

Islamic Manners, Part VII: Social Manners

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Manners of Hosting

Hospitality is highly valued in Islamic teachings. The Prophet (s) said, “Whoever believes in God and the Day of Judgment, has to honor his guest” (Kulayni 1407AH, 6:258). There are manners instructed for both the host and the guest. We shall now mention some of the manners instructed for hosts:

1. The benefits of hospitality should be calculated by spiritual, not worldly, measures. Those who seek only material benefits sometimes get surprised when they see that someone offers what he has to his guest and serves him. From the Islamic point of view, guests are heavenly blessings. We read in a hadith,

The Prophet (s) said, “When God wants good for a people, He gives them a present.” Some people asked, “What is that present?” He answered, “A guest. He brings his provision with him and takes away the sins of the people of that house.” (Majlisi 1403AH, 72:461)

2. One should not restrict his hospitality to affluent people. The Prophet (s) said, “It is reprehensible to accept the invitation of the one who has invited only the rich and not the poor” (Majlisi 1403AH, 72:448).

3. Avoiding extravagance. Islam has set a fair relation between the guest and his host, in which the host offers what he can and the guest does not expect more. The Prophet (s) is quoted to have said, “We do not put ourselves in trouble for our guests, and we offer them what we have” (Fayd Kashani n.d., 3:29).

4. Once someone invited Imam Ali (a) to his house. The Imam (a) said, “I accept [your invitation] under three conditions: Do not get anything from outside your house. Do not prevent us from what you have in the house. And do not to put your family in trouble.” That person accepted the conditions and the Imam (a) accepted his invitation (Majlisi 1403AH, 72:451).

5. One should not put his guest in difficulty. One night Imam Rida (a) had a guest. During their conversation, something went wrong with the light. The guest tried to fix it, but the Imam (a) did not allow that and fixed it himself, and said, “We are not the kind of people who put their guests to work” (Kulayni 1407AH, 6:283).

6. Avoiding showing off and pretentiousness

7. Not asking a guest whether he has eaten. Imam Sadiq (a) said, “Do not ask your brother [in faith] whether he has eaten when he comes to your house; rather, [just] offer him what you have; for indeed the most generous is the one who offers what he has” (Majlisi 1403AH, 72:455).

8. The host should not delay serving the food.

9. The food should be enough for the guests to feel full. Offering inadequate amount of food is a sign of stinginess.

10. Not preparing the means for the guest's leaving. Our Imams (s) had a great interest in having guests and, as a sign of hospitality, they would never help a guest leave their houses. It has been reported that once some people went to Imam Sadiq's (a) house. The Imam (a) received them. At their departure, the Imam (a) gave them some gifts and provisions, but told his servants not to help them [for leaving] and said, "We are from a household that does not help our guests to leave us" (Hurr al-'Amili 1409 AH, 11:456).

11. The host must not disparage the meal, since all the blessings of God are to be appreciated. Some people disdain even the good meals they prepare for their guest in front of them by saying, for instance, "This is nothing, or it is not good enough." Such statements are untrue and disrespectful towards God's blessings.

12. When inviting people over, one should consider his family's comfort too. One should not invite guests so frequently that his family gets tired of guests.

13. The host should not do anything that may annoy his guests, such as making certain jokes. He should not bother his guests with his family problems either.

14. The host should not serve his guest to the extent that the guest becomes uncomfortable; for example, he should not ask them to eat more than they can or give them what they do not like.

15. A guest is honorable and should be received warmly. It does not make any difference whether he is rich, poor, a relative, or a stranger. Salman said, "I went to the Prophet (s) while he was relying on a cushion. The Prophet (s) gave the cushion to me and said, 'O Salman! Whenever a Muslim visits his brother, God forgives the latter when he prepares a cushion for his guest to honor him'" (Majlisi 1403AH, 16:235).

16. The host should not consider the food and the service he offers as a loan to the guest and should not expect something in return; rather, he should serve the guest for the sake of God.

17. The host should eat with his guest and should not stop eating before the guest stops. Imam Sadiq (a) said, “While eating with people the Prophet (s) used to be the first to begin and the last to stop, so that people would feel comfortable to eat” (Majlisi 1403AH, 72:454).

