

# The Face of Mercy: Learning the Concept and Usages of IHSAN in the Qur'an

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## Abstract

*Ihsan* is among the primary and most frequently mentioned concepts in the Qur'an. Due to the wide range of its usages and semantic elements, most of its definitions in the commentaries of the Qur'an are not comprehensive or exclusive. Through an analytical-descriptive approach and with the method of interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an, the present research studies the concept and different examples of *ihsan*, its relation with other Qur'anic concepts, such as *taqwa* (God-wariness), faith, righteousness, reward, disbelief, denial of divine signs, oppression, and violation of the limits imposed by God. Reviewing the

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verses shows that the glorious Qur'an took the concept of *ihsan*, which was previously used in the realm of human relations, to a relatively new realm of meaning. Even though this concept has a moral color, its Qur'anic meaning and usage draw a system of interwoven and inseparable values that build up the emotional and behavioral characters of the believers in their relations with God, themselves, and others.

**Keywords:** *Ihsan, faith, righteousness, benefactors, taqwa (God-wariness)*

## Preface

As a frequent and key concept, *ihsan* has been widely used in the glorious Qur'an and Islamic tradition. Referring to verses and hadiths on *ihsan* to infer rulings in different fields of Islamic jurisprudence, such as sale, marriage, and jihad, has been widely practiced by Shia<sup>11</sup> and Sunni<sup>12</sup> jurists. The *rule of ihsan*<sup>13</sup> is among important principles in *fiqh* which can be applied in different cases. In ethical<sup>14</sup> and mystical<sup>15</sup> sources, the verses on *ihsan*, together with its role in the moral and spiritual formation of a person and society, have been discussed.

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<sup>11</sup> See Muhaqqiq Hilli (2010, 2:20) and Najafi (n.d., 20:291; 21:24, 180).

<sup>12</sup> See Sarakhsi (1406 AH, 46-47, 190-201) and Ibn Qudama (n.d., 7:433; 8:48; 10:460).

<sup>13</sup> Adopted from Qur'an 9:92-93.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, see Bayhaqi (1410 AH, 7:501) and Ghazali (n.d., 2:793-99).

<sup>15</sup> For instance, see Qaysari (1996, 615) and Fanari (1416 AH, 22-3).

Despite such a wide reflection of the concept of *ihsan* in Islamic teachings, a clear definition for it is still lacking. In many cases, this leads to a confusion and misunderstanding of the different meanings of *ihsan* and its instances. This research aims at providing a clear picture of the concept of *ihsan* and its instances and the relation between *ihsan* and other concepts such as God-wariness, oppression, faith, and righteousness. Reviewing the verses of the Qur'an shows that *ihsan* has been used with the meanings of doing good and doing an act perfectly and in the best way. The first meaning has been used for the relation of a person with God and with others, but the second meaning has been used only for God.

### Meaning of *Ihsan*

The word “*ihsan*” is the verbal noun of the root *h-s-n*, which conveys the meaning of beauty, goodness, kindness, competence, and so forth (Firuzabadi 1417 AH, 2:1563). This root and its derivatives, such as *hasan*, *hasanah*, *husna*, *muhsin*, and *absan*, which have been frequently mentioned in the Qur'an (16:67; 2:201; 11:114; 7:137; 4:59), address those religious and worldly issues which suggest rational, ethical, emotional, or sensational beauty and can provoke a sense of happiness, contentment, or admiration in a person and attract him (Raghib Isfahani 1412 AH, 236).

*Ihsan* is the antonym of *isa'ab* (doing evil) (17:7; 63:31) and has two usages: often with the preposition *ila* (to), *bi* (with), or *li* (for) and meaning doing good to someone; and without a preposition, which indicates doing something good in the perfect way (Jawhari 1376 Sh, 5:2099). Synonymy of *ihsan* with the words “*in'am*,” “*ifdal*,” and “*birr*” have made lexicologists and commentators explain the similarities and differences between them (Tusi n.d., 3:14; Raghib Isfahani 1412 AH, 114,

236, 815). The word “ihsan” and its derivatives have been used seventy-one times in the Qur’an.

