



GHAMIDI CENTER OF ISLAMIC LEARNING

An Initiative of Al-Mawrid U.S.

www.ghamidi.org

Character Development for the Youth

Maryam Habib

Age Group: 14 – 17

Language: English

Number of Classes: 4 (60 minutes each)

Course Description:

The purpose of this course is to highlight the salient features of the moral code inherent in Islam and its application in daily life. Students will explore four basic tenets namely Honesty, Integrity, Kindness and Tolerance within the framework of references from Quran and Hadiths in four sessions, respectively. Sessions will be structured to show students how they can apply these teachings in everyday life resulting in lifelong habits that invariably assist in achieving *tazkia*. Course content will specifically address issues from the perspective of a teenager, the challenges they face and the resultant conflicts that may make adherence seem difficult.

Code of Conduct:

1. When you login to Zoom, please make sure that your first name is displayed in the participants list.
2. Students will be required to keep their cameras on for the entire duration of the class.
3. Each class will be interactive. At the teacher's discretion, there will be time to ask questions.
4. Please remain respectful of everyone's opinions. Remember that healthy disagreements pave the way to a deeper understanding.

Syllabus

Following is the intended syllabus that shall be followed in this course. The course presenter may see it fit to make modifications as the course progresses.

Session: 1

- Introduction
- Foreword:

The most important requirement of Islam after its foundational beliefs is the purification of personal character whether it is measured in terms of development, morality or human interaction. This means that we strive to purify our thoughts, words and actions in relation to God and our fellow beings. This is the foundation of all good deeds. Whether we qualify for God's favor, therefore, is not only dependent on our belief system but also our good deeds. One without the other is meaningless¹.

"The best amongst you are the ones who are better in their character and their dealings" – Sahih Al-Bukhari: 3559

"A believer attains the same degree by his(/her) good character as that of a person who fasts during the day and prays during the night." – Abu Dawud: 4798

Basic human morality is universal, these are what we call universal truths. Each human being is born with a sense of morality, the ability to distinguish right from wrong². Situations which seemingly

¹ Quran 20: 75 – 76

² Quran 91: 7 – 10

appear grey can always be brought into clarity by asking the question “would you like such and such to happen to you?” Four of these universal truths are:

1. Honesty
2. Integrity
3. Kindness
4. Tolerance

It is stated in the Quran (90:16):

“Indeed, Allah commands justice, doing good to others (grace and kindness) and generosity towards kith and kin and He forbids all that is shameful (indecent, lewdness), wickedness (injustice, all that runs counter to goodness/reason) and rebellion. He instructs you, so you may be mindful (so you may take heed).”

- Honesty:

What is Honesty? Being truthful regardless of benefit or detriment. Being honest falls under the broader term of justice/avoiding injustice. Quran, on several occasions, commands bearing witness to truth irrespective of enmity, relation or personal gain, equating being truthful to righteousness, piety and closeness to God³. Similar emphasis is on fulfillment of one’s promises with the guarantee that one will be held accountable for one’s promises⁴.

Similarly, when we study the life of our prophet (pbuh), honesty, truthfulness, trustworthiness, honoring his word are a constant theme. This was true even before he received the first revelation, commonly known as ‘sadiq’ (honest) and ‘amin’ (trustworthy) due to his personal and professional dealings. There are several hadiths which emphasize the importance of honesty.

Abdullah ibn e Masood (ra) narrates Allah’s messenger as saying:

“When a person speaks the truth and continuously strives to speak the truth, a time comes when he is given the status of ‘siddiq’ (person who is always honest) before Allah. Similarly, when a person lies and continuously strives to construct falsehoods, a time comes when it is written that he is a liar before Allah.” – Sahih Al-Bukhari: 6094

The above refers to striving for continuity in being honest till it becomes second nature.

