

Dignity in Islam - Part II

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Abstract

In this part, discussion on *'izzah* as one of the closest concepts to dignity is continued. Everyone naturally seeks *'izzah*, because God is *'Aziz*, and we also strive to obtain some kind of *'izzah*. There are two ways for achieving *'izzah*. The first way, which is the right way, is to make oneself qualified for receiving *'izzah* from God. The other way is to cheat; for example, through arrogance, approaching powerful and rich people, and committing sins. The most prominent example of seeking *'izzah* through arrogance is Satan. In one of his sermons, Imam Ali (a) has explained this evil trait.

Keywords: *dignity, 'izzah, Satan, Iblis, arrogance, humbleness.*

Recap

We already outlined this series of talks by explaining the notion of *'izzah* and discussing the different verses that speak about this subject, thereby establishing that *'izzah* is a very important attribute of God. In many verses, the Qur'an stresses that God is *'Aziz*. This means that He is the source and origin of *'izzah*, and if anyone wishes to seek *'izzah*, they have to do this by drawing closer to God. Then, we defined *'izzah* based on different sources.

Bestowing 'IZZAH upon Creation by God

Everyone naturally seeks and yearns for *'izzah*. This yearning reflects our origin. God has absolute existence and grants us existence. Then, we strive to extend our life; we try to prolong it and increase its quality.

Similarly, God is the utmost Light, and therefore all His creatures seek light. He is the utmost Merciful, and therefore all His creatures love mercy and try to achieve it. Hence, there is a very natural connection between the attributes of God and what we as His creation seek.

God is *'Aziz*, and we also strive to obtain some kind of *'izzah*. There are two ways that we can achieve it. The first way, which is the right way, is to make oneself qualified for receiving *'izzah* from God. The other way is to cheat; for example, some people think that they can become *'aziz* by offering bribes, or they think that being a member of a gang, group, or powerful party can make them *'aziz*. These people assume that by attaching themselves to those who have apparent dignity and power, they can become *'aziz*. The Qur'an says that this kind of thinking is wrong:

الَّذِينَ يَتَّخِذُونَ الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَبِئْتَعُونَ عِنْدَهُمُ الْعِزَّةَ فَإِنَّ الْعِزَّةَ
لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا

Those who take the faithless for allies instead of the faithful. Do they seek honour with them? [If so,] indeed all honour belongs to Allah. (4:139)

For example, if we say that those who achieve good results in their exams will be given good opportunities at university and will ultimately find good jobs, then this will lead to two different reactions. Some students will study hard and genuinely achieve good results; others, however, will try to cheat. The cheaters may deceive some people for some time, but will not be able to deceive everyone forever. We must seek out genuine *'izzah* and not resort to any cheating in this regard.

The same principle applies to seeking light. On the Day of Judgement, God says that some believers will have so much light that their light will shine in front of them and on their right side:

يَوْمَ لَا يُخْزِي اللَّهُ النَّبِيَّ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَعَهُ نُورُهُمْ يَسْعَى بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَبِأَيْمَانِهِمْ يَقُولُونَ
رَبَّنَا آتِنَا لَنَا نُورَنَا وَاعْفُرْ لَنَا إِنَّكَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

On the day when Allah will not let the Prophet down and the faithful who are with him. Their light will move swiftly before them and on their right. They will say, "Our Lord! Perfect our light for us, and forgive us! Indeed You have power over all things." (66:8)

Seeing this, the hypocrites, who will have no light on that day, will say:

يَوْمَ يَقُولُ الْمُنَافِقُونَ وَالْمُنَافِقَاتُ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا انظُرُونَا نَقْتَبِسْ مِنْ نُورِكُمْ قِيلَ ارْجِعُوا
وَرَاءَكُمْ فَأَلْتَمِسُوا نُورًا فَضُرِبَ بَيْنَهُم بِسُورٍ لَّهُ بَابٌ بَاطِنُهُ فِيهِ الرَّحْمَةُ وَظَاهِرُهُ مِنْ قِبَلِهِ
الْعَذَابُ

The day the hypocrites, men and women, will say to the faithful, “Please let up on us, that we may glean something from your light!” They will be told: “Go back and grope for light!” Then there will be set up between them a wall with a gate, with mercy on its interior and punishment toward its exterior. (57:13)

The same applies to *‘izzah*. It is a quality of perfection that God possesses, and He has placed some of it in us to make us aware of its beauty and to encourage us to seek it.