Despite their different views on the interpretation of some of the mentioned verses (Tabari 1415 AH, 5:419; Tabarsi 1406 AH, 2:516), commentators have tried to present one definition for ihsan. However, due to the diversity of its usages and meaning elements and the inability to distinguish between the two usages of ihsan, most definitions are not comprehensive enough; examples of these definitions include benefitting, praising others (Tusi n.d., 2:153), an act done properly and out of awareness (Tabataba’i 1417 AH, 4:20), doing an act properly and with godly intention, and benefitting another person without expecting any reward or compensation (Alusi 1417 AH, 16:48; Tusi n.d., 1:267). Of all verses about ihsan, it can be understood that the important elements of its meaning are faith, godly intention, essential goodness of an action, goodness of the manner in which an action is done, and benefitting others. All or some of the mentioned elements define the sense of ihsan in every case. Thus, offering a comprehensive definition covering the two senses and all the usages of ihsan is impossible.

### **Usages of Ihsan in the Qur’an**

The word “ihsan” has been used in the Qur’an in the both above-mentioned senses. Its first meaning (i.e., doing good) is mentioned in such verses as 2:58, 3:134, and 7: 55-56. In these verses, examples of good acts have been mentioned and people are encouraged to do them. Some of these verses have demonstrated important parts of the intellectual, emotional, and behavioral personality of the prophets (a) and have introduced them as exemplars for benefactors (12:51-56; 28:14; 37:102-105). In some other verses, there is an advice for doing good to others (4:36; 6:151; 28:77).

Ihsan, as performing an action in a good and perfect manner (the second meaning) is mentioned, for instance, in 12:23, 32:7, and 64:6. As it can be understood from these usages, the one who performs ihsan in this sense is not called a *mubsin* (benefactor). Thus, it cannot be counted among moral concepts.

Studying and reflecting upon the verses shows that ihsan is an abstract concept that includes all kinds of goodness, and was completely known to the Arabs of the time of the Prophet (s). What is reported of some disbeliever praising the verse “Indeed Allah enjoins justice and kindness...” (16:90) supports this claim (Rawandi 1405 AH, 1:213). However, the glorious Qur’an has taken this concept, which was mostly used in the case of human relations, to a new domain, in the relation between human beings and God, religion, and the Prophet (s).

Despite the conceptual difference between ihsan and some other fundamental and more frequent concepts in the Qur’an, they have common instances; for example, in some verses, *taqwa* (3:133-134; 12:90; 39:33-34) and in some other verses, “faith and good deeds” (18:30) are regarded as instances of ihsan.

For the conceptual difference between ihsan and the mentioned concepts, an example is the meaning of God-wariness in *taqwa*, which shows the godly intention behind the action, while goodness in ihsan mainly shows the goodness in action. On the other hand, some verses have mentioned general concepts against ihsan in its first meaning, such as *zulm* (oppression) (2:58-59; 12:78-79; 37:113), disbelief and denial of the signs of God (5:86; 31:78-79; 77:40-45), and trespassing the limits of God (2:229).

Although ihsan is mostly used in ethics, the domain of its Qur’anic meaning illustrates a system of interwoven fundamental values and an emotional, behavioral framework for the believers in different domains

of their relation with God (2:58; 3:148), themselves (17:7), others (2:83, 195; 3:4), religion (6:84; 9:91), and foreigners (5:13). Demonstrating different aspects of the personality of some prophets (a) and introducing them as *muhsin* (benefactor) can be another reason for an expansion of the mentioned domain of meaning. (12:56; 28:14; 37:80)

### Examples of Ihsan

Ihsan in the sense of doing good deeds has been mostly used in the Qur'an in the case of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral relations of human beings with God. In some verses, issues such as faith in God, the Prophet (s), the Qur'an, expecting the understanding of the time of the Prophet (s), and the wish to join the believers have been mentioned as examples of good deeds. In Qur'an 5:82, Christians have been mentioned as better friends for believers, due to the existence of priests and monks among them and also because they do not have self-conceit. The following verses mention that the eyes of some Christians overflow with tears when they hear the Qur'an and recognize the truth, and they are counted among the benefactors because of their declaration of faith in God and His messenger (5:83-85). The apparent meaning of the verse "So, for what they said, Allah requited them..." (5:85) suggests that their support for the Prophet (s) and his religion is regarded as ihsan. Also, in some other verses, it is reported that disbelievers wish to return to this world and join the virtuous upon seeing the divine punishment (39:58-59). In these two verses, believing in divine signs has been mentioned as an example of ihsan. In these verses, lack of self-conceit has been introduced as the grounds for performing good deeds and faith, and everlasting life in Paradise has been introduced as its reward (5:82-85; 39:59).