Abu Huraira (ra) narrates the Prophet (pbuh) as saying:

“The signs of a hypocrite are three: Whenever he speaks, he tells a lie, and whenever he promises, he breaks his promise, and whenever he is entrusted, he betrays (proves to be dishonest).” – Sahih Al-Bukhari: 6095

Safwan bin Saleem (ra) narrates that, “We asked the Prophet (pbuh), “O messenger of God, can a believer be a coward? The Prophet said, ‘Yes’, then we asked, can a believer be a miser? The

³ Quran 4: 135, 5:8

⁴ Quran 17:34

Prophet (pbuh) said, 'Yes', then it was asked, can a believer be a liar? And the Prophet replied, 'No'."

This is the importance of honesty in our religion. How does it apply to young adults? It is not necessary that you be called upon to bear witness in trials and against great injustices, what one must remember is that the greatest of sins start from a place of seemingly harmless infractions. A white lie here, a slight concealment there start the erosion of inbuilt sense of morality. Examples of real-life issues which seem so small but can have life-long repercussions can include:

1. Cheating on a test
2. Being untruthful to parents out of fear that they will revoke permission for something you really want to do or make you do something that you have no interest in doing e.g., social media usage, trips with friends, sleepovers, parties, offering prayers etc.
3. Telling the truth to a person in authority about incidents of cyber bullying, pranks, vandalism, misuse of technology if the perpetrator is yourself or a friend.
4. Initiating or spreading rumors, gossiping. It is narrated by Abu Huraira (ra) that the prophet (pbuh) said, "it is proof enough that a person is a liar, if he spreads (without authenticating) what he hears." – Sahih Muslim: 5
5. Exaggerating or making up stories in order to 'fit in' or appear 'cool'.
6. Committing to doing something with no intent of fulfilling it.

It is wise to start practicing honesty in all aspects of your life to develop it as second nature. We all make mistakes, the important thing is to learn from those mistakes, to understand what we did wrong and why it is imperative to nip bad habits in the bud. Remember, it is difficult to tell the truth initially after which everything becomes easier and less complicated; whereas it is easy to tell a lie initially but everything that comes after becomes more and more difficult and complicated till you lose yourself, your moral compass, your connection to God.

Critical thinking exercise: Under what circumstances do you think not being honest is acceptable?

Session 2:

- Integrity:

Technically speaking, Cambridge dictionary describes integrity as the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles that you refuse to compromise on. In other words, moral or ethical incorruptibility. This is the framework within which honesty is one aspect. Having integrity essentially encompasses the entire command in Surah An-Nahl (16) verse 90 discussed in the previous session. These are further expanded in surah Bani Israel (17: 22 – 39) as follows:

1. Belief in one God, none but Him is worthy of worship and complete surrender.
 - a. How do principles of integrity fit into this?
 - b. On a personal level, why does negation of one God classify as the most unforgivable injustice of all?
2. Honoring one's parents, always treating them with extreme goodness.
 - a. Who is the most deserving of our good will? (hint: Sahih Muslim 2548, Shuab ul Iman by Imam Al-Bayhaqi: 7446)

3. Fulfilling the rights of your kith and kin, including generosity towards them, towards the impoverished and towards those who are travelling. If unable to help, refuse gently and with kindness. Avoid extravagance or wastage.
 - a. How should you deal with relatives you do not agree with or you dislike?
 - b. What do you think constitutes as extravagance or wastage?
4. Do not kill your children for fear of poverty.
 - a. How does this come into play in today's world?
5. Avoid adultery or anything that can lead to it.
 - a. Why is this so important?
 - b. How do you think words, actions, personal choices such as how you dress and how you carry yourself come into play within this context?
6. Never take an innocent life. Sanctity of life is established by Allah.
 - a. How do you think both who consider themselves religious and those who do not transgress this boundary?
7. Do not go near the wealth of an orphan, unless intending to enhance it, till they attain maturity.
 - a. What principle can teenagers extract from this to apply in their own dealings?
8. Fulfill your promises, give in full when measuring, remain fair in your dealings, do not deceive.
 - a. Can feelings of jealousy, envy, insecurity cause you to become unfair to others?
9. Do not follow or insist on what you have no knowledge of.
 - a. How can young adults pursue the course of knowledge if what they have been handed down does not make sense to them and they face resistance in seeking counter narratives? Should they insist on a viewpoint, without a sound argument, on the basis of tradition?
10. Never be arrogant in your thoughts, words or actions.
 - a. Think of an incident where you had an arrogant thought and how you reacted to it?

