

# Dignity in Islam - Part V

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## Abstract

In this continuation from the previous piece in the series, this essay explores the characteristics of people who lack honour as well as how we can improve our own personal honour. It examines the social and personal ramifications of having or not having a strong sense of honour with examples from the Qur'an, hadith, and Islamic history. Part of cultivating a sense of honour comes from knowledge of the self, something which is emphasised in the Islamic tradition, as will be shown. Lastly, it distinguishes between honour and arrogance and offers advice on how one may enjoy one and eschew the other.

**Keywords:** *Islamic ethics, honour, self-esteem, humility, Qur'an, hadith, Shi'ism*

Previously, we discussed some of the characteristics of honourable people, according to the Qur'anic verses and Islamic traditions. For instance, they encourage others, they automatically distance themselves

from evil, they are very patient, they do not harm others, they never allow themselves to be controlled or enslaved, and they are very careful with regard to their expectations. Furthermore, we mentioned some psychological findings regarding honourable people, such as having a sense of hope in the future, being respectful towards others, clearly distinguishing between ends and means, valuing being alone, acting on the basis of fairness, and being careful about the way they dress.

### **Characteristics of non-honourable persons**

Now, for the sake of comparison and for deeper understanding, let us refer to some of the problems of those who do not have an honourable character and lack self-respect.

#### **1) Weak willpower**

A person who lacks internal honour usually suffers from weak willpower. He is not able to stand against difficulties or face challenges, and quickly accepts his condition.

Sometimes, if not most times, we live in situations which are not pleasant and certainly not ideal. It is one of the realities of this world that we have to struggle to improve our situation, as the Qur'an says:

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي كَبَدٍ

Certainly, We created man in travail. (90:4)

When a person is not strong, he chooses the easiest way to achieve short-term relief, and does not consider the longer-term consequences of his choice. The easiest way to come out of any difficulty is to consider a short-term solution, and to be as pleased as possible with the way things are. For example, for a person who lives in a neighbourhood that has a high level of crime, the easiest solution is to ignore the underlying

causes of the situation and just try to protect his own family. A better way, however, is to reject the notion that the situation cannot be changed and to find ways to make the neighbourhood a safer and better place for all the residents.

Those with weak personalities try to do the minimum and put up with their sad situation. They sometimes resort to the idea of predestination and claim that everything that happens to them is already determined by God, and therefore they must accept the situation.

History also shows that some tyrants used the idea of predestination to prevent protests or objections from their people. For example, Mu'awiyah used to tell his people that they had to accept him as their ruler because he was predestined to rule over them. He convinced them that their situation could not be changed by referring, albeit falsely, to the following verse:

قُلِ اللَّهُمَّ مَالِكُ الْمُلْكِ تُؤْتِي الْمُلْكَ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَتَنْزِعُ الْمُلْكَ مِمَّنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُعِزُّ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُذِلُّ مَنْ تَشَاءُ بِيَدِكَ الْخَيْرُ إِنَّكَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

Say, 'O Allah, Master of all sovereignty! You give sovereignty to whomever You wish, and strip of sovereignty whomever You wish; You make mighty whomever You wish, and You abase whomever You wish; all good is in Your hand. Indeed You have power over all things.' (3:26)

He misused this verse by saying that his power was given to him by God, and that if the Ahl al-Bayt did not have power, it was because God had not willed so.

Tyrannical rulers who promote determinism, together with people with weak personalities who are prepared to live under any circumstances,

make life disastrous and devoid of any dignity and honour. It is at such times that people must rise, at whatever cost, to raise the awareness of the people, just as Imam Husayn (A) said: 'Death with dignity is better than life with humiliation' (Majlisi 1403 AH: vol. 44, p. 192).

## 2) Pessimism

Those without honourable character are often pessimistic and think negatively. We must be careful of such an attitude. We have to distinguish between caution and suspicion, for the two are not the same. We should be cautious, but not suspicious. When we want to get married, for instance, we should be cautious and choose wisely, but we should not be suspicious of people and think badly of them for no reason.

