شَفَا حُفْرَةٍ مِنَ النَّارِ فَأَنْقَذَكُمْ مِنْهَا كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ

A'al Imraan 3: 103. *And hold fast, all of you together, to the Rope of Allah (i.e. Qur'an), and be not divided among yourselves, and remember Allah's Favour on you, for you were enemies one to another but He joined your hearts together, so that, by His Grace, you became brethren (in Islam), and you were on the brink of a pit of Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus, Allah makes His Ayat (signs, revelations) clear to you, that you may be guided.*

Allah ﷻ didn't prohibit us from disagreeing with one another on any matter. It is natural that people will have difference of understanding, different priorities and different foci and so have different opinions on the same issue. Islam doesn't mandate that everyone must agree on everything except in the most fundamental elements of faith, as in worshipping Allah ﷻ alone and believing in and following Muhammad ﷺ as the Last and Final Messenger of Allah ﷻ. What Allah ﷻ did prohibit was for us Muslims to divide ourselves into casts, cults, sects and groups. Sadly, this is what we have done and continue to do. That is the reason for our failure as a people to become influential and powerful in the world today. That is the reason that those who mean to harm us can do so by exploiting our divisions. Until we recognize this and learn to join hands across our self-created barriers, even if we can't break the barriers down, we will be condemned to our present state of depression. Allah ﷻ said:

وَأَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَلَا تَنَازَعُوا فَتَفْشَلُوا وَتَذْهَبَ رِيحُكُمْ وَاصْبِرُوا
إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ

Anfaal 8: 46. *And obey Allah and His Messenger, and do not dispute (with one another) lest you lose courage and your strength depart and be patient. Surely, Allah is with those who are As-Sabirin (steadfast people)*

Rasoolullah ﷺ emphasized this unity when he said:

"Whoever testifies that there is no god but Allah, and faces our Qibla, and prays as we pray, and eats the meat slaughtered by us, he is a Muslim who has the rights of a Muslim and the duties of a Muslim."

(Bukhari, Book of Prayer).

The question that is often asked is, 'How do we deal with the differences in our theological positions, which are in many cases very marked and hardwired?' That is a legitimate question which must be answered. The usual approach is one of two kinds: either we pretend that differences don't exist or we attempt to ignore them. Both approaches don't work because the differences exist, are real and can't be brushed under the carpet. So, what must we do?

Let us learn from our Salaf who we like to quote but not to follow. It is time we stopped this hypocrisy. If you read history and the Seerah, you will see that the Sahaba disagreed, even on the most important point of Ibaadah. Two famous incidents:

1. After Ghazwatul Ahzab, when *Jibreel* (عليه السلام) came to Rasoolullah (ﷺ) and told him that Allah (ﷻ) had decreed that they should not take off their armor without dealing with the treason of the Banu Quraidha, Rasoolullah (ﷺ) ordered the Sahaba to march to Banu Quraidha where they had their forts and told them to pray Asr in the land of Banu Quraidha. As they proceeded there, the time for Asr came but the Sahaba were not near their destination. As they continued, time was passing and when it looked like it was almost Maghrib, some of the Sahaba decided to pray Asr within its time even though Rasoolullah (ﷺ)'s order was clear because they reasoned that the Salah must be prayed at its time and must not be delayed. Others said that they would follow the order of Rasoolullah (ﷺ) to the letter and pray Asr as Qadha if necessary but pray it only in the land of Banu Quraidha. Each group acted according to their Ijtihad but neither criticized or accused the other of any of the many things that we immediately accuse those we disagree with. When they met Rasoolullah (ﷺ) they asked him, without criticizing each other, whose Ijtihad was correct. He told them that both the opinions were correct. This not only shows us the manners of disagreement, Al-Adaab ul Ikhtilaaf, but also shows us the tolerance of Rasoolullah (ﷺ) in a matter which could otherwise have led to an ongoing disagreement between his Sahaba.
2. Another incident, reported by Ibn Abbas (RA), relates to the time that Rasoolullah (ﷺ) was marching with a battalion. When the sun was high, he asked the people if they were fasting. When they told him that they were, he called for water and raising the container high so that everyone could see, he said, 'I am

breaking my fast' and he drank the water. Some of the Sahaba followed his example and broke their fast, but others didn't and that is the point of this story; neither party criticized the other. They accepted what each had done and their unity remained intact.

