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Good Words and Ethics of Dialogue

Allah (may He be Exalted) has created human beings in the best form. Revealing His miraculous powers, He endowed human tongues with several fine functions. Allah (may He be Exalted) says, “And among his wonders is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colors: for in this, behold, there are messages indeed for all who are possessed of [innate] knowledge” (the Quran 30: 22). The human difference in languages is a very normal human characteristic. Indeed, humans have variant colors, speak different languages, go through diverse experiences, reach various perceptions, master different areas of knowledge and have a variety of mindsets. These differences could become a means to enrichment only if humans utilize them in creating balanced discourses whereby they can address issues of disagreement in an ethical language and consequently reach a far grander view of the universe.

The Good Word is an ethical way to guide humans to goodness, happiness and right. It constitutes a successful means of communication. Giving the parable of good words, the Glorious Quran likens it to a fruitful tree. Allah (may He be Exalted) says, “Have you not seen how Allah puts forth the example that a good word is like a good tree, whose root is firm and whose branches are in the sky. It bears its fruit every so often with the permission of its Lord; and God puts forth the examples for the people, so that they might bethink themselves [of the truth]” (the Quran 14: 24 – 25). Allah also says, “Unto Him ascend all good words, and the righteous deed does He exalt” (the Quran, 35: 10).

The Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) loved and promoted good communication. Anas Ibn Malik (may Allah be pleased with him) narrated that the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) said, “There is no transitive disease, no divination, but good omen pleases me. It was said: What is good omen? He said: Good Words” (Reported by al-Bukhari).

In the same context, al-Nu‘man Ibn Sa‘d (may Allah be pleased with him) narrated from ‘Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) said: *“There are rooms in Paradise with*

transparent walls that one can see through them.” A Bedouin was there and asked the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him): “Who are the ones to win them?” The Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) said: “*Allah has prepared those rooms for those who speak well to others, give food in charity, fast regularly, and pray at night when people sleep*” (reported by al-Tirmidhi).

Good words have many benefits; it is a means of attaining piety, righteousness, and forgiveness. They settle disputes, eliminate conflicts, and promote love and peace. They bring about all that is good both in this life and in the Afterlife. Allah commands us to say good words to all people regardless of race, color, and religion. Allah (may He be Exalted) says: “*And speak to people good [words]*” (the Quran 2: 83). Another Quranic verse commands the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him): “Tell My servants that they should speak in the most kindly manner [unto those who do not share their beliefs]:” (the Quran 17: 53)

A person is hidden under their tongue and they are seen who they are only when they talk. Speaking constitutes a great deal of one's everyday life. A word can take a person to the highest rank of heaven and can bring a person down to the lowest abyss of hell.

Abu Hurayrah (May Allah be pleased with him) narrated that the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) said: “*A person may say a word that pleases Allah so much that He will raise high this person's status in the hereafter, even though the person might have thought the word he said was insignificant. Similarly, a person may say a word that displeases Allah so much that He will send this person to the hellfire, even though the person again might have thought the word he said was no issue*” (Al-Bukhari).

People of different views should carry on dialogues provided they adhere to its necessary ethics. Such dialogues are healthy and necessary for better communication and understanding. No doubt, good words strengthen human relationships. A nicely dialogue guided by ethics is a means to resume the way of truth, refine souls and develop human character.

Allah teaches us through the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) the rules of ethical dialogue that humans need to abide by in order for them to reach real solutions and establish the truth. A thorough look into the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) reveals the positive influence of ethical dialogues on people's life. The Quran and the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) set ethical rules for dialogue and debate; dialoguers need to argue in the most ethical manner as they work out their persuasion skills. The ultimate purpose of

dialogue is to establish the truth and call others to it, taking into consideration the rules that Islam has established for that. Time and again, good words are the key. Allah (may He be Exalted) says: *“Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good words, and dialogue with them in a way that is best”* (the Quran 16: 125).

