

# Dignity in Islam - Part III

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## Abstract

In the previous parts, we began studying the notion of dignity in Islam, how God introduces Himself in the Quran as the absolute source of all dignity, and how the quality 'aziz is emphasized as a very key concept; it is mentioned in tens of verses, and it is very informative to our understanding of God's actions. We also commented on how we can mention His attributes when we pray to Him. In this part we shall mention different groups to whom the Quran has attributed honor and dignity, the standard of honor, the manner in which God has honored human beings, and the influence of honor and dignity on human character traits as described by the Ahadith.

**Keywords:** *dignity, the standard of honor, piety, freewill, intellect*

## God Grants Honor to His Creation

As was mentioned before, everything created by God has some share of dignity. For example, when we know of a renowned scholar, we regard anything written by that person—whether volumes or something brief—as valuable. Consider, for example, the late Allamah Tabatabai; due to the level of respect we have for him and his knowledge, expertise, and piety, we appreciate anything written by him, whether it is his famous *al-Mizan* or just a short essay. The same principle applies to God and His creation. Everything He has created is valuable. Even the smallest creatures bear His signs. We cannot underestimate anything created by God. The names and the greatness of God are contained in everything. In *Du‘a Kumayl* we say:

وَبِاسْمَائِكَ الَّتِي مَلَأْتَ أَرْكَانَ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ

And [I ask You] by Your names, which have filled the foundations of all things.

God’s signs can be seen in all things. This aspect is so important that even after thousands of years and after the development of science and technology, we cannot claim that we know everything about even the smallest creature of God. His creation is so sophisticated that no one can know everything about it, except Himself.

Among these creatures, some are more honored and have more significance. The Quran mentions them and characterizes them as *mukram* (honored and dignified) or *karim* (great and honorable).

### Angels as Mukramun

God has referred to the angels as *mukramun*:

وَقَالُوا اتَّخَذَ الرَّحْمَنُ وَلَدًا سُبْحَانَہٗ ۚ بَانَ عِبَادًا مُّكْرَمُونَ

They say, "The All-beneficent has taken offsprings."  
Immaculate is He! Rather they are [His] honored  
servants. (21:26)

This verse emphasizes that the angels are not gods. They are servants and have been created. However, they are special servants; they are pure and honored. To explain further why they are honored, the Quran says:

لَا يَسْبِقُونَهُ بِالْقَوْلِ وَهُمْ بِأَمْرِہٖ يَعْمَلُونَ

They do not venture to speak ahead of Him, and they  
act by His command. (21:27)

Since the angels are at the service of God, they are 'ibad mukramun (honored servants). If we also want to reach their level of honor and dignity, we too have to obey God.

It is reported that at the end of the life of Imam al-Hasan (a), a person called Junadah ibn Abi Sufyan asked him for some advice. The Imam, in the last hours of his life, offered the following advice, which is obviously very special and important: "If you want to have honor and dignity without having a big clan to support you, and [to have] majesty without having a kingdom, then come out of the humiliation of disobedience and enter the honor of obeying God" (Majlisi 1403 AH, 44:138).

According to this hadith, a person does not require a group, party, tribe, or a kingdom to have honor and dignity. It is possible to have all of these and still be humiliated. Rather, it is obeying God that is the key to honor. Angels do not do anything against what God wants, and do nothing less than what He expects, and therefore they are honored.

## Another Group of Honored Angels

In the story of Prophet Ibrahim (a), the Quran again refers to the angels as mukramun:

هَلْ أَتَاكَ حَدِيثُ ضَيْفِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ الْمُكْرَمِينَ

Did you receive the story of Abraham's honored guests? (51:24)

Those angels that visited Prophet Ibrahim were mukram and held in high regard.

