

What It Means to Follow the Way of the Companions

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In numerous places in the Qur'aan, Allaah praises and shows His pleasure for the Companions of the Prophet (Saw) and also for those who follow in their footsteps. For example, Allaah says,

"And the first to embrace Islaam of the Muhaajirun and the Ansaar and also those who followed them exactly (in faith)! Allaah is well-pleased with them as they are well-pleased with Him. He has prepared for them Gardens under which rivers flow (Paradise) to dwell therein forever. That is the supreme success". (at-Tawbah, 100)

Furthermore, the following verse of the Qur'aan was first and foremost directed to the Companions of the Prophet (saw);

"You are the best of peoples ever raised for mankind, you enjoin good and forbid evil, and you believe in Allaah" (al-'Imraan, 110)

In addition there are numerous hadith in which the Prophet (saw) told us about the special place and superiority of his Companions, and also of those who came after them. Imraan ibn Hussain narrated that the Prophet (saw) said,

"The best people are my generation, then the people who come after them, then the people who come after them" (al-Bukhaari, and Muslim).

In another very important hadith, the Prophet (Saw) said,

"The tribes of Israel broke up into seventy-two sects. My ummah shall break up into seventy-three sects. All of them will be in the Fire except for one: [That group] which follows what I and my Companions are following." (at-Tirmidhi)

The behaviour and actions of the Companions of the Prophet (ra) were witnessed by the Prophet (saw) himself and approved by him. This means that their behaviour was also approved by Allaah as it is an accepted principle that the Prophet (Saw) is not allowed to approve of something which is essentially wrong.

These verses and these hadith - as well as many others - demonstrate to us that the Companions were on the Straight Path. This is, in fact, the only true path as the hadith concerning the dividing into sects demonstrates. Indeed, Allaah makes it clear that the path to Him is only one when He says:

"And verily this is My Straight Path, so follow it, and follow not other paths, for they will separate you away from His Path. This He has ordained for you that you may become pious". (al-Anaam, 153)

Ibn Mas'ud stated that the Prophet (saw) drew a straight line with other lines to the left and right of it. He stated that the straight line was the Straight Path and upon all other lines were Satans calling the people to those paths. Then he recited the above verse from Surah al-Anaam.

Therefore, we should look to the Companions and the others of the first three generations - those who followed in their footsteps and who learned directly from

them -- and we should try to emulate them as we know that their lives were pleasing to Allaah.

However, in what matters should we emulate them? In matters of the deen, in matters related to following the Straight Path. And what is the deen? It is one's matters of belief, one's matter of law, one's matter of behaviour and ethics -- all of these form part of the deen and all are essential aspects of the deen.

We should look to the Companions and try to learn from them and be like them. But not just with respect to matters of 'aqeedah or beliefs - as some people today seem to think. It is true that aqeedah or faith is the foundation of life - but there is no such thing as 'aqeedah by itself without it being translated into actions and behaviour.

There are many people nowadays who are stressing that we have to follow the way of the pious forefathers or the salaf in Islaam. They talk, in particular, about matters of 'aqeedah. However, following in their footsteps is not simply a matter of believing some articles of faith and being able to repeat them like a parrot! So many people can rattle off the principles related to the names and attributes of Allaah but that does not necessarily make them true followers of the way of our pious forefathers.

Many times when it comes to behaviour and ethics, the same people who are "calling to the way of the Salaf" seem to forget that we have to follow their example in these areas as well. It does not make any sense - in fact, it is not possible - that we have the same beliefs as our Salaf but our actions are quite to the contrary. This means that we don't have their beliefs at all. If we had their beliefs, they would be represented in our actions. It is inconceivable that we call ourselves followers of those pious people yet our behaviour is not like their behaviour whatsoever. How can we truly call ourselves their followers when we lie, cheat, don't mind to live off of other people, spread false rumours about each other, are not willing to sacrifice for the sake of Allaah, and so forth. Indeed, some who claim to be following those pious individuals are actually the furthest away in their behaviour from the pattern and example that those pious souls set.

In this khutbah - after making the above point and advising us all to follow the way of the Prophet (saw) and his Companions in order to be among the saved sect - I would like to remind us of some of the behaviours and characteristics of those early generations. In this way, we can take a good look at their lives and we can also look at our own lives and behaviour, and truly ask ourselves if we are actually following their example and having their deen which was so pleasing to Allaah.

One of their characteristics that we can note in their speech and action is that they would weight every action according to the scales of the shariah.

We can see clear examples of how Abu Bakr and Umar would not take any action until they were certain that such an action was correct according to the Shariah. We must be cautious and not tread into doubtful matters - which was another one of the beautiful and noble characteristics. Many times we do things without first asking or searching to make sure those things are lawful and pleasing to Allaah. After we actually engage in the act, we may then ask, "Is this act halaal or haraam?" It is

one of the characteristics of the Salaf that they would ask this question before acting.