We have to abide by the ethical dialogue and only utter the good words even when debating with the people of the scriptures, who hold religious principles and beliefs entirely different from ours. Good words, gentle talks, kindness and lenient conduct are the means to carry on ethical dialogues. Kindness is an absolute beauty of everything: ‘Aishah (May Allah be pleased with her) narrated that the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) said: *“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”* (Muslim).

Allah (may He be Exalted) says: *“And do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best, except for those who commit injustice, and say to them, ‘We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you. And our God and your God is one; and we are Muslims [in submission] to Allah’”* (the Quran 29: 46).

The Quran is rich with many examples of ethical dialogues. One example in case is Allah’s conversation with the angels over Adam’s creation. The Quran relates part of this conversation as follows: *“Recall that your Lord said to the angels, ‘I am placing a representative on Earth.’ They said, ‘Will You place therein one who will spread evil therein and shed blood, while we sing Your praises, glorify You, and uphold Your absolute authority?’ He said, ‘I know what you do not know. And He imparted unto Adam the names of all things; then He brought them within the ken of the angels and said: ‘Declare unto Me the names of these [things], if what you say is true. They replied: ‘Limitless are You in Your Glory! No knowledge have we save that which You has imparted unto us. Verily, You alone are all-knowing, truly wise. Said He: ‘O Adam, convey unto them the names of these [things].’ And as soon as [Adam] had conveyed unto them their names, [God] said: ‘Did I not say unto you, ‘Verily, I alone know the hidden reality of the heavens and the earth, and know all that you bring into the open and all. that you would conceal?’”* (the Quran 30 – 33).

Another example from the Quran is a conversation between Allah and Prophet ‘Isa (Jesus, may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him). The Quran relates the story as follows:

“Allah says, ‘O Jesus, Son of Mary, did you say to the people, ‘Take me and my mother as deities besides Allah?’ Jesus says, ‘Exalted are You Allah! It was not for me to claim that is not my right. If I had said it, You would have known it. You know what is within myself, and I do not know what is within Yourself. Indeed, it is You who is the

Knower of the unknowable. I only commanded them what You commanded me – that is ‘worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord.’ And I was a witness over them as long as I was among them; but when You took me up, You were the Observer over them, and You are, over all things, a Witness. If You should punish them – indeed they are Your servants (and You are free to do whatever you want); and if You forgive them – indeed it is You who is the Exalted in Might, the Wise.’ Allah says to Jesus, ‘This is the Day when the truthful will benefit from their honesty. They will attain gardens [in Paradise] beneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide forever, Allah is pleased with them, and they are pleased with Him. That is the great attainment.’ (the Quran 5: 116 – 119).

In the same regard, the Quran relates the prophet’s dialogues with their peoples, where the prophets utilized both intellectual and textual arguments in order to reveal the truth and guide people to it. For example, Prophet Muhammad conducted an ethical dialogue with the idolaters of Mecca who stubbornly insisted that they were on the right path even though they were obviously wrong.

The Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) in kind fair style told them: *“Tell me who provides for you from the heaven and the earth?”* Then, Allah commands the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) to answer: *“It is Allah who provides for you. And yet, either you or we shall be on the right path or on the wrong one”* (the Quran 34: 24).

Elaborate contemplation on this conversation reveals that the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) was fair enough in the way he spoke with them; he did not tell them upfront: *“We are right and you are wrong,”* even though that was the case. This style of speaking is so indicative of the Prophet’s respect to his opponents and their choices, even though his opponents were obviously wrong. The dialogue further goes on to tell: *“You will not be asked about what we did wrong, and we will not be asked about what you did”* (the Quran, 34: 25). After the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) stated that one party (either he or his opponents) should be right and the other should be wrong, he continued to describe his view as wrong from the perspective of his opponents while he withholds from judging their view to be either right or wrong. This prophetic style aims to soften the hearts of opponents and show sensitivity to their beliefs. At the end of the conversation, the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) puts the whole issue in Allah’s Hands as he says to his opponents: *“Our Lord will bring us together; then He will judge between us in truth. And He is the Knowing Judge”* (the Quran 34: 26).

The Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) sets another example for ethical dialogue as he consults his wife Umm Salamah (May Allah be pleased with her) on the Day of Al-Hudaybiyah. Their conversation aimed to reach a solution for a political crisis that was going to undermine the Muslim front on the event of Al-Hudaybiyyah treaty.¹

After signing the treaty, the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) commanded the companions to "Get up and slaughter your sacrifices and get your head shaved." By Allah, none of them got up. The Prophet repeated his order three times but no one got up. He left them and went to Um Salamah and told her of people's response. She then said: "Do you want your order to be carried out? Go out and do not say a word to anybody till you have slaughtered your sacrifice and call your barber to shave your head." "The Prophet went out and did not talk to anyone of them till he did that, i.e. slaughtered the sacrifice and called his barber who shaved his head. Seeing that, they hurried in crowds to do as the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) did" (Reported by al-Bukhari).

We learn from this how important to dialogue with others and listen to their views even if we do not agree with them. Be a good listener and you will be able to contain your opponents and understand their arguments. Before you dialogue with an opponent, let him feel your sympathy with him; you share them worries and only wish them good.

The following rules and morals are highly necessary for constructive dialogue:

- **Sincerity:** Before you carry on a dialogue with someone, you must be free from intentions of showing-off or searching after repute. Your ultimate goal is to reach the truth, not to win others. Do not be self-centered. Do not seek praise or recognition from others. Al-Shafi'i said: *"I never debated with anyone but that I wished Allah guides him to declare the truth."*
- **Objectivity and Neutrality:** The true believer persistently seeks the truth; whenever they find it, they get it. You will never reach the truth unless you are neutral and objective.
- **Fairness:** Perfect fairness is to accept the truth regardless of the one who told it. The Quran fairly declares how different are the people of

¹ The Prophet and his companions aimed to Mecca for 'Umah but the idolaters denied them entry to Mecca.

the scriptures in their behaviors: “They are not all alike: among the followers of earlier revelation there are upright people, who recite Allah's messages throughout the night and prostrate themselves [before Him]” (the Quran 3: 113). Another Quranic example of fair judgment is revealed in the statement of the ant to her ant colony: “When they approached the valley of the ants, one ant said: "O ants, go into your homes, lest you get crushed by Solomon and his soldiers, without being aware [of you]” (the Quran, 28: 18). She fairly judged that Solomon and his soldiers may unknowingly crush the ants without being aware of that.

- **Quietness and Respect of Arguments:** Loud voice stands for weak situations. For example, when ‘Ali Ibn Abu Talib (May Allah be pleased with him) sent ‘Abdullah Ibn ‘Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) to negotiate with the Kharijites—a deviant Muslim sect who, following their delusive views, ignorantly violated people's lives and honors. ‘Abdullah approached them wearing a very beautiful garment, which they disliked and asked, “What have you come for? And what is that you are wearing?”

Ibn ‘Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) said: “Regarding the garment, what is wrong with it? The Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) used to wear nice clothes and none was better looking than he was.” Then, Ibn ‘Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) recited Allah’s saying: “*Say (O Muhammad), ‘Who has forbidden adornments and the good things that Allah has produced for His servants?’ Say, ‘They are for those who believe in the life of this world and in the life hereafter’*” (the Quran 7: 32). The Kharijites asked Ibn `Abbas: “Why are you here?”

Ibn `Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) said: “I was sent by the Companions of the Prophet and I do not see among you any of the Companions of the Prophet. I was also sent to you by the Prophet’s Cousin, e.g. ‘Ali Ibn Abu Talib. I would like to remind you that the Quran was revealed to the Companions of the Prophet and they must be more versed in its interpretation. I came here today to tell you what the companions wanted to say to you and then tell them back your responses. I am just a messenger.

Some Kharijites said: “Do not talk to Ibn `Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him); he is from Quraysh whom the Quran describes as: “they are a contentious people.” The Kharijites feared Ibn `Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) would win them. Some others said, “Why not we talk to him and see what he will say?” Ibn `Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) commented that only two or three of the Kharijites should talk to him.

