

Dignity in Islam - Part IV

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Abstract

After considering what has been stated in the previous parts, this part explains the moral and psychological traits that an honorable person normally possesses. The moral traits include ignoring the mistakes of others, disapproving of the mundane whims, patience, avoiding harming others, refraining from being a slave of others, and having control over expectations. The psychological traits involve hope in the future, respecting others, kindness and care, using no bad means to good ends, being fair, and obeying God. From the perspective that the discussion provides, we see that dignity can be considered to be one of the most fundamental virtues.

Keywords: *honor, patience, control over expectations, respect for others, obeying God*

Introduction

We established that God introduces the quality of *'izzah* as one of His main attributes in many verses of the Qur'an, describing Himself as *'Aziz* (Honorable). Furthermore, in addition to these verses, God makes it very clear that any type of dignity belongs to Him, comes from Him, and can only be bestowed by Him; as He said:

Whoever seeks honor [should know that] honor entirely belongs to Allah. (35:10)

We also mentioned how everything created by God is honored for being His creation and sign, and how some groups of people and creatures have been especially characterized as *karim* (honorable) or *mukram* (honored); namely, angels, some prophets, and the inhabitants of heaven.

We also stated that God has, in general, bestowed honor upon human beings; as is stated in the Qur'an:

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)

Furthermore, we described that the general honor given to all children of Adam is a capital that must be invested and grown, and a seed that must be cultivated. Those who are *karim* have grown that seed, and we mentioned some of the characteristics of these people, such as their view of the world as insignificant, their loyalty to their promises, their honesty, their soft-heartedness, their easy-going nature, their leniency

and willing to ignore the mistakes of others as much as possible. Now, let us further explore characteristics of honorable people.

Further Characteristics of an Honorable Person

- 1) AN HONORABLE PERSON IGNORES THE MISTAKES OF OTHERS
(TAGHAFUL)

Imam Ali (a) says:

الكريم يتغافل وينخدع

The honorable one causes himself to be heedless, and allows people to deceive him. (Tamimi al-Amidi 1366 Sh, 479)

When someone wrongs a person, if the latter shows that he realized who wronged him and then openly forgives the wrongdoer, this can make him feel embarrassed. On the other hand, if the one who is wronged shows that he realized who wronged him but does not take appropriate reaction, he may seem to be condoning or supporting the wrong action. Therefore, it is sometimes better to pretend to be unaware of what has happened.

This could be a suitable reaction with children or students, who may lose their courage, become disappointed, or even rebel if they are constantly corrected and scolded for their minor mistakes. Sometimes we must simply overlook the minor mistakes and pretend that we did not notice.

This is how a karim person lets other people deceive him, as mentioned in the above hadith.

2) Honorable people automatically distance themselves from evil.

Honorable people realize that committing sins does not suit their God-given value and dignity. They do not exercise immense self-control or pressure upon themselves; rather, they simply have no inclination to evil, because they are honorable. For example, if you wear a very clean and beautiful suit, then you see that some people are playing with clay and are making themselves dirty, you will not be inclined to play with them, because you have no inclination to make your suit dirty. When an honorable person looks at the immoral acts that some people commit, he has the same feeling. Imam Ali (a) says: “One who values himself finds passions and lower desires very insignificant” (Nahj al-balagha, wisdom 441). Such a person finds it easy to control his carnal desires.

In another hadith, we read: “Honor yourself away from every low thing, even if it leads you to something you desire” (Nahj al-balagha, letter 31). Hence, we must give up some types of pleasure in order to protect our honor. This will then lead us to greater pleasure in the long term.

A further argument can be inferred from the above hadith. When a person gives in to his desires and stops having an honorable life, he may have some fun, but at the same time he loses a part of himself. We can always withstand the loss of things like money and properties, but we cannot tolerate losing ourselves. The Qur’an explains:

وَتَرَاهُمْ يُعْرَضُونَ عَلَيْهَا حَاشِعِينَ مِنَ الدُّلِّ يَنْظُرُونَ مِنْ طَرْفٍ خَفِيٍّ وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا
 إِنَّ الْخَاسِرِينَ الَّذِينَ خَسِرُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ وَأَهْلِيهِمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ أَلَا إِنَّ الظَّالِمِينَ فِي عَذَابٍ
 مُتَقَبِّمٍ

You will see them being exposed to it, humbled by abasement, looking askance secretly. And the faithful will say, "Indeed the losers are those who have ruined themselves and their families on the Day of Resurrection. Look! The wrongdoers are indeed in lasting punishment." (42:45)

A person who loses his dignity has not lost anything external; he has lost a part of himself, because a person's dignity is a part of his existence. They give up something of themselves without replacing it. It is very important that we never take any risks with our dignity, honor, or modesty.

