

# Honesty

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## Abstract

Honesty, as a natural trait of human beings, is introduced in the Quran and Islamic traditions as an essential element of faith. Offering literal and technical meaning of honesty, we examine the different aspects of honesty in terms of Quranic verses and Islamic traditions, including honesty in speech, honesty in intention, and honesty in action. We also explore honesty from the viewpoints of Muslim scholars and mystics. In Islamic spirituality, honesty plays such a central role that it is regarded as the essence of *taqwa* and faith and the key to the correction of all moral problems. Finally, we discuss the ways of developing honesty and also its signs and effects both in personal and social life.

**Keywords:** *honesty, truthfulness, moral virtues, Islamic morality, Islamic spirituality.*

## Introduction

Honesty is a trait that stems from our nature, because we were created with a God-seeking nature, and believing in God always comes with honesty and sincerity. Honesty is an essential element of faith. (Tamimi Amidi 1366 Sh, 218) Man's pure nature requires that his speech should be in accordance with his inner state and that he should only express what he truly believes in. People who lie distance themselves from the belief in God and are trapped by the temptations of Satan and their egos. They do not comprehend that lying goes against the lofty nature of man and that it is an expression of animosity towards God. They do not realize that lying contradicts the fundamental principles of the universe they live in, as it is based on truth and honesty. The necessity of honesty and truthfulness is undeniable all over the world.

## Literal and Technical Definition

Literally, *sidq* (honesty) is the opposite of lying (Ibn Manzur 1414 AH, 10:193). "The term '*sidq*' refers to a trait deeply rooted in one's character that entails the accordance of one's inner state with his outward appearance; a trait that makes his words compatible with his true intentions and his actions with his inner state" (Kashani 1352 Sh, 344).

## Honesty in the Quran and Traditions

We read in the holy Quran,

Allah will say: 'This day truthfulness shall benefit the truthful.' For them there will be gardens with streams running in them, to remain in them forever. Allah is pleased with them and they are pleased with Him. That is the great success. (Quran 5:119)

This verse clearly shows how lofty the status of the honest and truthful is. This is probably because one can categorize all good deeds under the category of honesty and truthfulness. It is honesty that helps the truthful to please God, and pleasing him is the greatest success (Quran 9:72).

In another verse, we read,

O you who have faith! Be wary of Allah, and be with the Truthful. (Quran 9:119)

There are different opinions as to the identity of “the Truthful” mentioned in this verse. Some commentators maintain that it refers to the Prophet (s) and his companions, and some believe that it refers to those who have sincere intentions and are truthful in their actions and deeds. However, we can understand this verse by referring to other verses of the Quran. In verse 15 from surah al-Hujurat, we read: “The faithful are only those who have attained faith in Allah and His Apostle and then have never doubted, and who wage jihad with their possessions and their persons in the way of Allah. It is they who are the *truthful*” (49:15). Therefore, the “truthful” are those with these traits.

Another verse of the holy Quran reads,

[So] that Allah may reward the true for their truthfulness, and punish the hypocrites, if He wishes, or accept their repentance. Indeed, Allah is all-forgiving, all-merciful. (33:24)

In this verse, the truthful have been promised great spiritual and worldly rewards and hypocrites have been threatened to be punished if they do not repent.

Elsewhere, the Quran states,

Indeed, the Muslim men and the Muslim women, the faithful men and the faithful women, the obedient men and the obedient women, the truthful men and the truthful women, ... Allah holds in store for them forgiveness and a great reward. (33:35)

In this verse, God has promised ten groups of people forgiveness and a great reward, the fourth of which are truthful men and women. As is evident in the verse, after mentioning the traits of being a Muslim, having faith, and obeying God, the verse readily turns to the issue of honesty. This shows how important this trait is for men and women. A famous tradition from the Prophet (s) also highlights this fact: “No one’s faith will be fixed unless his heart is fixed, and the heart will not be fixed unless his tongue turns to righteousness.” (Daylami 1412 AH, 1:103) This tradition indicates that complete faith is only attained after the purification of one’s speech; therefore, those whose tongues are impure because of lies do not enjoy complete faith. Through this, one can understand the important link between faith and honesty. Faith is inextricably interwoven with honesty, because faith is linked with truth and honesty means showing the truth of things. This is why it is mentioned in certain traditions that a believer may be a coward or even stingy, but he is not a liar. (Irbili 1381 Sh, 2:218) It is also mentioned that the way to test one’s faith is to examine his honesty in speech (Kulayni 1362 Sh, 2:239. Fadlullah 1419 AH, 3:211).