It is further stated in the Quran (7:33)

“Say unto them (O Mohammad) that my Lord had only forbidden that which is indecent (shameful) whether open or in secret, and injustice and unjust transgression, and that you should associate ‘others’ with him (in worship or in deeds) for which he has given no sanction and attributing to Allah that of which you have no knowledge.”

If we analyze any moral predicament, everything which can be considered wrong will fall into one or more of the categories clearly established in the above verse. Similarly, all good deeds stem from either following the “10 commandments” as stated above in one form or the other or avoiding the list detailing all that is forbidden or ‘haram’.

Our Prophet (pbuh) exemplified character perfection, integrity at its finest level. Under the worst of circumstances, surrounded by enemies, ridiculed and persecuted, he never let go of any moral principle at any time. Quran commends this in Surah Qalam (68:4)

“Verily you are of the highest noble character.”

It is narrated by Nawas bin Sam'am Al-Ansari (ra), "I asked Allah's messenger (pbuh) about virtue and vice. He said, 'Virtue is a kind disposition and vice is what rankles in your heart and that you disapprove that people should come to know of it.'" – Sahih Muslim: 2553

The above identifies the moral compass that all of us are born with, our conscience, our innate ability to distinguish between right and wrong.

An important aspect of integrity is continuity or prevalence in life. It is not enough to do the right thing some of the time, it is important to practice it all the time.

It is narrated by Saeed Al-Muqbari that if the Prophet (pbuh) started a good deed he would remain steadfast and would continue to practice it. Aisha (ra) reported Allah's messenger as saying, "The acts most pleasing to Allah are those which are done continuously, even if they are small." – Sahih Muslim: 783b

It is narrated by Abu Bakr (ra) that the Prophet said, "Should I not inform you about the three gravest of high sins? These are to join others with God (in worship or in deeds), to break relations with one's parents, to bear false witness or to lie", Abu Bakr relays that when the Prophet (pbuh) was saying this he was reclining (on a pillow), but he sat up and repeated the third sin so many times that we wished for him to stop. – Sahih Al-Bukhari: 2654

Abdullah bin Amr (ra) narrates that the Prophet said, "Four attributes if found in a person makes him an absolute hypocrite. If he has one of these attributes, he will continue to have an attribute of a hypocrite till such time that he leaves that habit. These four attributes are:

1. When entrusted with anything, he betrays.
2. When he talks, he lies.
3. When he makes a promise, he breaks it.
4. When he fights, he reduces to using abusive language." – Sahih Al-Bukhari: 34

Session 3:

- Kindness:

One of the direct manifestations in our character that result from understanding Islam and our relationship with God is kindness. It is the emotional outcome of this manifestation that makes us surrender completely in front of God while creating feelings of grace, mercy, benevolence for our fellow beings.

When we understand our own reality and that of this world, we become a source of absolute kindness and generosity to our family and friends, our neighbors and co-workers, our community, our fellow human beings. It is written in the Quran,

"And the slaves of the Most Beneficent (Allah) are those who walk on the earth in humility and sedateness and when the foolish address them (with bad words) they reply back with mild words of gentleness (peace)." (25:63)

Abu Dharr Ghaffari (ra) narrates that Allah's messenger said that, "None of you should consider the most commonplace of good deeds as insignificant and if nothing else he should meet his brother with a cheerful countenance." – Sahih Muslim: 2626

Emotions like envy or jealousy erode feelings of kindness and generosity. Abu Huraira (ra) narrates that the Prophet (pbuh) said, "Avoid envy, for envy devours good deeds like fire devours fuel". – Sunan Abi Dawud: 4903

Arrogance is the antithesis of kindness. It is humility, the knowledge that we are God's servants, his creations that keep us grounded in our interactions with others. It is quite common to observe that a lot of people will practice kindness from a place of superiority but if they were forced to acknowledge those they perceive as lesser beings as their equals, they refuse to accept. Kindness or generosity should always stem from the absolute knowledge that all that we have is not because of our own doing but because of the infinite mercy of God and therefore it is our duty to help others less fortunate for we know that either we are tested by being deprived or by being endowed.

