

CHARACTER DEFINITION

وَإِنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ خُلُقٍ عَظِيمٍ

Surely you are upon a magnificent character is how most writers/speakers translate the above *aayah*. As simple as it may sound, its meaning is quite profound.

Obviously the *aayah* is praising Rasulullah *sallallahu alaihi wasallam*. However, it could be asked: why did Allah Ta'aala not say something like *surely you have magnificent character* or *you are a man of exemplary character*? What is meant by *you are upon a magnificent character*? The answer to these questions is rooted in *Al-Balaaghah* (the study of Arabic rhetoric). According to a number of classical experts in this field, usage of the word '*alaa* (upon) in this *aayah* is based on a figure of speech called *at-tamtheel*. Without going into the definition and other technicalities of *at-tamtheel*, the purpose of the *aayah* is hence a comparison of the exemplary character of Rasulullah *sallallahu alaihi wasallam* to a horseman riding firmly on his horse. While Rasulullah *sallallahu alaihi wasallam* is compared to a horseman, good character is compared to a horse and the impeccability of Rasulullah's *sallallahu alaihi wasallam* character is compared to the firmness with which the horseman rides his horse. Just as the horseman ensures that he does not fall off the horse, Rasulullah *sallallahu alaihi wasallam* always ensures that his actions never contradict the dictates of

good (exemplary) character. Just as the skilled horseman never falls off his horse, Rasulullah *sallallahu alaihi wasallam* never *falls off* good character.

Why Magnificent ?

أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ هَدَى اللَّهُ فَبِهِدَاهُمُ اقْتَدِهْ

*Those are the ones whom Allah had guided,
therefore follow their guidance.*¹

In this *aayah*, Rasulullah *sallallahu alaihi wasallam* was commanded to adopt the أخلاق (character) of all the previous *ambiyaa*. Like every other command of Allah, there is no doubt that Rasulullah *sallallahu alaihi wasallam* fulfilled this command too. Hence we conclude that Rasulullah *sallallahu alaihi wasallam* was the quintessence of the excellent character traits of all the previous *ambiyaa*. Adoption of the behaviour and conduct of every other *Nabi* is the reason why Allah Ta'aala described him *sallallahu alaihi wasallam* as a person of magnificent character.

An Astounding Example

Examples of Rasulullah's *sallallahu alaihi wasallam* impeccable character are many. Let us suffice with just one example – the fact that even after the Sahaabah *radiallahu anhum* (almost all of them) fled the battlefield of Uhud, he *sallallahu alaihi wasallam* did not even rebuke them (let alone punish them). On the contrary, he forgave them and uttered not a single word of reprimand. In this regard Allah Ta'aala said:

¹ Surah Al-An'aam Aayah 90

فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ لِنْتَ لَهُمْ ، وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ لَانْفَضُّوا مِنْ حَوْلِكَ

Due to mercy from Allah you were lenient to them.

*If you were foulmouthed and harsh-hearted,
they would have dispersed from you.²*

Three Levels

This aayah speaks of خُلُقِي عَظِيمٍ (magnificent character). On other occasions we read of خُلُقِي حَسَنٍ (good character) and خُلُقِي كَرِيمٍ (noble character). *Is there any difference between these terms or are they the same thing?* Some 'Ulamaa are of the opinion that they are three different levels of good character – the lowest is خُلُقِي حَسَنٍ (good character) and the highest is خُلُقِي عَظِيمٍ (noble character).

خُلُقِي حَسَنٍ (Good Character)

This is when you take revenge from those who wrong you to the extent of the wrong that they had done to you. Such revenge is permissible, but only to the extent of the wrong done to you. If the victim takes more revenge then he is entitled to, he too becomes a criminal. Thus extreme caution is required when exercising one's right to take revenge. In fact, considering human weakness, it would be advisable to swallow one's pride and forgo one's right instead of taking revenge. For example, if a man swore you, it will be permissible for you to swear him . . . but only to the extent that he swore you. Thus, if he only swore you, it will not be permissible for you to swear

² Surah Aal-'Imraan Aayah 159

him as well as his parents. If you do so, you too will be guilty of injustice.