## Prophets as Mukram

The prophets of God are also introduced as those with karamah and respect. God refers to Prophet Musa in the following way:

وَلَقَدْ فَتَنَّا قَبْلَهُمْ قَوْمَ فِرْعَوْنَ وَجَاءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ كَرِيمٌ

Certainly, We tried the people of Pharaoh before them, when a noble apostle came to them. (44:17)

This verse clearly shows that the messenger that came to the people of Pharaoh (i.e., Prophet Musa) was karim: he possessed honor and dignity.

In another verse, we read:

إِنَّهُ لَقَوْلُ رَسُولٍ كَرِيمٍ

It is indeed the speech of a noble apostle. (69:40)

In this verse, God makes it clear that the verses of the Quran are the words transmitted by a messenger, and are not the words of a poet, who merely speaks for himself. Here, the apostle referred to is either angel

Gabriel or Prophet Muhammad (s). The same phrase is repeated in Quran 81:91.

### The People of Heaven as Mukramun

The Quran describes the inhabitants of heaven as follows:

وَمَا يُجْزُونَ إِلَّا مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾ إِلَّا عِبَادَ اللَّهِ الْمُخْلَصِينَ ﴿٤٠﴾ أُولَئِكَ هُمْ رِزْقٌ مَّعْلُومٌ ﴿٤١﴾ فَوَاكِهُ وَهُمْ مُكْرَمُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾ فِي جَنَّاتِ النَّعِيمِ ﴿٤٣﴾

And you will be requited only for what you used to do—[all] except Allah’s exclusive servants. For such there is a known provision—fruits—and they will be held in honor, in the gardens of bliss. (37:39-43)

This passage refers to those that are mukhlas (purified), who will have some very special and distinct advantages, one of which is that they will not be judged in the hereafter; everyone else will be brought for judgement, but not the mukhlasun, since they are higher than the level of being questioned.

Another distinction is that their reward is not based on their actions. They are so close to God and so loved and honored by Him that He has granted them, so to speak, a blank check. They have a special sustenance decided by God and known only to Him. The word “ma’lum”(known) in the verse shows that their reward is something very special. Sometimes, when you wish to host someone, you reserve something special for your guest, which is known only to you. This is a special honor.

أُولَئِكَ فِي جَنَّاتٍ مُّكْرَمُونَ

They will be in gardens, held in honor. (70:35)

## Piety as the standard of Karamah

Apart from angels, prophets, and the pure servants of God, who are in the highest rank of karamah, other pious people in this world also have a special level of karamah. This is because, in reality, these pious people are the same people as those in heaven. They may be in this world now, but they are heavenly.

Furthermore, those people who possess more taqwa (piety) are even more honored:

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

O mankind! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God-worthy among you. Indeed, Allah is all-knowing, all-aware. (49:13)

If people understood this, the world would be free of conflict. Our Creator is the same, and our father and mother are the same, but unfortunately people forget this reality and get into conflict with their brothers and sisters in humanity.

God emphasizes that He did not create us into different tribes and nations to fight but rather to get to know each other. The different colors and ethnicities are there for us to better understand one another. If there were no differences between people, it would be difficult for us to recognize each other. We must use these differences as an opportunity to promote mutual understanding.

The above verse emphasizes that worldly things are not the criteria of superiority and that our Creator will judge us based on a different criterion. If you imagine a company that manufactures different laptops or mobile phones, then the designer of these items is best placed to judge which one is the best. Our designer is God, and He says that no one is better than another because of his color, ethnicity, or geography. In the sight of God, the best and most honorable are those who are more pious.

Everyone can be pious. We cannot decide our gender, color, or ethnicity, but we can control what is really important, and that is taqwa and knowledge.

أَمَّنْ هُوَ قَانِثٌ آتَاءَ اللَّيْلِ سَاجِدًا وَقَائِمًا يَحْذَرُ الْآخِرَةَ وَيَرْجُو رَحْمَةَ رَبِّهِ قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

Is he who supplicates in the watches of the night, prostrating and standing, apprehensive of the Hereafter and expecting the mercy of his Lord? Say, "Are those who know equal to those who do not know?" Only those who possess intellect take admonition. (39:9)

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

O mankind! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God-wary among you. Indeed, Allah is all-knowing, all-aware. (49:13)

Therefore, the pious are honored, and those with more piety are honored even more.