Another example that may be mentioned is that of Iblis. The problem with Iblis was that he wished to have this dignity for himself but in a way that was not acceptable or moral. He wanted to have a high status by bringing others down and keeping them lower than himself. We also see this trait in human beings. At times, when people cannot achieve good results, they try to sabotage the progress of others by misguiding them and damaging their prospects—for example, by giving them incorrect information about an upcoming exam. However, getting close to God cannot be achieved by bringing others down.

Iblis desired *‘izzah*, but in a way that was not honest. Imam Ali (a) cites the example of Iblis in *Nahj al-balaghah* (sermon 192). He explains the tragedy of Iblis and how we may also be influenced by him.

The Qur’an states that when God informed the angels about the creation of Adam, He commanded them to prostrate themselves before him:

إِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي خَالِقٌ بَشَرًا مِّن طِينٍ * فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِن رُّوحِي فَقَعُوا لَهُ سَاجِدِينَ * فَسَجَدَ الْمَلَائِكَةُ كُلُّهُمْ أَجْمَعُونَ * إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ اسْتَكْبَرَ وَكَانَ مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ

When your Lord said to the angels, “Indeed I am about to create a human being out of clay. So when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My spirit, then fall down in prostration before him.” Thereat the angels prostrated, all of them together, but not Iblis; he acted arrogantly and he was one of the faithless. (Quran 38:71-74)

Iblis refused to prostrate himself before Adam. He was not an angel, but he was very close to them at that time. Imam Ali (a) has explained why Iblis refused to prostrate:

اعْتَرَضَتْهُ الْحَمِيَّةُ، فَأَفْتَحَرَ عَلَى آدَمَ بِخَلْقِهِ، وَتَعَصَّبَ عَلَيْهِ لِإِصْلِهِ. فَعَدُوُّ اللَّهِ إِمَامٌ الْمُتَعَصِّبِينَ، وَسَلَفُ الْمُسْتَكْبِرِينَ، الَّذِي وَضَعَ أَسَاسَ الْعَصَبِيَّةِ وَنَارَعَ اللَّهَ رِذَاءَ الْجَبْرِتِيَّةِ، وَادَّرَعَ لِبَاسَ التَّعَزُّزِ

His vanity stood in his way. Consequently, he felt proud over Adam by virtue of his creation and boasted over him on account of his origin. Thus, this enemy of Allah is the leader of those who boast, and the fore-runner of the vain. It is he who laid the foundation of factionalism, quarrelled with Allah about the robe of greatness, put on the dress of haughtiness. (*Nahj al-balaghah*. Sermon 192)

Iblis thought that he was better than Adam, because Adam was created from clay and he was made of fire, not knowing that Adam’s honour

was not related to his creation from clay but to the spirit that God had given him.

Imam Ali (a) calls Iblis the leader or fore-runner of the *muta'assibin*—that is, those who are biased and arrogant and think that only they matter. Indeed, we see the results of such an attitude until today. Some people are so proud that they feel they have a monopoly over Islam. To them, no one else is a Muslim. Iblis laid the foundation of biasedness. He wished to take away the greatness of God, the absolute dignity that only fits the Almighty.

Iblis showed *ta'azzuz*. *Ta'azzuz* means the effort of a person who is not *'aziz* to pretend that they are *'aziz*. Such a person has nothing valuable but wants to pretend that they are valuable. This is similar to a person that does not possess knowledge, but he acts like religious scholars and makes his appearance like them in order to gain people's respect or support.

وَوَخَّلَعَ قَتَاعَ التَّدْلِيلِ. أَلَا تَرَوْنَ كَيْفَ صَعَّرَهُ اللهُ بِتَكْبَرِهِ، وَوَضَعَهُ بِتَرْفُعِهِ، فَجَعَلَهُ فِي
الدُّنْيَا مَذْحُورًا، وَأَعَدَّ لَهُ فِي الْآخِرَةِ سَعِيرًا

He [Iblis] took off the covering of humility. Do you not see how Allah made him low on account of his vanity and humiliated him for his feigning to be high? He discarded him in this world and provided for him burning fire in the next world. (Ibid.)