18. Welcoming the guest at the entrance

19. To accompany the guest to the door

Manners of Guests

Guest, too, should observe certain manners in their interactions with their hosts:

1. Going to someone’s house should be either because of an invitation or because of a special reason, such as visiting a brother in faith who is sick, offering one’s condolences to a person who has lost someone, or reconciling between two people. When going to someone’s house with an invitation, the guest should consider the host’s situation and act in a way that does not interrupt the host’s life or does not put him in trouble.

2. Behaving in good manners while entering, sitting, speaking, eating, and so forth, and avoiding things like impolite jokes, loud laughter, leering, stretching legs, overeating, talking a lot, backbiting, gossiping, and so forth

3. When there are a lot of guests and the place is a little one, it is expected to try to make room for recently arrived guests.

4. One should not differentiate between the invitations he receives from the rich and the ones he receives from the poor. The Prophet (s)

said, “Whoever does not accept an invitation has indeed disobeyed God and His Prophet” (Majlisi 1403AH, 72:448).

5. Not refusing someone’s invitation just because his house is far.
6. One’s intention for accepting a person’s invitation should be making him happy and not seeking worldly gains.
9. One should not go to his host’s house earlier than expected.
10. If the host shows him a place to sit, he should accept. Imam Sadiq (a) said, “If one of you goes to the house of his brother in faith, he should sit where he tells him to, for he knows the bad places of his house better than you” (Majlisi 1403AH, 72:465).
11. To greet the person sitting next to him first
12. Not to ask for what his host cannot provide
12. To leave the host’s house gratefully, and to overlook the things he did not like
14. Not to leave the host’s house without informing him, and to stay there as long as the host wishes, if it is possible for him
15. Not to stay in the host’s house for more than three days. The Prophet (s) said, “Being somewhere as a guest is just for three days and nights, [what is done for the guest] after that is charity” (Majlisi 1403AH, 72:460).
16. Being content with what the host offers, and not putting him in trouble by asking for more food or fruits
17. Not to stare at others while they are eating
19. Not to bring anyone without the host’s permission. Imam Sadiq (a) said, “When one of you [alone] is invited for a meal, his son should

not go with him, or else he will eat unlawfully and will enter [the host's house] unlawfully" (Majlisi 1403AH, 72:445).

20. Not to stay in the host's house more than usual. The Quran says, "And disperse when you have taken your meal, without settling down to chat" (33:53).

21. To eat enough from what has been provided for him and not to be shy. It is in a narration that the sign of love for a brother in faith is to eat abundantly while in his company (Majlisi 1403AH, 72:448).

22. To get permission before using the host's properties

People's Rights

Being careful about people's rights is one of the most important rulings in Islam, to which the longest verse of the Qur'an is devoted (Qur'an 2:282). In many parts of Islamic jurisprudence, this issue is addressed. For example, in the discussion on prayer, it has been emphasized that one's prayer is not valid if he prays wearing the clothes of, or standing in a place belonging to, another person without his permission. Also, in trading and business, it has been said that a contract cannot be valid without the consent of the two sides. The property, life, and reputation of a Muslim is so important that harming them will not be forgiven by God just by mere repentance. Imam Ali (a) has said that one of the conditions of repentance (*tawbah*) is to fulfill the rights of people that one has violated, and to compensate for any damages one may have caused.

If one has gained an amount of money illegally, he has to give it back; if he has disrespected someone, he must ask that person for forgiveness. One should try to fulfill people's rights as much as he can and knows. If he is not able to fulfill some of them, he can record them in his will, so that his family or friends pay his debts back or ask forgiveness for him. It has been narrated that once the Prophet (s)

asked his companions, “Do you know who the insolvent are among my people?” They answered, “The insolvent among us are those who do not have money or property.” The Prophet said,

The insolvents of my nation are the one who bring with themselves [good deeds such as] prayer, fasting, and alms-giving (*zakat*) at the Day of Judgment, but at the same time they have cursed someone, pelted another one, eaten someone’s money, shed the blood of someone, or beaten another one. So they have to pay the wronged people back from their good deeds. If his good deeds finish before he pays them back, the sins of the wronged people will be taken from them and transferred to him, and then he will be thrown into fire. (Majlisi 1403AH, 69:6)

Explaining the word *mirsad* (ambush) in the Quran, Imam Sadiq (a) is reported to have said, “*Mirsad* is a bridge on the *sirat* (the path that passes over hell and leads to heaven), which will not be passed by a servant who carries an act of injustice” (Majlisi 1403AH, 72:323).