### How God Has Honored Human Beings

In Surat al-Isra, God talks about the creation of human beings. Interestingly, in the very same surah, He mentions the idea of honoring human beings twice. The first mention is in the following verse:

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى  
كَثِيرٍ مِمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا

Certainly, We have honored the Children of Adam, and carried them over land and sea, and provided them with all the good things, and given them an advantage over many of those We have created with a complete preference. (17:70)

Before this, the Quran mentions that Iblis referred to the fact that God honored Adam above him:

وَإِذْ قُلْنَا لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ اسْجُدُوا لِآدَمَ فَسَجَدُوا إِلَّا إِبْلِيسَ قَالَ أَأَسْجُدُ لِمَنْ خَلَقْتَ طِينًا  
﴿٦١﴾ قَالَ أَرَأَيْتَكَ هَذَا الَّذِي كَرَّمْتَ عَلَيَّ لَئِنِ أَخَّرْتَنِي إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ لَأُحْتَبِكُنَّ  
دُرَيْتَهُ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ﴿٦٢﴾

When We said to the angels, “Prostrate before Adam,” they [all] prostrated, but not Iblis: he said, “Shall I prostrate before someone whom You have created from clay?”

Said he, “Do You see this one whom You have honored above me? If You respite me until the Day of Resurrection, I will surely destroy his progeny, [all] except a few.” (17:61-62)



Hence, when Iblis wanted to show why he was upset and angry, he declared that he was hurt by the fact that Adam was honored more than he was honored.

Looking carefully at these two verses, we note a subtle difference. In the verse that quotes Iblis, the word 'ala (over) is used, whilst in the verse in which God is speaking, simply the verb karramna (We honored) is employed. Karramna denotes that all children of Adam have been honored with an essential quality. God, from the outset, even before creating Adam, informed the angels of what He was about to do. Thus, it is clear that God always held a special position for human beings, and that He honored them in a special manner. The Quran reflects this in the following ways:

1. God commands the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam. This is indeed a remarkable sign of honor for Adam. This was not a prostration of worship but rather a sign of respect. Had the angels been more suited than Adam to the position of being the vicegerent of God, the Almighty would have perhaps asked them to merely salute Adam. However, God chose the act of prostration, which is a very powerful act, such that it is not allowed in our religion to prostrate oneself before anyone other than God. It seems, however, that before Islam prostration before others was permitted; for example, in the story of Prophet Yusuf, we read about the prostration of his parents before him. (12:100)

The fact that God commanded the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam shows the maximum amount of respect for him. It was an especially unique type of respect, given to someone who had a very high status.

2. Although God already had angels who were very close (muqarrabun) and honored (mukramun), He did not choose any of them to be His vicegerent on the earth; instead, He told them:

إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً

Indeed, I am going to set a viceroy on the earth. (2:30)

God wanted a human being on Earth to be His vicegerent, not an angel from heaven. This shows the honor of human beings.

3. God demonstrated for the angels the unlimited capacity of human beings for learning and gaining knowledge. The angels were surprised that God was making a new creation with such importance whilst they were glorifying and worshipping Him. In order to show them why He decided to choose Adam as His vicegerent, God taught Adam all “the Names”:

وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْبِئُونِي بِأَسْمَاءِ هَؤُلَاءِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

And He taught Adam the Names, all of them; then presented them to the angels and said, “Tell me the names of these, if you are truthful. (2:31)

God wished to convince them and to make them understand why He had chosen Adam. He did not want them just to accept this without understanding. Once God challenged them to say the Names, they replied:

سُبْحَانَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ

Immaculate are You! We have no knowledge except what You have taught us. Indeed, You are the All-knowing, the All-wise. (2:32)

This reply demonstrates that they did not have the capacity to be taught the Names, whereas human beings had the capacity to learn them.