There are many examples among the Sahaba as well as the Tabiyyoon and those who followed them as well as among the Ulama and Imams of later generations about how people differed and disagreed on very important issues, but their hearts remained together, and they didn't form sects and didn't abuse or malign each other. What happened to all that? Why don't we learn the lessons which are the cure for our ills today, instead of spending time, energy, emotion and resources on infighting?

Consider this: Dating back as far as the 10th century and up through World War 2, European nations were at war with each other, primarily due to theological differences between Catholics and Protestants. Yet if we look at Europe today, less than a century after World War 2, imagining war between England and France seems impossible. No matter that the two had fought each other tooth and nail for centuries. The reason is not that they have no differences in religion, culture, language, cuisine, customs or society, but that they decided to concentrate on what they have in common i.e. both are white, European, have common enemies (their perception), can benefit from economic collaboration (Brexit will show UK the cost of ignoring that lesson) and a common policy that transcends differences. The same is true of all other historical enemies in Europe. One point to note is that Europeans united by discarding religion altogether because religion and religious leaders had used religion to divide ordinary people and involve them in unending conflicts. Eventually when people saw through this conspiracy of priesthood, they discarded both priests and religion. Today, the churches of Europe are empty of worshippers and full of tourists. Muslim preachers who speak the language of division and use contrived 'evidence' from the religion to support their wrongdoing must beware that the day is not far when they and may Allah ﷻ forbid, Islam itself will be discarded and people will decide to live their lives according to whatever way that suits them, but keeps them from shedding the blood of each other to please this or that preacher.

That is the lesson we Muslims need to learn; that we can still have our theological differences, that we need not all agree on one theology, but we can still collaborate on several essential areas like security, economic development, education, skill development, employment, public health, industry, common market and a foreign policy that benefits everyone and can't be used by our enemies to divide and rule. Our present situation shows that even having the same theology doesn't stop us from fighting with and killing each other. Isn't it high time that we take stock of what is happening to us and change our leadership, either in their approach or physically? If our leaders won't accept that dividing us and exploiting us for their personal benefit is a bad idea, we need to understand that having such leaders and following them is a worse idea. Either they must change, or we must change them.

We must discard all leaders who preach division and recognize why they do that. They do it to preserve their own small constituencies from which they personally benefit financially, socially and politically. We must either convince them to see the greater good and stop preaching division or we must render them null and void by rejecting and ignoring them.

Now that we have completed this chapter, let us reflect on our activities, habits, preferences, likes and dislikes and see if they reflect us as someone who believes in and practices togetherness and the etiquette of disagreement when there is a need to disagree on any matter. Or do we also fall into the trap of criticizing people instead of looking critically at ideas and arguments? The need to be united is clear to everyone but let us see if we are contributing to that or working against it?

Then go to the Action Plan page and write in what you need to start doing, stop doing and continue to do. Try to be as specific as possible because that will help you to monitor your success after you start applying the new ways. Then list the Inhibitors and Enablers for each one. What are the things, habits, conditions, people and situations, which are likely to inhibit you from Starting, Stopping or Continuing that activity? And what are the things, habits, conditions, people and situations which are likely to help and enable you to succeed? The more specific you are, the better.

Action Plan

Start: What are the attitudes, behaviors, habits that I need to **start** in order to make the cultural switch to 'Equality'?

Stop: What are the attitudes, behaviors, habits that I do now but need to **stop** in order to make the cultural switch to 'Equality'?

Continue: What are the attitudes, behaviors, habits that I do at present, which I need to **consciously continue** to do in order to make the cultural switch to 'Equality'?