The late Ayatullah Khomeini said to his son,

Try not to leave this world while in debt to people, for things will become difficult then. Dealing with God is much easier than dealing with humans. I seek God’s refuge for myself, you, and the believers, from the rights of people and from dealing with humans who are in trouble. (Khomeini 1378 Sh, Letter on 1361/2/8)

Everyone seems to accept that people have rights. However, when it comes to action, some people violate the rights of the others. Some instances of these violations are as follows: looking at people’s notebooks without their permission, being careless about paying one’s debts, backbiting, accusing people, gossiping, and insulting.

Rights of Neighbors

It is understood from the Qur'an and the narrations that neighbors have a special position. God says in the Qur'an,

وَاعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَلَا تُشْرِكُوا بِهِ شَيْئًا وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا وَبِذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسَاكِينِ وَالْجَارِ ذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْجَارِ الْجُنُبِ

Worship God and do not ascribe any partners to Him, and be good to parents, the relatives, the orphans, the needy, the near neighbor and the distant neighbor. (Qur'an 4:36)

After commanding people to worship God and prohibiting polytheism, the Qur'an commands us in this verse to do good to our parents and neighbors, and states that even distant neighbors are included in this command.

The Prophet (s) said,

“Gabriel enjoined me to [do good to] the neighbor to the extent that I thought neighbors would inherit from each other” (Majlisi 1403AH, 71:94).

Imam Ali (a) also, in the last moments of his blessed life, emphasized on neighbors' rights:

“Fear God with regard your neighbors, for ... your Prophet enjoined about them to the extent that we thought he would say that they inherit from each other” (Nahj al-balaghah, Letter 47).

The prophet (s) also said, “Whoever believes in God and in the Last Day should honor his neighbor more than he honors anyone else” (Muhaddith Nuri 1408AH, 8:426-7) and “Whoever dies while three of

his neighbors are all pleased with him, his sins will be forgiven” (Ibid., 422).

Once, the prophet (s) was told that there is a woman who fasts all days and worships God at nights and gives alms, but hurts her neighbors with her words. The Prophet said, “There is no good in her. She is among the people of hell.” Then the people said, “There is this other lady who only performs her obligatory prayers, fasts the month of Ramadan, and does not hurt his neighbors.” The Prophet (s) said, “She is among the people of Paradise” (Muhaddith Nuri 1408AH, 8:423).

Also regarding neighbors, Imam Sadiq (a) said, “Being a good neighbor increases [one’s] sustenance” (Kulayni 1407AH, 2:666) and “Being good to neighbors blesses lands and increases lifetimes” (Ibid., 667).

We read in a hadith that

The Prophet (s) said, “Do you know what the rights of neighbors are?” The people said, “No.” He said, “To help him if he asked for your help, to lend him if he wanted to borrow from you, to fulfill his needs if he becomes poor, to congratulate him if he receives a good fortune, to visit him if he becomes ill, to console him if he encounters an affliction, to attend his funeral if he dies.” (Majlisi 1403AH, 79:93-4)

Imam Kazim (a) is narrated to have said, “Being a good neighbor is not [only] to avoid bothering your neighbors; rather, it is to be patient when they bother you” (Harrani 1404 AH, 409).

It is very good that neighbors know and visit each other, but it should not be to the extent that it disturbs their comfort.

Another responsibility of neighbors towards each other is to be mindful of each other in a way that if one of them is in need of something, the others offer their help.

In addition to what was mentioned so far, it should be noted that neighbors should not interfere in each other's private affairs.

Manners of the Sick and Visiting them

Manners of the Sick

1. To be patient and thankful to God
2. Not to complain about one's illness to others
3. To hide the illness for three days
4. To give to charity
5. To hope for God's mercy and trust in Him

Manners of Visiting the Sick

Visiting ill people is one of our religious duties, which has certain manners:

1. Visiting the ill person with the intention of getting closer to God
2. Being hope-inspiring to the ill person
3. Not talking a lot near his bedside
4. Speaking positively in his presence
5. Not prolonging the visit, unless the patient wishes so
6. Trying to calm the patient and his family
7. Giving an appropriate gift to the patient

8. Reciting *Fatihah al-kitab* (Qur'an 1) and giving to charity for the healing of the patient
9. When going to the hospital to visit a patient, also visiting the other patients that are in the same room
18. Offering one's help to the patient if he needs anything
19. Visiting the patient at a time when it does not disturb him or his family

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