God has disposed all that is in the earth, as well as whatever is in the heavens, for the benefit of mankind (Quran 45:13). Of course, with this advantage comes a great responsibility. It is not permitted for us to waste water or other natural resources, but we can benefit from them to fulfill our real needs. Likewise, God has given us the ability to tame large animals, such as camels and elephants, and to use them for our needs. The same applies to jinns; human beings have the ability to control them, but jinns cannot control human beings as long as humans use their intellect and do not listen to them.

4. When God speaks about the creation of man, He attributes the spirit of man to Himself :

فَإِذَا سَوَّيْتُهُ وَنَفَخْتُ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِي فَقَعُوا لَهُ سَاجِدِينَ

So when I have proportioned him and breathed into him of My spirit, then fall down in prostration before him. (15:29)

This divine spirit was not given only to Adam, but rather to all human beings:

الَّذِي أَحْسَنَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقَهُ وَبَدَأَ خَلْقَ الْإِنْسَانِ مِنْ طِينٍ

Who perfected everything that He created, and commenced man's creation from clay.' (32:7)

ثُمَّ سَوَّاهُ وَنَفَخَ فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِهِ وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ قَلِيلًا مَّا تَشْكُرُونَ

Then He proportioned him and breathed into him of His Spirit, and made for you the hearing, the sight, and the hearts. Little do you thank. (32:9)

God completed the physical creation of man and then breathed into him of His spirit. This means that all human beings have this valuable spirit that God attributes to Himself. This is another aspect of man's honor. After describing man's creation and spirit, God says:

ثُمَّ خَلَقْنَا النُّطْفَةَ عَلَقَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْعَلَقَةَ مُضْغَةً فَخَلَقْنَا الْمُضْغَةَ عِظَامًا فَكَسَوْنَا الْعِظَامَ  
لَحْمًا ثُمَّ أَنْشَأْنَاهُ خَلْقًا آخَرَ فَبَارَكَ اللَّهُ أَحْسَنُ الْخَالِقِينَ

Then We created the drop of fluid as a clinging mass. Then We created the clinging mass as a fleshy tissue. Then We created the fleshy tissue as bones. Then We clothed the bones with flesh. Then We produced him as [yet] another creature. So blessed is Allah, the best of creators! (23:14)

The Quran does not mention that man is the best of creatures, but only that man is better than many of them:

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى  
كَثِيرٍ مِمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا

Certainly, We have honored the Children of Adam, and carried them over land and sea, and provided them with all the good things, and given them an advantage over many of those We have created with a complete preference. (17:70)

In the previous verse (23:14), God declares Himself as the best of creators. It is interesting to note that God does not say this in any other place, but only states it after He mentions the creation of the human soul. God has created man in the best way, but man is not necessarily

the best creature. It is not true that we are automatically the best by birth; we are better than many, but we are not the absolute best automatically. However, the way we have been created is the best because we have the capacity for perfection, knowledge, compassion, mercy, and love. This is why God says:

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي أَحْسَنِ تَقْوِيمٍ

We certainly created man in the best of forms. (95:4)

Imagine two factories that produce laptops. One produces the fastest laptop, whose speed is fixed at a certain level and cannot be upgraded. The other factory produces a laptop that is initially slower, but can be upgraded and become even faster than the other one. In this scenario, we would say that the second laptop is better, because the first one has a fixed speed that cannot be upgraded, whereas the second one is slower to start with but can be upgraded and become faster than the first one.