Second, they used to remember and think a lot about death. This remembrance of death would have a strong effect on their actions and their attachment to this world. The Prophet (saw) advised them to remember death often -- the thing that brings an end to the pleasures of this world. They implemented this teaching of the Prophet (saw).

Thabit once said, "**Whenever we attended a funeral, we would be crying**". We can see from other reports of the same nature that they were not actually crying for the deceased. Instead, they were crying for themselves. They realized that they would also have to face that same day in which their deeds would come to an end. They would think to themselves: Are we prepared for that day when the two angels will come and question us? Are we prepared for that day when our deeds will come to an end and there will be no more opportunity to repent from our sins??

How often do we who claim to be following in their footsteps remember death. Do we every cry when thinking about that day in which our deeds will be sealed and the angels will come to question us? If we are truly following their way, we must remember death often and this remembrance should have a profound effect on us. This is all part of following the way of the Companions.

A third characteristic that we find about them is that they were very forgiving to those who did them wrong in any way. They implemented Allaah's description:

"[Those] who repress anger and who pardon men, verily Allaah loves the good-doers" (al-'Imraan, 134)

They would forgive people in hopes that Allaah would forgive them. Recompense comes in a form similar to the deed that is being recompensed. Hence, those who are forgiving to others for the sake of Allaah, Allaah willing, may look forward to Allaah treating them in the same way. How many of us today possess that characteristic?

On the other hand, how many of us hold a grudge forever and are never willing to forgive some wrong that may have been done to us many years ago?

Another important characteristic was the great respect that they had for the honour of other Muslims and how they always desired good for their brethren Muslim. The Prophet (saw) explicitly told them,

"Every Muslim is inviolable to another Muslim - his blood, his wealth and his honour"

Abu Bakr once said, "**Do not belittle any Muslim for the most insignificant Muslim is great in the eyes of Allaah**". 'Umar ibn al-Khattab declared that to save a life of a Muslim was more important to him than all of the lands of Iraaq. In fact, the Prophet (saw) said,

"The killing of a believer is greater in Allaah's sight than the perishing of this world." (an-Nasai, sahih, al-Albaani in Sahih al-Jaami' as-Sagheer, vol.2, p.804, hadith no. 4361)

That has happened to this beautiful characteristic of our Salaf. Do we treat each other with the respect and honour that they used to treat each other? Nowadays it is not uncommon to see Muslims cheating other Muslims. It is not uncommon to see Muslims breaking their promises to other Muslims. Indeed we can even see Muslims killing one another.

In fact, nowadays, it is not uncommon to see Muslims treat, honour and respect non-Muslims in a much better fashion than they treat their own brethren Muslims. As long as we behave in this manner, we cannot possibly claim to be following in the footsteps of our pious predecessors.

Another very important aspect of their lives was their continued performance of the late night prayers, known as the tahajjud prayers. We know the place of those prayers in the Qur'aan. For example, Allaah says:

"Verily, the pious will be in the midst of Gardens and Springs (in Paradise), taking joy in the things which their Lord has given them. Verily, there were before this doers of good. They used to sleep but little at night (invoking their Lord and praying) and in the hours before dawn, they were found asking (Allaah) for forgiveness" (al-Dhaariyat 15-18)

The Prophet (saw) also said about the late-night prayers

"Stick to the late-night prayers for it [their performance] was the custom of the pious people before you; it is also a means of getting closer to your Lord; it wipes away your evil deeds; and it keeps one from committing sins". (Ahmad, at-Tirmidhi, Al-Haakim and others, sahih, see Sahih al-Jaami' as-Sagheer, vol.2, p. 752, hadith no. 4079)

The performance of this prayer was something very dear to our pious predecessors. They would not be happy when they missed its performance. In addition, they understood the cause of their missing it. al-Hasan al-Basri said, "No one leaves the night prayer except due to a sin that he performed". On another occasion he said, "The late night prayer is only heavy upon a person who is weighed down by sins".

In our desire to be their true followers, we have to revive this sunnah and important practice. In this day and age we find many excuses not to perform this very important act. However, we must struggle and overcome those excuses and do our best to have this characteristic that was so common and so important to those whom we wish to emulate.