خُلُقِي كَرِيمٍ (Noble Character)

This is when you forgive the person who abuses your rights. This is certainly a higher level of good conduct and has been encouraged by Allah and His Rasool *sallallahu alaihi wasallam*.

لَا يُحِبُّ اللَّهُ الْجَهْرَ بِالسُّوءِ مِنَ الْقَوْلِ إِلَّا مَنْ ظَلَمَ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ سَمِيعًا عَلِيمًا
إِنْ تُبْدُوا خَيْرًا أَوْ تُخْفُوهُ أَوْ تَعْفُوا عَنْ سُوءٍ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَفُوًّا قَدِيرًا

*Allah disdains loud utterance of evil except for the oppressed,
and Allah is All-Hearing and All-Knowing.*

If you expose good deeds, conceal it or forgive the wrong (that was done to you), then certainly Allah is All-Forgiving and All-Able (to take revenge).³

خُلُقِي عَظِيمٍ (Magnificent Character)

This is when, let alone forgiving the person who harmed you, you present him with a gift. Remember that when a person unlawfully harms you, he is actually transferring his good deeds to you. Thus, *خُلُقِي عَظِيمٍ* is when you repay those who trample your rights with kindness (*du'aa*, a gift etc.) instead of revenge. Do you recall Hasan Basri's (ra) reaction to the person who had backbitten him? Did he not send him a plate of fresh dates and a message that '*I have learnt that you had backbitten me and*

³ Surah An-Nisaa Aayaat 148 – 149

*thus presented your good deeds to me. I therefore present my dates to you’.*⁴

Zain-ul-‘Aabideen

There are probably very few who have not heard of ‘Ali bin Husain, more commonly known as *Zain-ul-‘Aabideen* (ra). He was the grandson of Rasulullah *sallallahu alaihi wasallam*. Accompanied by his servants, he was one day confronted by a man who began hurling all sorts of verbal abuses at him. Realising that his servants were furious and going to attack the man, he stopped them saying: *‘Leave the man alone’*. He then told the man: *‘The amount of my conduct that is hidden from you is much more. Do you have a need in which we could assist you?’* The man felt ashamed of himself when he heard this. On the contrary, *Zain-ul-‘Aabideen* (ra) immediately gave the man one-thousand dirhams. Thereafter, whenever the man met *Zain-ul-‘Aabideen* (ra), he would tell him: *‘I bear testimony that you are among the children of the Rasool sallallahu alaihi wasallam’.*⁵

A More Encompassing Definition

Without differentiating between the three types mentioned thus far, some ‘*ulamaa* define *تَخَلَّى مِنْ الرِّذَالِ وَ اتَّخَلَّى* as: *تَخَلَّى مِنْ الرِّذَالِ وَ اتَّخَلَّى* (shunning of bad behavior and adoption of good conduct). Others define it as: *بَذْلُ النَّدَى وَ كَفُّ الْأَذَى وَ اخْتِمَالُ الْأَذَى* (to be generous to people, avoid causing them any difficulty and tolerance of

⁴ Tafseer Ash-Sha’raawi (Al-Maktabah Ash-Shaamilah, 2nd Edition)

⁵ Ibn-ul-Jawzi, *Sifat-us-Safwah* V.2 Pg.71

inconvenience caused by them). However, such statements do not really define خُلُقٍ حَسَنٍ – they merely identify its ثمرات (benefits).⁶

Ibn-ul-Qayyim (ra) explains that bad character comprises of four components:

1. الجهل – (Ignorance) which causes people to regard good things as bad and vice versa.
2. الظلم – (Immoderation) which causes man to do things at the wrong time; thus:
 - > He gets outraged whereas he should remain calm
 - > He remains calm whereas he should be outraged
 - > He is harsh whereas he should be lenient
 - > He is tolerant whereas he should be stern
 - > He spends when or where he should not do so etc.
3. الشهوة – (Greed) which results in niggardliness, indifference towards *haraam* and disgraceful, lowly behaviour .
4. الغضب – (Anger) which results in haughtiness, malice, jealousy, hostility and insolence.