If we think too negatively, then we inadvertently attract troubles. In Islam, we have a concept called *tatayyur*, which means that a problem may actually happen to a person who thinks pessimistically that it will happen to him. Thinking that bad things are going to happen can increase the chances of their occurrence.

Some people have tried to explain this by the idea of the flow of positive and negative energy in the universe, and how our thoughts can influence this flow. I do not wish to comment on that, but I can say that if a person has a positive and good opinion of God and hopes that good things will happen, then things will likely be as he hopes; and if a person thinks that disasters will take place, then things will probably be as he thinks.

It is said that once an angel<sup>33</sup> appeared before Pharaoh and asked him: 'What would you do if you had a servant whom you had looked after and supported from his birth, whom you had nurtured and protected, to whom you had given parents, and to whom you had granted a high position, and then this servant, instead of being grateful to you, started to question your existence, did not believe in you, did not admit that you had bestowed these favours, and, above all, wanted to take your position?' Pharaoh replied: 'I would make him drown in the sea!' (Saduq 1408 AH: vol. 1, p. 581). The punishment that Pharaoh suggested was reserved for him and became his own fate as a consequence of his disobedience and oppression.

In the story of Prophet Yusuf (A), when he learned about the plots of the women of the city, he prayed: 'My Lord! Prison is dearer to me than to what they invite me. If You do not turn away their schemes from me, then I will incline towards them and become one of the senseless' (12:33). In this whole episode, it was none other than Prophet Yusuf (A) who suggested prison, and he actually ended up in prison, though he was saved later. Sometimes, negative thinking may actually lead to negative things.

Therefore, we should try to be positive as much as possible. God says in a *hadith qudsi*:

أنا عند ظنّ عبدي المؤمن

I am as with the opinion of My believing servant.  
(Kulayni 1407 AH: vol. 2, p. 72)

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<sup>33</sup> An angel can take the form of a human being or an animal, except dogs and pigs.

One of the major sins is to lose hope in God's forgiveness. If a person believes that God will not forgive him, then he may indeed not be forgiven. We must always have hope.

Those who do not have honourable personalities and are not internally strong become pessimistic; they tend to think negatively; they tend to be suspicious and hopeless, and do not bring positive changes to their life and to their society.

### 3) Unstable Relationships

Those that lack inner dignity cannot have durable and stable relationships with other people. Such people are comparable to countries that do not have stable governments and, as a result, are not able to form stable relationships with other countries. When a person has inner peace, integrity, honour, and respect, then the relationship between that person and his spouse, children, friends, colleagues, and neighbours will be stable and successful. But when a person has inner confusion and instability, when he feels vulnerable and weak, then he becomes upset and reacts aggressively. When such a person is challenged, he gets distressed and offended and thus reacts with anger, which earns him a reputation as a rude person.

A confident lecturer or scholar is not frustrated when people ask him questions. He does not view them as bad or as troublemakers. In the *hawzah* (seminary), the teachers actually favour those students who thoughtfully criticize the contents. Such students are known as *mustashkil* (lit. 'objector'), which is a prestigious title. If there are no questions from the class, then the teacher will often comment that the class is not supposed to be a funeral ceremony!

Lacking self-confidence can have ill effects on a person's personal life. When a person has internal worries, then he can create problems for himself and for the people around him. Sometimes we must pause and realize that our problems can be fixed once we fix what is inside ourselves.

#### 4) Showing off

Those without honour tend to show off. For them, how they are judged by others becomes the most important thing.

However, typically, a long-standing billionaire will not be concerned over whether people think he is rich or poor, because he has confidence in himself, but when a poor person achieves some monetary success, he becomes concerned about his image and wants people to recognize that he has money.