Hence, God has demonstrated His greatest power and design when He created man, not because man is the best from the moment he is born, but because man has the ability to upgrade himself and become the best. Therefore, this verse refers to our honor and superiority to a certain extent at the time of creation:

According to Allamah Tabataba'i (1417, 13:155), this verse (17:70) refers to the way God has favored and always favors human beings, but it is also a criticism of human beings in that, despite being honored by God, they have not responded appropriately to their Lord. Allamah adds that this verse is an explanation of the honor that all human beings have, apart from the additional honor that some of them receive because of their virtues and righteous deeds.

This verse is undoubtedly generic and refers to all human beings, whether religious or non-religious. The mere fact that they are human beings means that they have been honored. In Islam, even if a person was found guilty and was going to be sentenced to some severe punishment, he must still be honored as a human being. It is not true that because he is to be executed, he can be mistreated or deprived of proper food, clothing, or accommodation. Even if he is to be executed after ten minutes, he must still be treated with respect. From one angle he is a criminal, but from another angle he is a human being.

When we look at the way Imam Ali (a) treated his killer, Ibn Muljam, we see that the Imam (a) emphasized that he should not be abused. The Imam (a) did not allow his followers to treat Ibn Muljam unjustly and violate his rights.

#### 5. God Has Given Human Beings Free Will

The free will which is given to man is different from that given to the angels. Although angels also possess free will and perform good deeds without any compulsion, they are not presented with choices and temptations, because they do not have any desire for anything bad. They are created in such a way that they only want to do good things, whereas human beings are given free will together with the desire for both good or bad actions.

We have the potential to become better than angels if we choose to act as angels do whilst we still have the desire for bad things. We are tempted by Satan and by our own nafs al-ammarah (carnal soul) to do wrong. This is one explanation of the following verse:

إِنَّا عَرَضْنَا الْأَمَانَةَ عَلَى السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَالْجِبَالِ فَأَبَيْنَ أَنْ يَحْمِلْنَهَا وَأَشْفَقْنَ مِنْهَا  
وَحَمَلَهَا الْإِنْسَانُ إِنَّهُ كَانَ ظَلُومًا جَهُولًا

Indeed, We presented the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it, and were apprehensive of it; but man undertook it. Indeed, he is most unfair and senseless. (33:72)

Man was able to take the trust that the heavens, earth, and mountains were unable to take, because of the special gift that God had given him: the fact that he could choose with freedom and act voluntarily. Trust is interpreted in many ways one of which is duty and holding responsibility that is based on freewill. (See Tabataba'i 1417, 16:352)

### **Intellect Qualifies a Person for More Honor**

According to Allamah Tabataba'i, the thing that qualifies human beings for their innate dignity and honor must be something that is exclusive to them—something that is not found in animals or other creatures. He concludes that this element is 'aql (reason/intellect); God has honored man by giving him intellect, by which he can distinguish between good and bad, and by which he can make use of natural resources. (Ibid, 13:157)

If we glance at the way humans have evolved their living habits and the way they have used the earth's resources, we can see that there has been stark development over time. For example, the way houses are now built, the construction of roads and bridges, transportation, communication, medical progress, and so forth are all due to the gift of intellect. With our intellect, we have been able to enhance our lives.

However, it is also true that man has misused natural resources and has corrupted the environment and nature. The amount of waste man has produced in the last fifty years is perhaps more than all the waste produced in the entire history of the world prior to that. So, I do not

claim that human beings have always acted well, or that they have carried out their moral duties. I just maintain that God has given us intellect to benefit and to act morally and piously to improve the conditions of life for ourselves and others.

### Proper Utilization of Intellect

When man properly utilizes his intellect, he qualifies for additional honor and dignity. Those who have used their intellect properly and have become pious acquire special honor. As we mentioned in the previous discussions, the pious have special karamahh, and among the pious those who have more piety are entitled to more karamahh:

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O mankind! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. Indeed, the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God-wary among you. Indeed, Allah is all-knowing, all-aware. (49:13)

### Human Honor in Hadiths

I would like to mention some hadiths about the honor that God has given human beings, and discuss about how we must safeguard it and invest in it so that it can grow. There are in fact many such hadiths, but I will only mention some of them.