He (May Allah be pleased with him) said to them: “What is that makes you angry with `Ali?” They said, “We have three points against him.”

Ibn `Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) said: “Go ahead!” They said: “He let men judge over Allah’s judgment.” They refer to the incident in which `Ali accepted the arbitration during the first civil war in Islam between him and Mu`awiyah. May Allah be pleased with both! The Kharijites cited the Quranic verse: “the judgment should have rested with Allah alone” (the Quran, 6: 57).

Ibn `Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) said: “What else?” The Kharijites said, “`Ali fought his opponents but he was reluctant to captivate their women. If he thought his opponents were still Muslims and he did not accept them as captives, then he had no right to fight them. But if he was sure his opponents were not Muslims any longer, then why would he not captivate them?”

Ibn `Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) said: “What else?” The Kharijites said, “When he signed the treaty based on the arbitration, he did not sign it with his title as the Muslim ruler. He just wrote his name: `Ali Ibn Abu Talib.”

Ibn `Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) said: “Are you finished?”

The Kharijites said: “Yes!”

Ibn `Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) said: “You said that `Ali let men judge over Allah’s judgment. To this question, I respond that Allah says, “*O who believe, do not kill wild animals while you are in the state of performing pilgrimage. And whoever of you does intentionally – the penalty is to offer a sacrificial animal equivalent to what they killed. The judgment of such a case is to be referred to two just men*’ (the Quran 5: 95). According to this

verse, Allah authorizes two just men to settle the issue of killing a wild animal while performing pilgrimage. Now, let me ask you a question: Which is worthier of being settled: Muslim bloodshed or the killing of wild animals?”

The Kharijites said, “Of course Muslim bloodshed!”

Ibn ‘Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) set another example to the Kharijites—Allah says, “*If you fear a quarrel between a husband and wife, appoint two arbitrators; one from the husband’s family and the other from the wife’s family (to reconcile between them)*” (the Quran 4: 35). I appeal to you by Allah, which is more important: Arbitration in Muslim bloodshed or marital conflict?” The Kharijites said, “Of course arbitration in Muslim bloodshed!”

Ibn ‘Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) went on saying, now the first question is cleared. The Kharijites affirmed saying, “Yes, but what about the second?” Ibn ‘Abbas said: “As to the second question, you said that ‘Ali fought his opponents but was reluctant to captivate their women, which indicates his vacillation about what he did; otherwise, he would take the women of his opponents as prisoners of war. Now, I ask you: Would it be okay for you to captivate ‘Aishah—the mother of the believers that was the wife of your Prophet and treat her as a prisoner of war? If you say yes, you are out of Islam and if you say she is not the mother of the believers any longer then you will be out of Islam as well. They felt abashed and shamed.

The Kharijites said, “Then what about the third question?” Ibn ‘Abbas (May Allah be pleased with him) said: “You said that ‘Ali deposed himself as the ruler of the believers and if he is not the ruler of the believers, then he is the ruler of the disbelievers.

I would like to remind you of the Hdaybiyah event when the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) signed the treaty with Abu Sufyan and Suhayl Ibn ‘Amr, who were then disbelievers. The Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) wanted to write in the treaty this is the peace agreement between Muhammad, the Messenger of Allah. However, the idolaters of Mecca refused as they said to the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him): ‘If we were sure you are the messenger of Allah, we would

not fight you. Rather we state your name in the document as Muhammad Ibn ‘Abdullah. The Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) responded positively to their request and his name was written with no titles.”

After such successful dialogue, two thousands of the Kharijites retracted their ideology and only a few kept to their deviant view whom ‘Ali (May Allah be pleased with him) fought the rest of Kharijites. Now, observe the effect of quiet dialogue on these stubborn minds; only one session could drive two thousands to the right way of the Sunni Muslim Community.