Another group of verses regards the performers of certain deeds as benefactors: those who are used to sleep little during the night, plead

God for forgiveness at dawns, and donate a share of their wealth to the poor (51: 15-19). Verses 55 and 56 of surah A'raf order to supplicate God with fear and hope and state that "Allah's mercy is close to benefactors." Mentioning financial help to the poor and not causing corruption on the earth together with worshipping God shows how, from the viewpoint of the Qur'an, the relation between a human being and God is inseparable from his relation with other human beings based on ihsan (51:17-19; 7:56).

Referring to the ritual of sacrifice in hajj, the glorious Qur'an states that the value of the ritual is in its expression of God-wariness in the hearts of those who perform it, whom the Qur'an gives glad tidings as "benefactors" (22:36-37). From these verses, it can be understood that in order for a deed to be an instance of ihsan, not only it has to be good in itself and done in the right way but also it has to be motivated by good and godly intentions (22:31-37).

In another surah, the verses of the Qur'an have been mentioned as the sources of guidance and mercy for the benefactors, who are introduced as those who maintain the prayer, and pay the zakat, and are certain of the Hereafter (31:2-5).

Mentioning the most significant socio-economical deed (i.e., paying the zakat) beside the most significant act of worship (i.e., maintaining the prayer) in addition to the faith in the Hereafter suggests how, from the viewpoint of the Qur'an, the triangle of the relation with God, society, and the hereafter are tightly interrelated and totally influential in the formation of ihsan. Since these verses first mention "the benefactors" and then introduce them as those who maintain the prayer, and pay zakat, for their faith in the Hereafter, it can be understood that the mentioned actions were introduced as new examples of ihsan, which were previously unknown to the Arabs.

Another evidence to support this idea is that, according to the familiarity of the Arabs with the concept of felicity, the three elements have been mentioned as the grounds for benefiting from the guidance and mercy of the verses of the Qur'an, making the performers of those actions as "felicitous."

Some other verses mention the possibility of repentance after disobeying God, regarding it as an example of *ihsan*. After reporting the disobedience of the Israelites despite witnessing the signs of God and benefitting from His abundant blessings (2:49-57; 7:159-160), the Qur'an mentions God's order to them to enter Jerusalem prostrating at the gate and to ask for forgiveness by saying "*hitta*" (relieve [us of the burden of our sins]). It continues saying that if they do so, their sins would be forgiven, and that "the benefactors" would be rewarded more. In these verses, those who obeyed God are considered as benefactors and those who disobeyed are considered as wrongdoers. Thus, wrongdoing is regarded as the opposite of *ihsan*, and absolute submission to the order of God is introduced as an example of *ihsan*. This can also be seen in the story of Ibrahim's (a) perfect submission to God in sacrificing his son, which is mentioned an example of *ihsan* (37: 103-105).

In some verses of the Qur'an, those godly men who fought along with their prophets (a) against the enemies of God showed great resistance against the difficulties are called benefactors (3: 146), because in the mentioned difficult situation, they did not say anything other than asking God to forgive their sins and excesses and to make their feet steady, and to help them against the faithless (3:147-148). God has mentioned worldly rewards, including victory over the enemy, and rewards in the hereafter, which are Paradise and its blessings, as the results of performing good deeds and has informed about His love for the benefactors.

The relation between Muslims with the religion and the Prophet (s) is another realm in which *ihsan* has been used in the sense of performing good deeds, and issues such as preaching beliefs and monotheistic values, defending them against enemies, and enduring different kinds of pressure and annoyance have been mentioned as its examples. In this regard, the glorious Qur'an extends the meaning of *ihsan* to emotions and expressions, in addition to behavior, and tries to introduce good examples and provide psychological, cultural, social, and military strategies to promote religious culture. In this sense, Prophet Ilyas (a) is called a benefactor because of calling his people to God-wariness, avoiding idol-worshipping, and worshipping God, who is the best of creators and the Creator of their forefathers (37: 124-126, 129-131). An everlasting good reputation for Prophet Ilyas (a) and peace from God upon him have been considered as the rewards for his good deeds.