Aisha (ra) reported Allah's messenger (pbuh) as saying, "Kindness is not to be found in anything but that it adds to its beauty and it is not withdrawn from anything, but it makes it defective." – Sahih Muslim: 2594. She further reported that Allah's messenger (pbuh) said, "Verily Allah is kind and He loves kindness and confers upon kindness which he does not confer upon severity or anything else besides kindness." – Sahih Muslim: 2593

Jarir Bin Abdullah (ra) narrates that the Prophet (pbuh) said, "A person who is deprived of speaking kindly is deprived of all good." – Sahih Muslim: 2592.

How can young adults incorporate kindness in their daily lives?

- Making sure no one is sitting alone for lunch at school.
- Standing up for someone who is being bullied.
- If you need to talk about personal things with your close friends, making sure you do not do so when other people are present so as not to make them feel excluded.
- Speaking nicely to your family, relatives, friends, domestic helpers etc. even if you are in a terrible mood.
- Staying quiet instead of passing a mean remark.
- Not making fun of others who dress differently or speak differently or behave differently. Redirecting such conversations to other subjects if your friends indulge in such behavior.
- Speaking nicely to everyone is the easiest way to show kindness.

Critical Thinking Exercise:

If you had to choose between being right and being kind, what would you choose and why?

Session 4:

Tolerance:

Tolerance is different from patience. It is true that it stems from a place of steadfastness, but it is directed more towards our interactions with others whereas patience is an internal exercise. Where does tolerance come into play:

1. Having the capacity to listen earnestly to a differing point of view about:
 - a. Religious interpretation
 - b. Political views
 - c. In case of disagreements on any topic.

This does not mean that you must agree with the other person, but it does require you to develop a temperament which allows you to listen to a different sometimes conflicting viewpoint with intellectual integrity. This means to assess the argument on merit and always allow the possibility that you could be wrong. This is the only way to gain knowledge. Without tolerance, we deprive ourselves to expand our horizons, to strive for better understanding, to create alliances across varying narratives or in case of critical differences to never make our arguments ad hominem but rather ground them on indisputable facts.

Why is it that sometimes we see intolerant behavior from deeply religious individuals? Or why the space to ask presumably controversial questions for a better religious understanding seems to be shrinking in our public discourse. These reactions usually stem from:

- a. Fear
- b. Insecurity
- c. Lack of knowledge
- d. Blind following of certain traditions, narratives

It is imperative that we inculcate tolerance for others in our daily lives. The only thing that we should be intolerant about is persecution, injustice and cruelty. Despite having strong differences, we can never be intolerant towards fellow humans on the basis of their religious beliefs, political affiliations, sexual orientation/gender identity etc. Our religion teaches us to preach by our actions, our kindness and generosity to others, it is only through the strength of our own character that we can hope to initiate a change in anyone's perspective.

However, we can never use tolerance as an excuse to shy away from our obligations to stand against injustice. Anas Bin Maalik (ra) narrates that Allah's messenger (pbuh) said,

"Help your brother, whether he is the oppressor or the oppressed." A man asked, "O Allah's messenger (pbuh), I can help someone in case he is the oppressed, but when he is the oppressor how can I help him?" The Prophet (pbuh) replied, "you create hurdles in his way, or you stop him, that would be helping him." – Sahih Al-Bukhari: 2443

This clearly outlines our tolerance criterion. Have you ever witnessed an incident of intolerance? What was your reaction to it? What would you have done differently?

References:

1. Quran
2. Meezan by Javed Ahmad Ghamidi
3. Maqamaat by Javed Ahmad Ghamidi
4. Hayat e Rasul e Ummi by Allama Khalid Masood.