Then Imam Ali (a) explains:

وَلَوْ أَرَادَ اللهُ سُبْحَانَهُ أَنْ يَخْلُقَ آدَمَ مِنْ نُورٍ يَخْطَفُ الْإِبْصَارَ صِبَاؤُهُ، وَيَبْهَرُ الْعُقُولَ
رُؤَاؤُهُ، وَطِيبَ بَأْخَذِ الْإِنْفَاسِ عَرْفُهُ، لَفَعَلَ، وَلَوْ فَعَلَ لَطَلَّتْ لَهُ الْأَعْنَاقُ حَاصِغَةً،

وَلَخِفَّتِ الْبُلُوى فِيهِ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ. وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ سُبْحَانَهُ يَبْتَلِي خَلْقَهُ بِنِعْضِ مَا يَجْهَلُونَ
أَصْلَهُ، تَمْيِزاً بِالِاخْتِبَارِ لَهُمْ، وَتَقِيماً لِلْأَسْتِكْبَارِ عَنْهُمْ، وَإِعْثَاداً لِلْخِيَلَاءِ مِنْهُمْ

If Allah had wanted to create Adam from a light whose glare would have dazzled the eyes, whose handsomeness would have amazed the wits and whose fragrance would have caught the breath, He could have done so; and if He had done so, people would have bowed to him in humility and the trial of the angels through him would have become easier. But Allah, the Glorified, tries His creatures by means of those things whose real nature they do not know in order to distinguish [good and bad] for them through the trial, and to remove vanity from them and keep them aloof from pride and self-admiration. (Ibid.)

Imam then points out what we can learn from this episode:

فَاعْتَبِرُوا بِمَا كَانَ مِنْ فِعْلِ اللَّهِ بِإِبْلِيسَ، إِذْ أَحْبَطَ عَمَلَهُ الطَّوِيلَ، وَجَهَدَهُ الْجَهِيدَ، وَكَانَ
قَدْ عَبَدَ اللَّهَ سِتَّةَ آلَافِ سَنَةٍ، لَا يُدْرَى أَمِنْ سِنِي الدُّنْيَا أَمْ مِنْ سِنِي الْآخِرَةِ، عَنْ
كِبَرِ سَاعَةٍ وَاحِدَةٍ. فَمَنْ بَعْدَ إِبْلِيسَ يَسْلُمُ عَلَى اللَّهِ بِمِثْلِ مَعْصِيَتِهِ؟ كَلَّا، مَا كَانَ اللَّهُ
سُبْحَانَهُ لِيُدْخِلَ الْجَنَّةَ بَشَرًا بِأَمْرِ أُخْرِجَ بِهِ مِنْهَا مَلَكًا

You should take a lesson from what Allah did with Satan; namely He nullified his great acts and extensive efforts on account of the vanity of one moment, although Satan had worshipped Allah for six thousand years - whether by the reckoning of this world or of the next world is not known. Who now can remain safe from Allah after Satan by committing a similar disobedience? None at all. Allah, the Glorified, cannot let a human being enter Paradise if

he does the same thing for which Allah turned out from it an angel. (Ibid.)

The extensive worship and obedience of Iblis was wiped away as a result of a moment of pride. This displays the problem of arrogance. At times, it can be seen that a person is apparently good, but when they are faced with a test, one moment of arrogance and bias can destroy their personal and social lives. We see that sometimes people live together as spouses for decades and then everything crashes down. One should not think that since they have lived to the age of forty, fifty, or sixty, they are immune to such problems. These character flaws can be very much hidden, waiting for the opportunity to surface.

Imam Ali (a) makes it clear that no one should feel relaxed if they have these spiritual diseases. Indeed, going to Heaven will not be possible for a person who possesses the quality for which Iblis was cast out of Heaven. The Qur'an says:

تِلْكَ الدَّارُ الْآخِرَةُ نَجْعَلُهَا لِلَّذِينَ لَا يُرِيدُونَ عُلُوًّا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَلَا فَسَادًا وَالْعَاقِبَةُ
لِلْمُتَّقِينَ

This is the abode of the Hereafter which We shall grant to those who do not desire to domineer in the earth nor to cause corruption, and the outcome will be in favour of the God-wary. (28:83)

Hence, a wrong way of seeking dignity is to display arrogance or to engage in *ta'azzuz*. However, this will neither help nor lead to a good result. Many people try these methods, but they eventually find that these methods do not work. Indeed, it is quite the opposite; if a person wishes to acquire a high position and status, the requirement is

humbleness. The world is made such that those who are humble will be raised, and those that are arrogant will be demoted. A hadith states:

من تواضع لله رفعه الله

Whosoever shows humbleness for the sake of God,
God will raise him. (Kulayni 1357 Sh, 2:12)

Of course, this humbleness must be genuine. At times, people speak very humbly about themselves, but only in order to cover their arrogance. For example, our scholars sometimes sign off their letters with the word *al-abqar*, which means the most insignificant, as an expression of their humbleness before God. However, some impious scholars write such words so that the readers think that they are humble. This is a very delicate and subtle issue. Sometimes a person can suffer from pride and not realise it.