Alongside the verses of the Quran, there are many traditions from the Infallibles (a) pertaining to the importance of honesty. We mentioned some of them earlier, and now we will mention some others:

1. [In order to assess a person's faith], do not examine his prostration and bowing down [in prayer], because he may have become used to them, such that if he stops doing them, he will be frightened. Instead, examine his honesty in speech and his returning of trusts. (Kulayni 1362 Sh, 2:105)
2. God has not sent down any prophet except with honesty in speech and returning trusts to the righteous and unrighteous. (Ibid., 104)
3. If one's tongue embraces honesty, his acts will also be purified and cleansed. (Ibid.)
4. [Imam al-Sadiq(a) in a message to one of his companions:] Observe and see what actions enabled Imam Ali (a) to reach such a high status in the eyes of the Prophet (s), and do not neglect those actions ... Imam Ali (a) was able to reach that status through honesty in speech and returning trusts. (Majlisi n.d., 68:5)
5. Imam Ali (a) was once asked, "Who is the most honourable [in the eyes of God]?" The Imam (a) replied: "One who always speaks with honesty." (Ibid., 9)<sup>3</sup>
6. Honesty is the foundation of religion. (Tamimi Amidi 1366 Sh, 218)

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<sup>3</sup> Taking into consideration the verse of the Quran that states: "Verily, in God's sight the most honourable of you is the most pious of you" (49:13), it becomes clear that the essence of *taqwa* and faith is honesty.

7. Honesty is the key to the correction of everything. (Ibid., 219)

We will bring an end to this discussion, which deserves much more contemplation, with a tradition from the Holy Prophet (s).

8. The Prophet of God was asked: “What act will qualify one to go to Heaven?” The Prophet replied: “Honesty, because when one is honest, it will cause him to do good; and when he does good, he will develop faith; and when he develops faith, he will enter heaven.” The man inquired: “What act will make one doomed to hell?” The Prophet answered: “Lying. If one lies, he will do evil; and when he does evil, he will become a disbeliever; and when he becomes a disbeliever, he will end up in hell.” (Daylami 1412 AH, 1:186)

It is interesting that in this tradition, honesty is considered the source of doing good, and doing good the source of faith. This is because those who do evil usually employ lies to justify their actions. Lies affect one’s soul, weaken one’s faith, and eventually lead one to disbelief. This is pointed out in the Quran: “Then the fate of those who committed misdeeds was that they denied the signs of Allah and they used to deride them” (30:10).

### **What is Honesty?**

Examining the different aspects and facets of honesty will guide us towards its essence. We will mention some of these aspects below according to the viewpoint of scholars of ethics:

## Honesty in Speech

This type of honesty manifests itself in correctly informing others of the reality and in being honest with God in what we say to Him in our supplications. Therefore, one who says: “Indeed I have turned my face toward Him who originated the heavens and the earth, as a hanif, and I am not one of the polytheists” (Quran 6:79) but his heart is saying something different, or one who says: “We only worship You” (Quran 1:5) while being attached to this world is a liar.

It is noteworthy, however, that despite the importance of honesty in speech, being honest is not always encouraged in Islam, as it may lead to corruption and problems in certain situations. Sometimes, honesty leads to the disclosure of secrets, resulting in conflicts and disputes that entail bloodshed between people and even nations. In such situations, honesty is not encouraged, and it is better to either lie or do *tawriyah*.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, if one realizes that there have been issues between two friends, in order to reconcile them, one may go to one of them and tell him that the other one said good things about him, even if the other one has never said those things. In fact, the examples of *tawriyah* should be in harmony with rationality and common sense; any action outside of rationality here may lead to deviation from the line of morality and spirituality.