- **Modesty:** It is a persuasive instrument whereby you respect others and their opinions. It makes your opponents more open to listen to you and consider your views. Needless to mention, when you respect your opponent he will definitely pay you equal or even more respect. A dialogue in which two parties modestly behave shall come up with effective conclusions. The Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) promises that Allah will raise the status of those who are humble: “One who displays humbleness towards another seeking the pleasure of Allah, Allah exalts him in ranks” (Muslim). Modesty is to accept the truth even if it comes from your opponents.
- **Avoid Vain Talk and Argumentation:** Every word counts. You should better avoid argumentation that yields no practical value. Such kind of argumentations usually aims to overcome one’s opponents and show their failures. The Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) enjoins that we must avoid vain argumentation. The Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) says, “*The worst of people are those of argumentative personality (in the negative sense of the word).*” The Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) also promises that Allah will grant a house in Paradise to whoever gives up on argumentation even if they are right.

As far as Islam is concerned, stern debates form a kind of religious extremism and exaggeration which the Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) declared forbidden: “The most despicable amongst people in the sight of Allah is the ruthless argumentative (person)” (Related by al-Bukhari in his Authentic collection). The Prophet also said, “I guarantee a house in the surroundings of Paradise for the one who avoids argumentations even if he were in the right, a house in the middle of Paradise for the one who

avoids lying even if he were joking, and a house in the upper part of Paradise for the one who perfects his character” (Reported by Abu Dawud). Showing-off and argumentative debates are forms of the disliked in-depth questioning of religious issues. ‘Abdullah Ibn Mas‘ūd reported that the Prophet said, “Ruined, were those who indulged in hair-splitting. He (the Holy Prophet) repeated this thrice” (Reported by Muslim).

- **Referring disagreements to the Book of Allah and the Prophet's Sunnah for Judgment:** Allah (may He be Exalted) says: *“If you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger. That is the best [way] and best in result”* (the Quran 4: 59) Yet, the interpretation of religious text must meet the scholarly rules of interpretation as outlined by the early Muslim doctors of law and interpretation.
- **Be a Good Listener:** We all like to speak more and listen less. Just remember a human being is created with one tongue and two ears in order to listen more and speak less. Therefore, we need to be good listeners; we need to spend more time understanding others than being understood: *“Only the people of knowledge can understand it”* (the Quran, 29: 43). The Prophet (may Allah's Peace and Blessings be upon him) was a good listener and he would carefully listen to his opponents no matter how vain their talks were as he, for instance, did with ‘Utbaḥ Ibn Abi Raḥīḥ. After finishing his talks, the Prophet said: O Abu al-Walid, have you finished. Yes, he replied. Then, listen to me—the Prophet said. He then recited: *“Ha. Meem; a revelation from the Most Gracious, Most Merciful; a divine writ, the messages whereof have been clearly spelled out as a discourse in the Arabic tongue for people of [innate] knowledge to be a herald of glad tidings as well as a warning. And yet, [whenever this divine writ is offered to men,] most of them turn away, so that they cannot hear [its message]; and so they say, [as it were:] Our hearts are veiled from whatever you call us to, [O Muhammad,] and in our ears is deafness, and between us and thee is a barrier. Do, then, behold, we shall do [as we have always done]!”*... (the Quran, 41: 1-5). The Prophet went on reciting while ‘Utbaḥ was quietly given to listening.

These ethical rules could create informative and fruitful dialogues that unite rather than divide people. However, some defects may render a dialogue fruitless. These defects include the following:

- **Angry Voice:** Some might think that loud and angry voice is the best way of persuasion. However, Allah teaches us that: “The ugliest of all voices is the braying of donkeys” (the Quran, 31: 19).
- **Overstatement of Others’ Views:** Someone may overstate their opponent’s views and may even accuse them of disbelief, profanity or heresy.
- **Telling lies about the Opponent:** Some may maliciously slander the opponents and damage their reputation.

The ethics of dialogue are highly urgent even when we communicate with those who disagree with us just to respect and safeguard their rights as the Prophet did with all people. The ethics of dialogue and justice are necessary for teachers with their students, for parents with their children and only the good words can serve this purpose.