In verse 120 of the surah Tawbah, those who helped the Prophet (s) in fighting with the enemies and endured all the difficulties are called benefactors. Calling those acts "good deeds," mentioning the reward of those who act so, and stating that the reward of the virtuous will not be forgotten show that doing good deeds and *ihsan* are similar in meaning here. Even those who sincerely want but are not able to do anything for the cause of God are regarded as benefactors (9:91). Finally, striving for the sake of God in any way has been introduced as a good deed (29:69), and it shows that the mentioned striving is a good deed only if it is solely for the sake of God (Tabarsi 1406 AH, 8:226).

Steadfastness in the way of religion and enduring different kinds of emotional and physical abuse from the enemies are examples of *ihsan* in this realm (16:127-128; 11:115). Listing prophets such as Noah (a), Abraham (a), Moses (a) and Harun (a) among distinguished benefactors and referring to their intellectual and behavioral personalities in the Qur'an show that all the mentioned points, especially promoting

monotheistic beliefs and values and demoting disbelief and polytheism are among significant examples of *ihsan* in religion (37:75-80, 114-121; 130-131).

Humans' relation with each other in the society is another field where *ihsan* means "to perform good deeds." The Qur'an introduces some examples of this kind of *ihsan* and calls the believers to it. For example, doing good, especially to one's wife, is greatly emphasized; and men are warned against hurting their wives by misusing their right of divorce. In some verses, the reconciliation of men with their wives and their waiving of some of their own rights in order to keep the marital life is mentioned among the examples of *ihsan* (4:128). Here, *ihsan* requires avoiding greed, which destroys the grounds of peace and reconciliation. Providing financial support to the woman whom one divorces before copulation is another example of financial *ihsan* (2:236).

Some other examples of *ihsan* in this field has to do with emotions: the God-wary have been described as those "who spend in ease and adversity, and suppress their anger, and excuse [the faults of] the people" (3:134). Since forbearance has a constructive influence in bringing the hearts together and in spiritual formation, practicing it even toward unbelievers has been advised and introduced as a good deed (5:13).

Elsewhere, it is mentioned that the elderly need more emotional care, so avoiding any action that would hurt them emotionally has been regarded as a good deed (12:78). This shows that the mentioned good deeds are among obvious and known examples of *ihsan* and thus expected from the virtuous. Making reconciliation between people, allocating a part of the income to the needy (51:19), and giving charity (28:76-77) are among the examples of *ihsan* in social relations (2:178).

Divine forgiveness, which is a sign of God's love toward people, corresponds to the mentioned good deeds as reflections of humans' love towards one another.

Although *ihsan* in the sense of doing good to others is included in the examples of the meaning of *ihsan* as "performing good deeds," it has a different usage as well; since, in some of its examples, the benefits of *ihsan* are more for those toward whom doing *ihsan* is advised than for the one who does *ihsan*; and in some cases, it has no benefit for the benefactor at all. This sense can be seen especially in the relation between human beings and God. The Qur'an has mentioned some examples of God's *ihsan* to His servants in this world and in the hereafter. In the Qur'an, Prophet Yusuf (a) mentions God as the one who saved him from prison and brought his family from the desert to Egypt, regarding this as God's *ihsan* to him (12:100). The survival of the Egyptians from the famine has also been called the *ihsan* of God (Tabarsi 1406 AH, 5:406). Wealth has also been mentioned as God's *ihsan* to human beings (28:77).

In surah al-Rahman, when some of the blessings for the God-wary are mentioned in the paradise, it is said that the requital of *ihsan* is nothing but *ihsan* (55:46-58). According to the apparent meaning of the verse and also the previous verses, the mentioned blessings are examples of God's *ihsan* provided as the reward for what the God-wary do in this world. The interrogative form of the verse suggests the obviousness of the rule of goodness in return for goodness and its applicability even to disbelievers (Tabatabai 1417 AH, 1:386). Also, the provision of paradise and its eternity is another example of God's *ihsan* to those who have faith in God and do righteous deeds (65:11).