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<sup>4</sup> *Tawriya* literary means concealing or not disclosing. It is a religious term that means saying an expression which may convey a meaning to the audience that is not intended by the speaker, like when a person comes at the door and asks for someone, and you tell them: “He is not here,” and by “here” you mean “right here behind the door,” but the listener assumes that that person is not home.

These are all examples in which being honest is neither encouraged nor admired. This is why the Prophet stated: “Being honest is not encouraged in three things: spying, telling a husband about something that his spouse has done and that will upset him, and denying the news that one delivers” (Majlisi n.d., 68:9).

He also said: “O Ali! God considers lying for the sake of settling disputes amongst Muslims good and honesty that leads to corruption amongst them evil.” (Tabari 1370 Sh, 433) Such traditions allude to the point that a believer must be vigilant and take into consideration the time, place, and outcomes of his words. Therefore, sometimes it is possible to leave a certain level of honesty to reach its higher levels, while the spirit of honesty is maintained within one’s character.

### **Honesty in Intention and Will**

This type of honesty is in essence sincerity (*ikhlas*). It refers to carrying out all deeds for God’s sake, because God accepts only the sincere deeds of His servants. Knowing that no aspect of man’s character, spirit, or soul is hidden to God, a believer always strives to act with a sincere intention and purify his deeds of any form of duplicity, which is itself a form of dishonesty.

### **Honesty in Action**

This type of honesty refers to the oneness of one’s inward status and outward appearance and actions, such that one’s outward aspects do not show something that does not exist in one’s inward reality. This aspect of honesty is also referred to as practical honesty (Makarem Shirazi 1389 Sh, 3:331). One who does an act that goes against his inner state is a liar, and one whose inner and outer states are compatible is honest. This may be the reason why there is a belief that the most honest



statement is that which is compatible with one's actions. (Tamimi Amidi 1366 Sh, 217) Also, we read in a tradition, "Call people to goodness through means other than your tongue, so that they see effort, honesty, and piety from you." (Majlisi n.d., 68:8) The tradition clearly stipulates that one's actions should be proof for the truthfulness of his words. It seems that honesty correlates with doing good, and if one's tongue is kept away from falsity, one's actions will be purified as well (Ibid.)

### **Honesty in Spirituality**

Examples of this type of honesty include patience, thankfulness, and reliance on God. This is the highest level of honesty, and whoever is able to develop these traits within himself becomes truly honest. However, one who claims to have these traits without really having them is a liar. For example, one who claims to fear God but easily commits sins, his claim of fear is a lie (Naraqı 1388 Sh, 318).

After examining the different aspects of honesty, it becomes clear that contrary to the common belief, which sees honesty only as saying the truth, honesty has a much broader meaning, which is alluded to in the Quran and traditions.

It can be argued that the whole world is based on truthfulness, and therefore the act that is compatible with the system and structure of this world is a true act and will lead to good results. On the other hand, any act that goes against this system and structure will not last, and the doer of such an act will be defeated by the world. Pertaining to this issue, Imam Ali (a) says: "Honesty is the compatibility of speech with the system that God has incorporated in the world." (Tamimi Amidi 1366 Sh, 217, 219) He also states: "Whoever is honest will reach

salvation,” (Ibid, 218) and “An honest person is on the verge of salvation, and a liar is on the verge of perishing.” (Tabari 1370 Sh, 1:172).

Honesty is also one of God’s attributes. God is Honest in all of His speech and actions. His essence is pure from all dishonesty. Since man is God’s representative, he is disposed to honesty. However, in certain situations and due to specific factors, this tendency fades away. In this case, one must remove the obstacles quickly so that he can regain his primordial nature and thus achieve a lofty life.

### **Honesty from the Viewpoint of Muslim Scholars**

Abd al-Razzaq Kashani considers honesty the very foundation of wisdom. He divides it into honesty in intention, honesty in speech, and honesty in action. He then defines honesty in intention as maintaining a pure intention when doing a good deed for God’s sake and avoiding any other motives, such as duplicity, hypocrisy, fame, rewards, and so forth. According to this scholar, honesty in speech refers to the compatibility of speech with reality. He then explains honesty in action as follows:

Honesty in action is refraining from an act that one would be ashamed of doing in the presence of others and the conformity between what he does in their presence and what he does in solitude. Therefore, his inward and outward status are similar, such that if his actions were presented to the people of the world, he would not deny or disown any of them. (Kamal al-din, 1380 Sh, 541-43)

## Honesty in the Words of Mystics

Ba Yazid Bastami was once asked, “What is God’s greatest name that effects all things?” He replied, “Show me God’s small name, and I will show you God’s greatest name. Verily, God’s greatest name is nothing but honesty. Be honest and choose whichever of His names that you wish, for all of His names are great” (Ibn Arabi 1405 AH, 2:222).