3) An honorable person is very patient.

Honorable people know that they must be patient. Those who are not strong in their personalities and are not very determined quickly give up even in the face of insignificant difficulties, whereas those with dignity are very patient and persistent. It is narrated that Imam Husayn (a) advised Abu Dharr: "Ask God for perseverance and victory ... patience is part of faith and part of having an honorable character" (Majlisi 1403 AH, 22:411).

4) An honorable person does not harm others.

An honorable person does not harm others in any way, whether in relation to their properties or their reputation. An honorable person never gets involved in backbiting. His strong personality and self-worth prevent him from doing so. A hadith states,

الغيبة جهد العاجز

Backbiting is the resort of the incompetent. (Tamimi al-Amidi 1366 AH, 221)

A person that is incompetent tries to elevate himself by bringing others down. However, an honorable person never brings people down. An honorable person never does anything to harm others, especially their honor and reputation in society.

5) An honorable person never allows himself to be controlled or enslaved.

An honorable person refuses to serve people who seek to control him. We can always serve and work, but we must be able to do this by choice. We must not allow anyone to use our services to enslave us, as it is against our honor and dignity. Imam Ali (a) says, "Do not be a servant of another person, for surely God has created you free" (Nahj al-balagha, letter 31; Harrani 1404 AH, 77).

However, to be a slave and servant of God gives us honor:

إلهي كفى بي عزاً أن أكون لك عبداً

My God, it suffices me as a source of honor to be Your servant. (Majlisi 1403 AH, 74:400)

Being a servant of God is the most natural and most honorable thing we can do, but no one other than God should expect our total submission, service, and servitude. We must not be a servant of anyone else, because God has created us free.

An honorable person is helpful and kind, but also careful not to let anyone take unfair advantage of him or damage his honor and dignity.

6) An honorable person is very careful with regard to his expectations.

One of the very destructive attitudes is expecting things from others. This is a type of greed, and can be very destructive. If I expect my father to help me, say, in my marriage or when I wish to buy a house, then this means that I can never truly become independent. It also means that I place undue pressure on my father. This all fuels an unfulfilled nature that always expects more. If we want to love and be loved by others, then we should not expect anything from them. A hadith states, “Sever your greed from what the hands of people hold” (Majlisi 1403 AH, 70:168).

We should never make plans based on what we expect others to give us. We should only ask and expect from God, not from anyone else.

In Islam, lending is highly recommended, but borrowing is discouraged and *makruh*. If you are not very desperate, do not ask for any loans, as it damages your dignity. Imam Ali (a) says: “If you allow greed and expectations and demands from people to take over, you will humiliate yourself and lose your dignity and honor.” Prophet Muhammad (s) also says: “Seek your needs [from others] honorably.” In other words, do not bow down, and only ask others if you need to. Be careful when accepting conditions and never compromise your honor and dignity.

Characteristics of an Honorable Person in Psychology

To support what we have said, I wish to cite some psychological findings regarding some of the characteristics of the people who have honor, self-value, and self-esteem.

1. The people that have honor and dignity have a sense of hope in the future.

We see that at times some people are very pessimistic and have no hope. As a result, they lack courage to undertake any work or project. They believe that things will fail, or that the obstacles cannot be overcome. This is not necessarily because they have had bad experiences but because the person lacks a strong personality, lacks self-esteem, and has not been raised as a dignified person.

A person that is *karim* has a lot of strength and confidence in himself and in God, and also in the world that is under the lordship of God and always hopes that better things will happen.

If we see that our children, students, or teachers are consistently pessimistic and look at things in a negative light, it means that something was wrong in their upbringing. We must invest in the self-esteem and self-respect of the young ones.