Imam Hadi (a) says:

مَنْ هَانَتْ عَلَيْهِ نَفْسُهُ فَلَا تَأْمَنُ شَرُّهُ



Do not feel protected against the evil of the one who has no respect for himself. (Majlisi 1403, 75:365)

When we do good to people and show them kindness, we must realize that in reality we have honored ourselves and that we are the main beneficiary. If I help someone, if I treat a person with courtesy, I have first and foremost honored myself. If I speak in a polite manner and use good language, I have honored myself. Those who are very noble do not use bad words, do not mistreat people, and do not wrong them. And many of those who are unjust and merciless lack self-respect and internal honor for themselves.

Hence, the Imam (a) explains that when a person does not have respect for himself, the people around him should not feel safe from the evil that may come from him. A person who has value and dignity for himself will be prevented by his self-respect from wrong or inappropriate deeds; he will be naturally inclined to do good; and thus he will not expect any thanks or appreciation in return.

Whenever we do something good, we should know that we are in fact doing good to ourselves. Of course, other people are responsible to thank those who do good, but we should not expect to be thanked and should not do anything for this purpose. We read in the Quran that those who are selflessly good say,

إِنَّمَا نُطْعِمُكُمْ لِوَجْهِ اللَّهِ لَا نُرِيدُ مِنْكُمْ جَزَاءً وَلَا شُكْرًا

We feed you only for the sake of Allah. We do not want any reward from you nor any thanks. (76:9)

In our education systems, we must educate students in a way that they enjoy doing good and feel that they empower and honor themselves by doing good. They should not expect anything in return; when others

do not appreciate them, they should not feel sad or regret the services they have provided. Instead, they should be trained to consider the Day of Judgement, when God will appreciate them. Imam Ali (a) said: “One who does not repay evil with goodness does not belong to the noble.” (Tamimi Amidi 1410, 823)

If someone does not do good to the one who wrongs him, he is not a perfectly noble and honorable person. A praiseworthy and honorable person in Islam is the one who, when people wrong him, does good to them in return. If people are not kind to us, we must still be kind to them; if they have left us alone in our time of need, we must rush to their aid when they are in need. We must not look for an opportunity to seek revenge. The one who is honorable responds by doing better than what people do to him. We can only imagine the result of observing this instruction in our society. If we refrained from doing wrong, and if we did good to those who wrong us, our society would be a part of heaven.

### **Characteristics of the Honorable**

God has given us the capital and seed of karamahh, but it needs to be preserved, nurtured, and grown so that we become truly honorable. Those who are truly honorable and possess dignity have certain characteristics. We have already looked at two hadiths from Imam Ali (a) in this regard, and now we wish to expand this further. These characteristics are the following:

#### **1. Regarding worldly matters as insignificant**

Significance and greatness are relative. If we wish to judge whether something is great or insignificant, we must compare at least two things and then conclude that one is greater than the other. When a person

brings his innate honor to perfection, worldly matters such as wealth, power, position, and fame will seem unimportant to him, because he realizes that he has a true treasure inside himself. Imam Ali (a) says: “Whosoever possesses an honorable soul, the material world is very insignificant for him.” (Ibid, 664)

In the eyes of an honorable person, this world is nothing. In Nahj al-balaghah, Imam Ali (a) talks about one “brother” of his, who had such characteristic. Commentators disagree as to whether this brother was the Prophet (s) or Abu Dharr. But one of the qualities of this person was that the material world was very insignificant to him:

كَانَ لِي فِيهَا مَضَى أَحَبُّ فِي اللَّهِ وَكَانَ يُعْظِمُهُ فِي عَيْنِي صَعْرُ الدُّنْيَا فِي عَيْنِهِ

In the past, I had a brother in faith. He was prestigious in my view, because the world was meagre in his eyes. (Nahj al-Balagha, saying 289)

In another famous saying of his, Imam Ali (a) says: “Is there not a free and noble person who is willing to leave this lumadhah for those that deserve it?!” (Ibid, saying 456) Lumadhah is the food that remains stuck between the teeth. The Imam (a) expresses his disappointment at the fact that people are willing to fight over and be so concerned with something of so little value.