Wrong and unproductive ways of seeking dignity and ‘IZZAH

Therefore, one way of seeking dignity that is wrong and unproductive is through arrogance, through *takabbur* and *ta‘azzuz*, as Iblis did. This can be seen in those who follow his path, such as Pharaoh, who was extremely arrogant and even claimed to be a god. This shows the problem of arrogance: it has no limits, and an arrogant person will not be satisfied even after dominating millions of people or an entire country even for countries. Imam Khomeini famously said that if arrogant powers had full control over the entire world, they would look for other planets to control and dominate!

Pharaoh was not happy to be just the king and ruler. He declared himself to be god and commanded the people to worship him:

فَقَالَ أَنَا رَبُّكُمُ الْأَعْلَى

[Pharaoh] said, "I am your exalted lord!" (79:24)

On another occasion, he said:

وَقَالَ فِرْعَوْنُ يَا أَيُّهَا الْمَلَأُ مَا عَلِمْتُ لَكُمْ مِنْ إِلَهٍ غَيْرِي فَأَوْقِدْ لِي يَا هَامَانُ عَلَى
الطِّينِ فَاجْعَلْ لِي صَرْحًا لَعَلِّي أُطَّلِعُ إِلَى إِلَهِ مُوسَى وَإِنِّي لَأَظُنُّهُ مِنَ الْكَاذِبِينَ

Pharaoh said, "O [members of the] elite! I do not know of any god that you may have other than me. Haman, light for me a fire over clay, and build me a tower so that I may take a look at Moses' god, and indeed I consider him to be a liar!" (28:38)

Not only was Pharaoh claiming to be the greatest and most high god but he also declared that he was the only god. This is the path of Iblis. We should not think that these traits do not apply to us, and we should not say that we are far from being like Pharaoh or Nimrud. There is a possibility, had we possessed the same power and opportunity that we could have been like them. We do not have such opportunities, and therefore it may be easier for us to be humble. However, if we had such power and scope, then that would truly show us whether we were humble or not.

When Imam Khomeini was a teacher at the seminary, he was very careful not to allow any of his students to walk behind him. A habit of students at the seminary is to follow their teachers to ask them questions or to simply remain in their company. But Imam Khomeini would always walk alone. If anyone followed him, he would stop and ask them if they had any questions. He would deal with their requests or questions and then bid them farewell. This is what the following hadith states: "The shoes will not follow a person except that he and

his followers will be destroyed” (Warram 1368 Sh, 2:205; Kulayni 1375 Sh, 2:297).

Such pure souls are cautious; they think, if lots of people begin to walk behind them and show them respect, it may cause them to consider themselves very important. Then, gradually, pride and arrogance may seep in, so they try to avoid such situations.

If we look at revolutionary people, who revolted against unjust rulers and toppled them, we see that when they come to power, some of them remain humble and sincere, whilst others begin to forget about their ideals and strive only for power and money. We should remember that many of us have not been seriously tested in this regard; we also may fail in these tests if God does not help us.

Another false way to achieve dignity is to attach oneself to powerful and rich people. This is not right either, especially when one does not care about whether God is pleased with those people or not. The Qur’an says:

الَّذِينَ يَتَّخِذُونَ الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَبِئْتَعُونَ عِنْدَهُمُ الْعِزَّةَ فَإِنَّ الْعِزَّةَ
لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا

Those who take the faithless for allies instead of the faithful. Do they seek honour with them? [If so,] indeed all honour belongs to Allah. (4:139)

A third false way, which is also unproductive, is to commit sins and yet expect to achieve dignity and honour. At times, people think that they can be successful if they disregard God’s rulings. Some of them say that they will repent and lead a righteous life when they reach their goal. However, they are not aware that no one can gain *‘izzah* by disobeying

God. *'Izzah* comes from obedience and not from disobedience. If someone gives you an offer of job, business, or friendship and you will have to slightly disobey God if you accept it, then do not even think about it; even thinking about it is wasting your time and energy, let alone accepting it. Indeed, our reputation among people has to be such that they feel embarrassed to give us such offers. Believers must behave and appear in such a way that the impious ones move away from them.

Up to now, we discussed about God-given dignity, the dignity that He has bestowed upon mankind in general. In next parts, we will learn about acquired dignity, which we achieve by our efforts, and the opportunities that God has given us to achieve it.

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