2. A person that is *karim* is respectful to other people, and not arrogant.

A *karim* does not do injustice to the others, nor does he disregard the rights and opinions of the others. Those people who are unjust and arrogant have some internal weakness. A hadith states: “Only a weak person needs to do injustice” (al-Sahifa al-sajjadiyya, supplication 48).

If a person is internally strong and confident, they do not need to resort to acts of injustice. A confident person will be very considerate and take into account the rights of the others. Humility and respecting the rights of people is a sign of *karamah* and honor.

3. An honorable person is very kind and caring.

Previously, we mentioned that a *karim* is lenient and good-tempered, and we now add the quality of kindness. Imam Ali (a) said: “The love

that emanates from one who has honor is more than the love that comes from kinship.”

The relationship of kinship makes a person affectionate towards his relatives, and a *karim* person shows love and sympathy to the others as if they are his kin. An honorable person cannot be relaxed and indifferent when other people are suffering, no matter if they are his relatives or not.

4. An honorable person is very patient and persistent.

We have already spoken about this. Psychologists also emphasize this characteristic and the fact that patience and perseverance allow a person to meet the challenges and overcome them. Imam Ali (a) has said: “To be honorable means that you possess the good quality of patience.” A *karim* is one who is persistent and does not give up easily.

5. An honorable person makes a clear distinction between end and means.

This is a very important aspect and I would like us all to think about this very carefully. The honorable make a clear distinction between ends and means. Many people are not able to accurately do this. When they have a good end in mind, they assume that they can employ any means to reach that good end. This is not correct. An honorable person does not use corrupt and evil ways even for good causes. Even if a person pursues the best goals, they are not permitted to use any means they wish.

An honorable person is very careful about the people he chooses as friends and allies, about the money he uses, and the means and

instruments he uses. Everything must be honorable, and this principle cannot be violated when a good goal is pursued.

Unfortunately, sometimes we see that this important point is neglected even in religious programs. We see that in mourning ceremonies, for instance, Islamic requirements and values are compromised. We should remember that it is not enough to have the intention of holding a very good *majlis* for Imam Husayn (a); we must also be careful about the way we run and conduct such gatherings. We cannot invite just any speaker to have a larger attendance. Everything has its own manners and etiquette in Islam.

In the early years of his mission, the Prophet (s) had a lot of difficulties. He had few followers, and they were subjected to all kinds of persecution. However, the Prophet (s) remained very careful about the way he preached his message. At times, people told him that they were ready to embrace Islam and support him with their entire tribe if he promised that after his death he would appoint one of their tribe members as his successor. Had he not been a man of great honor, he would have agreed in order to benefit from their support at least in the short term. He could later break the deal by making some excuses, but he was a man of principle, so he flatly refused and told them that appointing a successor was not in his hands. Others offered him their support as long as he exempted them from prayer (*salah*), but he rejected this offer as well.

When the Prophet's son passed away, an eclipse occurred, which, the people thought, was the mourning of the sky for the sorrow of the Prophet (s). The Prophet (s) did not use this opportunity to promote himself either; neither did he keep silent allowing them to retain their false idea. Instead, he clearly stated that the eclipse had nothing to do

with anyone's death, and that it was only a sign of God. Prophet Muhammad (s) was an honorable person who would not use any means just because he pursued a good goal.

6. An honorable person values being alone.

Honorable people are not afraid of being alone. Conversely, people who are internally weak always seem to want to socialize with others. They find it very difficult and disturbing to be alone. If they are put in a place alone for an hour, or even less, they are not able to cope. This is why a harsh punishment for prisoners is to put them into solitary confinement and not let them meet anyone. However, people of strong character have an inner treasure and realize that it is actually not bad to be alone. In fact, they often look for some time to be alone. Imam Zayn al-Abidin (a) says: "Were all the people between the east and west to die, I would not feel lonely as long as the Qur'an was with me" (Kulayni 1365 Sh, 2:440; Majlisi 1403 AH, 46:107).

Of course, it is not bad to socialize and interact with people, but it is bad if one cannot also enjoy loneliness. All the great thinkers and reformers were those who had some private time for themselves. When a person is always with other people, constantly speaking and listening, he does not have time to reflect. In our relationship with God, we need some time to be alone with Him. We usually cannot have full presence of heart and connection with God when in public.