Accordingly, good character comprises of the following components:

1. الصبر – (Patience) which leads to gentleness, tolerance, suppression of anger, avoidance of inconveniencing others and abstention from irrational decisions.
2. العفة – (Chastity) which leads to avoidance of:

⁶ *Maw'idhat-ul-Mu'mineen Min Ihyaa 'Uloom-id-Deen* Pg.121

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- > Lies
 - > Backbiting
 - > Slander
 - > All indecent speech and actions
3. الشجاعة – (Courage) which causes dignified behavior, noble character traits, generosity and selflessness.
4. العدل – (Moderation) which results in:
- > Generosity – Thus he is neither miserly nor wasteful
 - > Modesty – Thus he is neither shameless nor prudish
 - > Bravery – Thus he is neither cowardly nor belligerent⁷

Another Definition

However, it could be argued that even the above explanation of Ibn-ul-Qayyim (ra) does not define good character; it only highlights its components. Thus Al-Ghazzaali (ra) writes that: *الخلق is a firmly established spiritual attitude due to which actions are accomplished without any prior deliberation. If the resultant actions are praiseworthy, this attitude is called خُلُقًا حسنًا* Conversely, if the resultant actions are blameworthy, it is called *خُلُقًا سيئًا*⁸ Likewise, Ar-Raazi (ra) writes that: *الخلق is a spiritual aptitude through which man finds it easy to do good actions. Accomplishing good is one thing, accomplishing it with ease is another. Included in the meaning of حُسْنُ الخلق (good character) is:*

- > Polite speech and behavior towards others

⁷ Ibn-ul-Qayyim, *Madaarij-us-Saalikeen* Pg.583-584

⁸ *Maw'idhat-ul-Mu'mineen Min Ihyaa 'Uloom-id-Deen* Pg.121

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- > Harmonious fulfillment of the rights of others
 - > Avoidance of greed, miserliness, anger and harshness in one's dealings
 - > Abstention from severing ties with others⁹

An Interesting Observation

While the Arabic word for character is خُلُق (with a ضَمَّة on the letter خ), the Arabic word for physical features is خَلْق (with a فَتْحَة on the letter خ). This indicates a relationship between the two. Regarding this relationship, the commentator of *Tafseer-ul-Baydaawi*, Shaikh Zaadah (ra), explains that although (good) character is only attained after extensive effort and lengthy exertion, it is called خُلُق due to its resemblance with خَلْق in firmness and permanence.¹⁰

The Weightiest Item

The merits of خُلُقٍ حَسَنٍ (good character) are many. We suffice with the following two *ahaadith* of Rasulullah *sallallahu alaihi wasallam*:

مَا مِنْ شَيْءٍ أَثْقَلُ فِي مِيزَانِ الْمُؤْمِنِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ مِنْ خُلُقٍ حَسَنٍ

*On the Day of Qiyaamah nothing will be weightier in the scale of the Believer than good character.*¹¹

سُئِلَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ عَنْ أَكْثَرِ مَا يُدْخِلُ النَّاسَ الْجَنَّةَ ؟

⁹ Fakhruddin Deen Ar-Raazi, *At-Tafseer Al-Kabeer* V.30 Pg.71 (Dar-ul-Kutub Al-Ilmiyyah 1411 / 1990)

¹⁰ *Haashiyah Shaikh Zaadah* V.4 Pg.526 (Dar-Ihya' At-Turaath Al-'Arabi)

¹¹ Sunan At-Tirmidhi (Hadith 2002), Sunan Abu Da'ud (Hadith 4799)

فقال: تَقْوَى اللَّهِ وَحُسْنُ الْخُلُقِ

*Rasulullah sallallahu alaihi wasallam was asked about the most frequent cause of the people's entry into Jannah. He replied:
The taqwa of Allah and good character.¹²*

May Allah Ta'aala guide us to adopt the character of Rasulallah
sallallahu alaihi wasallam,
Aameen.

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¹² Sunan At-Tirmidhi (Hadith 2004)