### Two Stories about Honesty

It is narrated that Abdullah ibn Dinar said: “I left the city of Mecca with Abdullah ibn Umar, and we stopped in a station outside the city. A shepherd, who was a slave, came to us from the mountains. Abdullah told him: ‘Sell us a sheep from the herd.’ The shepherd answered: ‘I am only a shepherd, not the flock owner.’ Abdullah said: ‘You can tell the lord of the herd that one of the sheep was eaten by a wolf.’ He answered: ‘The lord of the herd is not here now, but what about his God?’ Abdullah began to cry. Then, he bought and freed the young slave and told him: ‘These words of you brought you freedom in this world, I hope they will do the same for you in the hereafter’” (Ghazali 1386 Sh, 4:698).

Abu Amr Zajjaji says, “My mother passed away, and I inherited a house from her. I sold it for fifty dinars and used the money to go to hajj. When I reached the city of Babel, a thief approached me and asked me of what I had with me. I told myself that it was better to tell the truth, so I told him that I had fifty dinars with me. He said, ‘Give them to me.’ I gave him the bag, and he began to count. When he finished counting and saw that the number was correct, he returned the bag to me and said: ‘Take your dinars; your truth impressed me’ (Jami1858, 248-49).

## The Ways of Developing and Enhancing Honesty

The greatest factor that can help one develop this attribute is to firmly believe in God and the hereafter and to be God-weary. In a famous tradition narrated in *Nahj al-balagha*, we read: “The sign of faith is to prefer telling the truth when it harms you over a lie that will benefit you.”<sup>5</sup>

Pondering the positive effects of honesty and the negative effects of lying is another factor that can help develop honesty in one’s character.

Building proper self-esteem can also be a central factor in developing honesty. Those who can trust their conduct and speech and have developed proper self-esteem never lie or deceive, because they are not worried about whether others will accept their speech and actions or reject them.

Bravery also leads to honesty in conduct and speech, because a brave person does not fear expressing the truth (Makarem Shirazi 1389 Sh, 3:215).

## The Signs of Honesty

If one intends to see whether he is honest or not, he should look for the signs of this attribute, which are mentioned in the Quran and traditions. Some of these attributes are as follows:

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<sup>5</sup> This tradition should be interpreted in the light of the previous traditions and considering the related jurisprudential discussions.

**1. The compatibility of speech and conduct.** The first and foremost sign of honesty is the compatibility of one's speech and conduct. If one's speech is not compatible with his conduct, he is not honest.

**2. Tranquillity and peace.** Peace and tranquillity are evident in the speech and conduct of an honest person, unlike a liar who is constantly in fear and stress. The Prophet (s) is reported to have said: "Leave what brings you doubt and move towards what does not lead to doubt, for honesty is peace and lying is doubt and unstableness" (Majlisi n.d., 71: 214).

According to Izz al-Din Kashani, a sign of an honest person is that if his secrets were disclosed, he would not be ashamed (Kashani 1352 Sh, 344).

**3. Being a good-doer.** The Prophet (s) stated, "Hold on firmly to honesty, for honesty leads to goodness, and goodness to Heaven" (Khurramshahi and Ansari 1376 Sh, 792). It is also mentioned in another tradition, "A man came to the Prophet [s] and asked: 'O Prophet of God! What are the deeds of heavenly people?' The Prophet [s] responded: 'Honesty. When a servant is honest, he performs good deeds. And He who does good will be protected and immune, and he who is immune will be in Heaven.' The man asked: 'What are the deeds of those who go to hell?' The Prophet answered: 'Lying. When a servant of God lies, he does evil, and when one does evil he becomes a disbeliever, and disbelievers will go to hell'" (Warram 1369 Sh, 1:43).