Likewise, if a person is rich inside, it does not matter for him whether people are pleased with him or not. Such a person does not show off to attract attention, because he has no need to feel important and significant to others. Imam Kazim (A) said to Hisham ibn al-Hakam: 'If you have a pearl in your hand and people say it is a walnut, does it make any difference to you? And if you have a walnut and people say it is a pearl, you should not feel happy!' (Harrani 1404 AH: p. 383; Majlisi 1403 AH: vol. 75, p. 296)

The Imam (A) points out here that what people think does not have any effect on reality. In fact, if they make a mistake, then we should feel sorry for them, that they have not understood the difference between a pearl and a walnut.

A believer is careful about his reputation, and that is another issue. He has to behave in a way that people do not think bad of him. Our respect and reputation should not be put in danger, but that does not mean that we should show off and try to please everyone. We must do our best to act in a way that God wants, and try not to attract suspicions and questions. But there is no need for us to go out of our way and change our lifestyle to please others. Our main concern should be God's pleasure with us.

### Improving our own honour

Now, I wish to briefly discuss and provide some suggestions as to what we can do to improve our self-respect and internal honour.

#### 1) Knowing ourselves

A very important stage in improving our honour is to know ourselves. Hadiths have placed great emphasis on *ma'rifat al-nafs* (self-knowledge). This does not mean that we should know facts about ourselves such as our name, surname, date of birth, and so forth; rather, it means that we should know our reality, what God has placed within us, and our talents and potentials. It is reported that the Holy Prophet (S) said:

من عرف نفسه فقد عرف ربه

Whosoever knows himself knows his Lord. (Tamimi Amidi 1410 AH: vol. 1, p. 588)

This is a famous hadith quoted in both Shi'a and Sunni sources. It is impossible for us to know ourselves properly and not find a connection to God. On the other hand, those who have failed to understand God fail to know and remember themselves, as the Qur'an states:

وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ نَسُوا اللَّهَ فَأَنْسَاهُمْ أَنْفُسَهُمْ أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ

And do not be like those who forget Allah, so He makes them forget their own souls. It is they who are the transgressors. (59:19)

Hence, if we know ourselves and that we are created by God as His vicegerents on earth and as creatures that possess the potential to become the best of creation, then we can even surpass angels. If we recognize this, we will feel so honoured that we will not allow ourselves to be humiliated and brought down by doing evil or things that are not useful.

In a poem attributed to Imam 'Ali (A), we read:

أتزعم أنك جرم صغير وفيك انطوى العالم الأكبر

Do you think that you are an insignificant germ, while inside you the greater universe is condensed?  
(Maybudi 1411 AH: 175; Maulana Shawqi 1383 SH: 62)

Mystics say that the human being is the *greater universe*, and what we see externally, i.e. nature, mountains, seas, and jungles, is the *lesser universe*, because it is smaller than what exists inside human beings. God has honoured us and we must be cognizant of that and invest in self-knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

## 2) Maintaining good relationships with others

In addition to self-knowledge, we must try to establish good relationships with other people. Indeed, this is a very important step to self-improvement. Finding the right people and forming constructive friendships with them will give us confidence. A person who has good

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<sup>34</sup> Those interested in reading more on this can consult the literature which is nowadays available in English.

friends whom he can trust feels empowered. Conversely, one who does not have good friends finds it difficult to trust anyone. This causes a feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness; everything in life feels negative. Hence, it is very important to learn how to befriend others.

A hadith states:

أعجز النَّاسَ من عجز عن اكتساب الإخوان

The most incompetent person is one who cannot find friends. (*Nahj al-Balagha*, saying 12)

It is important to establish good relationships with different people. Once we establish a network of good relationships that are reliable, we will feel much more empowered internally. The way we understand the world is very important and impacts the way we understand ourselves, and vice versa.