Islam strikes a balance and teaches that one must have times of solitude and also times when he must interact, be present in society, and be productive. Islam encourages prayers to be done congregationally, but not at the expense of private moments with God. This is why *nafila* prayers are recommended to be performed at home and obligatory prayers in congregation.

Hence, a person of honor and dignity enjoys being alone. It is at these times that they are able to dig deep into their hearts and minds, and ask questions such as “Are there any problems in me?” “Do I possess any negative character traits?” or “How is my relationship with God?” It could also be a time for deep repentance.

7. An honorable person commits himself to *insaf* (fairness).

In Islamic teachings, *insaf* is considered a great virtue. When a person has *insaf*, he has achieved at least 70-80% of moral perfection. This is because *insaf* comes with many other positive traits. *Insaf* is to judge between ourselves and others without any bias. We must remain in complete control of our emotions, desires, and self-interest. If we are able to do so, we can see the truth and accept it even if it is against ourselves.

An honorable person is always fair; it does not matter if he is the judge or one of the parties in a dispute. He is ready to admit his mistake and apologize for it.

8. A person with an honorable character respects himself.

We already discussed the very important trait of being respectful to others, valuing their opinions and rights, and being humble towards them. But it is also very vital that a person should have respect for himself.

When someone respects himself, it becomes a source of internal strength. You may have noticed that many of the people who come from noble families, just by virtue of being constantly reminded of their heritage, behave and act very distinctly from others. These people tend to remember that their conduct must be befitting for their

background. If a person is a sayyid, then they should always be aware that they must act in a way that is expected from the progeny of the Prophet (s). If a person values and understands this, he will be very careful in his behavior. When a person has expensive jewelry, he should be the first to acknowledge this, not to disregard his expensive property and then expect others to respect it.

Every person who possesses a noble and honorable personality should first respect himself. He should be very careful about the words he uses. People can be judged by their words, and most of the time a person's good or bad character appears in his words, especially in private conversations and interactions with close people.

9. An honorable person is careful about the way he dresses.

It is a societal norm that certain situations require specific types of attire. An honorable person dresses in a modest and respectable way. They will not wear clothes that are unclean or revealing.

Islam teaches us that we should be careful in safeguarding our image and reputation in the eyes of others. Even at home, in front of our children, we cannot be dressed inappropriately. Fathers in front of their daughters, mothers in front of their sons, and brothers and sisters in front of each other must dress in a modest way.

Even when we are completely alone, it is *makruh* to become totally naked. Some scholars are very careful about this.

Hence, a person who has an honorable personality is very careful about his words, clothes, and all his manners and actions.

When it comes to friends, an honorable person does not befriend a person of whom he is ashamed in certain circles. He does not befriend

a person who he cannot introduce to his parents or to members of his community.¹ He will not have such friends at all. An honorable person makes friends with people whom he can show to others with honor. The same applies to colleagues and classmates. If we ever have to hide something that our friend does, then this should alarm us, because it shows that something is wrong.

Nowadays we have problems with social media. We exchange texts, emails, or broadcast ourselves in an audio-visual way, but then we become scared in case our parents or elders find out and see our posts. Here, I am not referring to things like hijab, rather about our attitude and manners before reaching the boundaries of halal and haram.

An honorable person does not mix with all people. Just as we do not trust everyone with our money, we should not entrust all people with our modesty, chastity, and morality. If we are not prepared to entrust money to them, why should we spend our time with them and let them into our lives?

10. An honorable person does not disobey God.

In a beautiful hadith, we read: “On the face of this earth, there is none more honorable to Allah than a person that is obedient to His commands.”

No one has more honor than a pious person, and no worldly matter is more valuable than piety and *taqwa*. We have only two choices: to be honored by God and receive His love, or to indulge in worldly pleasures

¹ . In some cases, however, there may be reasonable reasons for hiding the relationship. For example, a white person may befriend a black person and decide not to tell his racist parents about his friendship, because he knows that they may make troubles for him due to their racism.

and gains. These two options are not even comparable. A wise and rational person never replaces being with God with fame, money, or worldly pleasures.

Another hadith mentions: "One who has self-honor never humiliates himself by disobedience." Indeed, disobeying God means harming oneself; you may harm others as well, but you primarily harm yourself.

Indeed, those with an honorable personality have other virtues, which we will leave for future discussions for the sake of brevity.

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