**4. Being detached from anyone other than God.** From a mystical point of view, another sign of honesty in its mystical meaning is preferring God to everything else. This meaning has been alluded to in the words of Imam Sadiq (a). When the Imam (a) was asked about the meaning of honesty, he responded: "Honesty is to avoid choosing

anything over God, because God says: 'He has chosen you'. Now that God has chosen you, you should choose him too and you should not prefer your desires, yearnings, and this world to him" (Ghazali 1386 Sh, 14:206).

## **The Effects of Honesty in Personal and Social life**

### **Peace and Tranquillity**

As we mentioned earlier, one whose speech and conduct are compatible and his conduct confirms his speech enjoys a life full of peace and tranquillity. However, one who lives a life of lies is constantly worried that his lies may unfold.

### **Blessing**

Honesty fills one's life with blessings the same way lying makes it unhappy and ominous. The Prophet (s) said: "Honesty is blissful and lying is inauspicious" (Harrani 1404 AH, 13).

### **Benefitting from God's Favor**

When God intends to show His love to a servant, He inspires him with honesty, (Tamimi Amidi 1366 Sh, 217) and the servant lives his life accordingly and does nothing but obey God. An honest person constantly enjoys the company of God in his life and feels God's help at all times. In this regard, Imam Baqir (a) said: "O People! Be honest, for God is with the honest" (Majlisi n.d., 66:386).

### **Purity of Actions**

The natural result of refraining from lies is that one's actions will be purified and blessed (Kulayni 1362 Sh, 2: 104). This results from the fact

that the one who is always honest in his speech strives to adjust his actions with his words and to become honest in his actions as well.

### **Salvation**

Honesty leads to salvation and eternal happiness for those who embrace it. Imam Ali (a) has stated: “The fate of honesty is salvation.” (Tamimi Amidi 1366 Sh, 218)

### **Developing Trust and Friendship**

One of the effects of honesty is developing trust in society. It is clear that group work is only fruitful when the members of the group are able to trust one another, and this trust cannot be built without honesty. One who is known to be honest is trusted by people. They accept his words and find affection for him in their hearts. Imam Sadiq (a) stated: “An honest person gains three things from his honesty: people’s trust, affection, and awe.” (Ibid., 219)

### **Respect and Honour**

Honesty elevates one’s status in the eyes of others and earns their respect and esteem. In this regard, Imam Ali (a) says: “Always be honest, for this attribute elevates one’s status” (Ibid.).

### **Avoiding Sins**

Honesty keeps one away from committing sins, because an honest person does not lie about his actions, so he does not commit a sin that needs to be hidden by lies.

It is mentioned in a tradition that a man asked the Prophet (s): “I commit four hidden sins: adultery, drinking wine, stealing, and lying.

Whichever one of these that you choose, I will stop doing.” The Prophet (s) replied: “Do not lie.” The man left and carried on with his daily affairs. When he got an opportunity for adultery, he thought to himself that if the Prophet (s) asked him about it tomorrow, he would either have to lie or tell the truth. If he were to lie, he would have broken the promise he had given to the Prophet (s), and if he were to tell the truth, the Islamic punishment for adultery would be carried out for him. Therefore, he refrained from committing this sin. When he got opportunities for drinking and stealing, the same thoughts crossed his mind. Later, he visited the Prophet (s) and said: “O Prophet of God! You closed all paths to sin for me, and I have refrained from all of them.” (Ibn Abi al-Hadid 1964, 6:357)

### **Conclusion**

For personal growth and to create a healthy social environment, people must embrace truthfulness and honesty. One must be honest with others not only in speech but also in intention and action. If one purifies his heart, then his emotions, feelings, motives, and goals will also become clear to others, and this naturally results in earning the trust of others.

Honesty and truthfulness in life are the signs of a healthy and spiritual life; lying and deceit, on the other hand, show an impure, impious, and unhealthy life. It is possible to trace back all sins to lying. One who claims that he believes in the existence of a creator for this world and in the hereafter should truthfully abide by the rulings and laws that guarantee his salvation in this world and the hereafter, because untruthfulness leads to neglecting those rulings and laws, which is in contradiction with his belief in God and the hereafter.



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