### 3) Humbleness

Humbleness is very important in raising our level of honour. To be humble is different from being weak. In a very beautiful Qur'anic verse, God warns:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَنْ يَرْتَدَّ مِنْكُمْ عَنْ دِينِهِ فَسَوْفَ يَأْتِي اللَّهَ بِقَوْمٍ يُحِبُّهُمْ وَيُحِبُّونَهُ  
أَذَلَّةٍ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَعِزَّةٍ عَلَى الْكَافِرِينَ يُجَاهِدُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلَا يَخَافُونَ لَوْمَةَ لَائِمٍ  
ذَلِكَ فَضْلُ اللَّهِ يُؤْتِيهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَاللَّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

O you who have faith! Should any of you desert his religion, Allah will soon bring a people whom He loves and who love Him, [who will be] humble towards the faithful, stern towards the faithless, waging jihad in the way of Allah, not fearing the blame of any blamer. That is Allah's grace which He grants

to whomever He wishes, and Allah is all-bounteous,  
all-knowing. (5:54)

An expression in Farsi says: 'God has not made a covenant of brotherhood with anyone.' It is not the case that God is anyone's relative or has any special arrangement with anyone. He decides how to relate to you based on how you decide to behave. If you are good, He keeps you as a friend; if you are bad, He will change the way He interacts with you. Consider the Israelites, whom God favoured and blessed with miracles, to the extent that they received food from heaven. However, when they changed, they lost their blessings.

These people whom God loves and who love God do not behave the same towards everyone. According to Islamic teachings, when encountering arrogant people or those who wish to misguide others, we must not be very friendly. A hadith states:

التكبر مع المتكبرين عبادة

Arrogance with arrogant people is an act of worship.  
(Aynathi 1384 SH: p. 75)

This does not mean that we should become arrogant. It means that we should refuse the influence and pressure of arrogant people.

The above-mentioned verse describes the importance of being humble towards those who have faith. This humility is not out of weakness. Pointing to this, God uses the phrase '*ala al-mu'minin*' and not *li al-mu'minin*; '*ala*' indicates a kind of high position and highness, meaning that they are humble not because they are low, but because they are prepared to lower themselves from a high position. In reality, they are high and strong, but they opt to treat people with humility.

One can be of great value but still act humbly. Imam 'Ali (A) was the caliph, but still treated the poor and the weak humbly. This is humility with strength and self-respect. One can be humble and still maintain his honour. This encourages others around him to open up to him. Everyone loves humble people. A boss loves a humble employee, and an employee loves a humble boss. As soon as people sense arrogance, they become alarmed and distance themselves.

#### **4) Recognizing limitations**

It is very important to recognize our limitations. Every one of us has strengths and weaknesses; some are common and some are specific and personal. We have to understand our limits. Imam 'Ali (A) says: 'May God's mercy be upon the person who knows his limits and does not go beyond that' (Tamimi Amidi 1410 AH: vol. 1, p. 373).

If a person knows his limits, and his strengths and weaknesses, if he knows what he can undertake and what he cannot, then he will not exhaust himself; he will not take it on himself to do things that are beyond his capacity. It is important that we take things we can manage, and do not bring ourselves to despair.

One of the beauties of the month of Ramadan is that it boosts our willpower, and we feel that we are strong and can withstand the pressures of hunger, thirst, and the temptation of our desires for such long days. Those who do not fast cannot understand how good we feel when we achieve this great success of fasting and remaining strong. This is just a sample of our willpower, which we can experience more if we complete such realistic projects. When we properly fulfil a duty, it builds our confidence, and this confidence grows with every completed task. A person can then reach a point where, with the blessings of God, he feels he can change everything. Imam 'Ali (A) says about the

companions of Imam Mahdi (A) that they are so strong and so determined that if they decide to move mountains, they will do it (Yazdi Ha'eri 1422 AH: vol. 2, p. 171; Sulayman 1386 SH: vol. 1, p. 414). There is no limit to their determination.

We also can reach such a stage, but this strength has to develop gradually. We must undertake realistic projects, complete them, grow in confidence step by step, and be always hopeful that we can do anything with the blessings of God.

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