In some verses, showing *ihsan* in emotions, speech, and manner towards people who need more attention and care is emphasized.

Moreover, *ihsan* towards parents is greatly stressed: it has been advised more than ten times and usually after calling people to monotheism (2:83; 4:36; 6:151, etc.). In verses 23 and 24 of surah *Isra'*, great respect for the parents, speaking with them kindly, being humble with them, treating them with mercy and love, asking God to forgive their sins and have mercy on them, and helping them financially are mentioned as examples of *ihsan* to parents especially (4:36).

In the surah *Ahqaf*, the difficulties that a mother goes through during pregnancy, delivery, milking, and childhood of her children have been mentioned as a reason why her children have to show *ihsan* towards her (46:15). The verses that emphasize on showing *ihsan* to the parents do not mention any rewards or praise for those who do this *ihsan*. This may be because this *ihsan* is in return for the difficulties that the parents go through in raising their children, and the children should not expect any reward or praise for their *ihsan* to them.

Humbleness and providing financial help to orphans, the needy, near and distant relatives, neighbors, travelers, slaves, and avoiding arrogance, bragging, and miserliness are mentioned among the examples of *ihsan* to others (4:36-37). Also, it is clear that the kind and significance of *ihsan* towards each of the mentioned groups is different from other groups (2:83).

We should also do *ihsan* to ourselves. According to the glorious Qur'an, everyone will see the rewards, punishment, and other results of his beliefs, speeches, and good and bad deeds in this world and the hereafter (53:31; 98:6-8; 99:7-8). Therefore, by choosing to do good deeds and then receiving the rewards for those deeds, one can do *ihsan* to himself (17:7).

A further usage of *ihsan* in the Qur'an is in the sense of doing an action in its perfect way. For instance, divine actions are described by the

derivatives of *ihsan* in this sense (e.g., verse 7 of surah Sajda with regard to the creation of all creatures, verse 64 of the surah Ghafir and verse 3 of surah Taghabun regarding the creation of human beings). Also, in some cases, where God is mentioned as “the best of creators,” this meaning is intended (23:14; 37:125). In the surah Yusuf, *ihsan* refers to the perfect way of doing an action attributed to God (12:23). In this verse, Prophet Yusuf (a) remembers the blessings he received in the house of the ruler of Egypt. Contrary to what most commentators have said (Tabari 1415 AH, 12:238; Tabarsi 1406 AH, 5:341), serious evidence show that the word “*rabbi*” (my lord) refers to God, not the ruler of Egypt (Tabataba’i 1417 AH, 11:125). In either case, *ihsan* means the same.

*Ihsan* in this sense has been attributed to human beings only once in the case of faith and good actions (18:30). The reason might be that human beings, due to lack of enough knowledge about different aspects of an action including its consequences in this world and in the hereafter, cannot recognize its goodness and badness without divine guidance and thus cannot perform it in its most perfect manner by themselves (11:7; 41:33).

## Conclusion

*Ihsan* is among the rich teachings of the Qur’an. Due to its different meanings and the failure to notice all its meaning elements, most definitions offered for *ihsan* are not comprehensive. A careful study of the usages of *ihsan* in the Qur’an shows that it has been used in the sense of doing good and doing an action in the best and most perfect way. The first meaning has been used in different cases of the relation between human beings and God and between human beings themselves, but the second meaning has only been used for God. Studying the concept and examples of *ihsan*, on the one hand, shows that this concept is closely related to the Qur’anic concepts of God-wariness,

faith, and good deeds and that it stands against such concepts as disbelief, denial of the signs of God, and violation of God's limits. On the other hand, it becomes clear that the glorious Qur'an took the concept of *ihsan*, which was mostly used in human relations, to a relatively new realm of meaning. Even though, the concept has a moral color, but its Qur'anic meaning and usage draws a system of fundamental values in Islam, which are interwoven and inseparable, and also builds up the emotional and behavioral formation of believers in their relation with God, themselves, other believers, religion, and foreigners, and presents a multi-dimensional concept.

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