No one has disregarded the material world as Imam Ali (a) did. In one of his sermons, he describes the material world as being like the water that comes out of the nose of a goat. (Nahj al-Balagha, sermon 3) He also says:

إِنَّهُ لَيْسَ لَأَنْفُسِكُمْ ثَمَنٌ إِلَّا الْجَنَّةُ فَلَا تَبِيعُوهَا إِلَّا بِهَا

Beware that there is no price for you except heaven, so do not sell yourselves except for that. (Ibid, saying 456)

Imam Ali (a) warns us not to sell ourselves cheaply. Our price is heaven, and if we become pleased with anything less, we have sold ourselves cheaply.

Hence, those who are karim and enjoy self-esteem, self-honor, and self-respect would not consider worldly matters as great, whether it is money, fame, or position, as these are all insignificant.

## 2. Keeping the promises

Those who are low or empty of honor easily promise and easily break their promises. It does not matter for them whether they have promised or not. They are a different person every day. One of the worst things in life is to deal with such people, who do not have any regard for what they have said and simply change their minds.

According to our tradition, one of the characteristics of those with honor is that they abide by their promises, contracts, and treaties. Imam Ali (a) said:

الكريم إذا وعد وفى وإذا توعد عفى

When an honorable person promises, he fulfils, and when he gives a warning [and can punish], he forgives.  
(Tamimi Amidi 1410, 82)

A karim will fulfil his promise, but when he is wronged, he forgives. This is the quality of God, who has stated that there will be punishment for disobedience, but then He overlooks and forgives in many cases.

In another hadith, Imam Ali (a) says: “A requirement for possessing honor is that you keep your promises and the pacts you have made.” (Tamimi Amidi 1410AH, 672) And in another hadith, we read: “Those who are honorable are quick in forgiving, but those who are mean and

do not have a great personality always think of revenge and want to retaliate.” (Ibid, 84; Leithi Wasiti 1377 Sh, 17)

### 3. **Honesty**

Telling lies is a sign of a low character devoid of honor, esteem, and respect. Imam Ali (a) says: “Telling lies and betraying others are not the characteristics of honorable people.” (Tamimi Amidi 1410AH, 81) It is impossible that a truly honorable person would lie or betray. In a hadith attributed to Imam Husayn (a), we read: “Truthfulness is dignity, and dishonesty is a sign of incapacity.” (Karajaki 1394 AH, 72; Ya’qubi 1362 Sh, 2: 184)

Dishonesty is a sign of an unsuccessful person. Such people feel they have to do mischief to progress and get ahead. If a public speaker, for instance, possesses knowledge, he does not need to tell lies. For he knows enough true things to speak about. But if he has not studied properly, he may feel that he has to fabricate stories and hadiths to entertain people. The same applies to social life. If someone has necessary skills and knows how to deal with issues, he does not need to tell lies.

### 4. **Modesty and chastity (‘iffah).**

An honorable person would not have an unlawful relationship with the opposite gender. Those who commit adultery do not have honorable personalities in most cases. A hadith states, “A person that possesses honor and respect for himself and his family would never fornicate.” This is because such a person respects his own wife and daughter, and so he maintains that respect for others as well.

In another hadith we read: “The worth of a person can be known by the extent of his ambitions. His bravery is proportionate to his muruwah, and his chastity is proportionate to his ghayrah.” (Nahj al-Balagha, saying 47) Ghayrah is a difficult term to translate into English. It is a kind of protective jealousy, when a person wants to protect and not let anyone abuse his family. One can also have ghayrah for his faith and community. This ghayrah makes him observe modesty and chastity. The hadith also teaches us that if we wish to see how great a person is, we should take note of his aims and goals. Does he seek to be with Salman and Abu Dharr, or does he crave merely to have some money in his account? Does he wish the company of the noble, or to add a few meters to his house?