One thing that comes out very clearly in the different statements of the Muslims of the early generations is their attitude toward this world. They always put the Hereafter first. They preferred the deeds that would benefit them in the Hereafter over those deeds that would merely benefit them in this world. In fact, this world meant very little to them except as a means of attaining salvation in the Hereafter. Allaah makes it very clear in the Qur'aan that if someone desires this world, Allaah will give it to him. This is very easy for Allaah and the things of this world are not that important to Allaah, so He will even give its pleasure to the disbelievers. Allaah says in the Qur'aan:

"Whoever wishes for the quick-passing [transitory enjoyment of this world], We readily grant him what We will for whom We will. Then, afterwards we have

appointed for him Hell, he will burn therein disgraced and rejected [far from Allaah's Mercy]. And whoever desires the Hereafter and strives for it, with the necessary effort due it, while he is a believer, then such are the ones who striving shall be appreciated, thanked and rewarded [by Allaah]" (al-Israa 18-19)

A true believer should be "above" this world. His aspirations and goals are not of this world. He should not be spending all of his time just for the sake of this dunya. As I stated, this characteristic was very clear in those people whom Allaah has stated that He is pleased with.

One of those early pious souls, Malik ibn Dinar, once said, "Whoever proposes to this world, it will seek from him his entire religion as its dower and it will not be pleased with anything other than that".

There is no question that chasing after this world is one of the greatest trials that Muslims are afflicted with today. Many who have education or wealth are chasing after more and more wealth. Many of our youth do not know and understand anything except getting the latest clothing, best pair of sneakers and so forth. We have lost that proper balance in our lives between this life and the Hereafter. The proper balance is wherein the Hereafter comes first in our lives and this world is only a stepping stone to Allaah's Forgiveness in the Hereafter. That was the understanding of our Salaf and that is the understanding we must have if we are truly following in their footsteps.

Another aspect that we can see in some of their statements is that they realised that they had never given Allaah even the smallest amount of thanks. In fact, to them, the act of thanking Allaah was yet another blessing that Allaah had guided them to, such that Allaah was once again deserving of thanks for guiding them to thanking Him. The only result is to realise all of the great blessings that Allaah has given you and to realise that all of your praises of Allaah, thankfulness to Allaah, sacrifices for Allaah's sake are actually nothing compared to all that Allaah has so graciously done for you.

Another characteristic we find among them is that they were more concerned with their own shortcomings than with the shortcomings of others. It is reported that 'Umar once said, "May Allaah have mercy on the one who points out my shortcomings". In fact finding the faults of others will not be of much avail to you in the Hereafter. Instead, recognising your own faults and changing them, this will be of great benefit to you in both this life and the Hereafter. We should be very concerned with correcting our own faults. In fact, we should be happy when other people point out our shortcomings so that we may realise them and correct them. This was the way of our pious Forefathers and this must be our way too.

The Salaf would also remain away from sinful people and their gatherings. Indeed, as we find in the example of 'Abdullaah ibn Mas'ud, even if they were invited to a wedding feast, they would leave that feast if they found something forbidden therein. They would stay away from the people of sin and innovations. In this way, their hearts would remain pure and clean. They would not be infected or infiltrated by the doubts and desires of such evil people. By mixing only with good people and attending only settings in which the forbidden aspects are absent, they were able to increase their faith and keep their faith strong.

Nowadays, we find our situation many times to be quite different. We might take as friends not the pious but the people who commit many sins. We take them as friends for very inconsequential reasons, such as we like their sense of humour or they have the same nationality that we have and so forth. We fail to realise how much harm they may be causing our own religion. We fail to realise that by mixing with them and being in places in which Allaah's law is being transgressed, we are harming ourselves and we are clearly straying from the way and practice of those first generations whom the Prophet (saw) described as the best generations.

There is one final characteristic of our noble forefathers that I would like to mention. However, this is one of the most important of their characteristics. This is the attending the daily prayers in congregation in the masjid. During the time of the Prophet (saw) this was one of the signs that differentiated a true Muslim from a hypocrite. 'Abdullaah ibn Mas'ud once said, "Whoever wishes to meet Allaah tomorrow as a Muslim should guard the prayers whenever he is called to them. The Messenger of Allaah taught us the sunnah of guidance. Part of this sunnah is to perform the prayer in the masaajid in which the call to prayer is given. If you pray in your houses, like those people who stayed behind and prayed in their houses, you have left the sunnah of the Prophet (saw). If you leave the sunnah of your Prophet (saw), you'll be misguided... in our view, no one would no attend the prayers except for someone who was well known for his hypocrisy" (Muslim).

In our society here, it is sometimes difficult to make it to the prayers. However, we have to do our best. We have to sacrifice for the sake of the prayers. We have to arrange our time in such a way that we can make it to the prayers. If we do so, we will be actually following in the footsteps of the Companions of the Prophet (saw), who were from the best generation ever raised for mankind.

These are just some of the important characteristics of our pious forefathers. When we recognise that their path is the correct path - the path of the Saved Sect - we must realise that we are not simply talking about believing in some doctrines that we can rattle off with our tongues. Instead, we are talking about their deen - and deen encompasses every aspect of our lives. If we are truly their followers, this must be exhibited by our behaviour, our actions, our ethics, our worship and obviously, our beliefs. However, if we drop any of those aspects, then we are not truly following their path, no matter how much we may claim to with our tongues.