## 5. Kindness

It is easy to have interactions with an honorable person, because they do not get angry or harsh easily, and they are not hardhearted. They have their principles, but they are easy-going if their principles are not violated. God describes the Prophet (s) as follows:

فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ لِنْتَ لَهُمْ وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ لَانْفَضُّوا مِنْ حَوْلِكَ فَاعْفُ عَنْهُمْ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ وَشَاوِرْهُمْ فِي الْأَمْرِ فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُتَوَكِّلِينَ

It is by Allah’s mercy that you are gentle to them; and had you been harsh and hardhearted, surely they would have scattered from around you. So excuse them, and plead for forgiveness for them, and consult them in the affairs, and once you are resolved, put your trust in Allah. Indeed, Allah loves those who trust in Him. (3:159)

The Holy Prophet was very kind and soft-hearted. He would play with children. This softness of heart, along with having principles and strength in faith, gives a person an honorable personality. But if someone is harsh and constantly makes others unhappy and angry, if he ignores others and isolates them, then such a person will end up being alone; even his spouse and children will refuse to remain with him.

On the other hand, if a person has no principles and always wants to please others, he will not achieve anything either, as it is impossible to always please everyone. People should know that there are a few principles that we will never compromise, but we are flexible with regard to the other things.

Ayatollah Mutahhari mentions that when they initially began to import tomatoes to Iran, there were some people who opposed it. The Farsi word for tomato literally means “tomato of the west,” and so some ignorant people felt that it was a foreign element invading their faith and tradition. It is said that a man who was very strict about not having any tomatoes in his house saw his son coming home with a bag and going secretly to his room. He became suspicious and followed his son and saw that he was secretly bringing tomatoes home. He became furious and told his son: “I knew you didn’t pray but I kept silent, I knew you didn’t fast but I kept silent, and now you are bringing tomatoes home! I cannot tolerate this one!” This type of attitude is wrong. We must identify the important principles and stress them, and then be prepared to compromise other things.

If we are to become bothered by every single mistake that our children, spouses, or friends make and try to correct them, then they will simply

rebel. We must be prepared to overlook insignificant things. A hadith from Imam Ali (a) states:

الكريم يتغافل وينخدع

The honorable person will cause himself to be heedless (yataghafal), and allows people to deceive him. (Tmimi Amidi 1410AH, 34)

The word yataghafal in the hadith does not exactly indicate heedlessness; it means to be actually alert but to pretend that you did not notice. It is similar to the concept of *tajahul*, when you know something but you pretend that you do not know it. Taghafal occurs when a person pretends that they did not notice what just happened. For example, a parent knows their child is telling a lie but does not rebuke them at that moment. They may say something such as “I trust you and accept what you say.”

Hence, it is possible to be easy-going without compromising the principles.

### **Conclusion**

By reviewing various verses and traditions concerning dignity and honor, we see that obeying God is the key to honor, even if one doesn't have a group, party, or any other supporters.

It is mentioned in the Quran that piety is the standard of honor; the more pious a person is the more he is honored before God. Human beings, however, generally are honored by God. Whatever there is in the heavens and the earth is disposed for the benefit of mankind. Man is also created in a manner that he is able to upgrade himself and become the best. What qualifies human beings for dignity is 'aql (intellect); God



has honored man by giving him intellect. Of course, with this advantage comes a great responsibility.

Finally this fact is mentioned according to the traditions which state dignity has a great influence on human character traits and qualities. Those who possess honor and dignity more are naturally inclined to do good, the material world is very insignificant for them, they abide by their promises and contracts, they are honest ones, and they are kind and easy-going persons.

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