

Being An Example

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The Friday Prayer: III

Allaah says in the Qur'aan,

"Indeed in the Messenger of Allaah you have an excellent example to follow for him who hopes in (the meeting with) Allaah and the Last Day and remembers Allaah much" (al-Ahzab, 21)

This is a very great blessing for this ummah. Allaah has given us a perfect example of how to apply this religion. In every aspect of our lives, we have a human example to look to. We can see how he behaved under different circumstances and we can know with certainty that the way he behaved was in accordance with the revelation of Allaah.

This is just one of the many blessings that we Muslims have received. In the other religions, such as Christianity or Judaism, they do not have such a wonderful example. They do not possess a detailed and authentic record of how their prophets lived. Hence, when it comes to day to day matters in their lives, they have no authentic reference that they can turn to that will give them the satisfaction of knowing what God wants from them in each and every moment of their lives.

If we look at how humans behave around us, it is common or normal for people to look at others and to take them as their examples. Indeed, for the majority of the people, it seems that they are in need of an example. Perhaps such examples give them guidance, hope and confidence.

al-Hamdulillaah, Allaah has provided us with the best possible example. We Muslims do not have to look to the kinds of people that the non-Muslims are looking at as examples and sources of guidance. We don't have to look to movie actors, rock stars, athletes, or politicians as our sources of guidance. Believe it or not, this is who the disbelievers are looking at as their examples. This is why they always have such people give "public broadcasting announcements" about AIDS, drinking while drunk and so forth. These people are asked to give these announcements because they are the people that so many others look up to, admire and take as their role models. The saddest thing is when Muslims also start taking these people as their role models. Allaah has blessed us with the most excellent role model and yet we turn to people like this.

We must turn to the Messenger of Allaah (saw) as our role model. However, not everyone has access or the time to study the life of the Prophet Muhammad (saw). Furthermore, the time that he lived was many years ago and somethings have changed since that time - some people cannot see that although things have seemed to change, in reality, they have not fundamentally changed since the time of the Prophet (saw).

For these and other reasons, even devout Muslims look to other people as, you could say, "supplementary" role models or examples. People who are closer to their own situation and environment. Many of us need to see examples and role models in front of us today who are reacting to the things that are going on now. All Muslims probably realise that the Prophet (saw) is the best example but sometimes it is simply hard for them to figure out exactly how that example fits into their life today when they are, for example, living in a non-Muslim environment where haram things are all around them. How does one cope in such an environment? What does one do when faced with specific situations in this environment?

In these cases, who should we take as examples and role models? The answer is those people who are taking their example from the Prophet (saw) and through their knowledge and understanding of the Prophet (saw) are applying his teachings to today's situation. That is, in essence, those people of knowledge and taqwaa. They are the heirs of the Prophet (saw) as he stated in the hadith,

"The scholars are the heirs of the Prophets" (Ahmad, at-Tirmidhi, and others, according to al-Albaani, it is sahih, Sahih al-Jami as-Sagheer, no.6297)

They have the knowledge to understand the Qur'aan and the Sunnah and see its guidance for today. And they have the taqwaa to apply that knowledge today. Knowledge without taqwaa is not sufficient, and taqwaa without knowledge is also not sufficient.

That is who we should be taking as examples for our own lives. But there is another very important aspect to this topic that I would like to stress. That is, whether you like it or not, whether you even realise it or not, virtually every single one of you is an example and a role model for somebody else. Again, you may not realise that fact but it is the case. The Messenger of Allaah (saw) was an example for the entire ummah, and this role has passed on to us with respect to certain individuals. Some reflection will make you realise that this is exactly the case.

Many of you have younger brothers or sisters. It is very common for younger brothers and sisters to look up to their older siblings. Many times their older siblings are much closer to them than their parents, with respect to age, lifestyle, environment, problems, concerns and so forth. Therefore, they may not look to their parents in issues that concern drugs, alcohol, sex, dating and so forth. There may be a generation gap and they feel that their parents are out of touch with what is going on now. Perhaps even more dangerous, there may be a cultural gap - wherein immigrant parents have children who grew up in this country and children are definitely Americans while the parents are still somewhat Pakistani, or Arab or Malaysian or whatever the case might be.

So they look up to their older brother or sister. They look to see how their older siblings are coping with their own problems. They take their example because of the love and mutual trust that usually exists among such siblings. What kind of example do you set for younger siblings? Are they memorising the Qur'aan because they have seen you memorising the Qur'aan and you have influenced them or encouraged them to memorise the Qur'aan? Or are they spending all of their time playing basketball and chasing after members of the opposite sex because that is the example you set for them?

One of the greatest influences on others is the set of friends that a person has. In fact, the

Prophet (saw) said,

"The person follows the way of his dear friend". (Abu Dawud, at-Tirmidhi, al-Albaani calls it sahih, See Sahih al-Jami as-Sagheer, no. 3545)

People always want to impress their friends and fit in with the group that they hang around with. Just think about when you were growing up, didn't you do many things just because your friends were doing them? If it was a fashion they were following, you wanted to follow the same fashion. If it was something dangerous or harmful, such as taking drugs or alcohol, it was your friends' examples that gave you the courage to try or do the same thing. What kind of example do you set for your friends?

Many of you are also parents. Listening to one's parents is something greatly stressed in Islaam. The Prophet (saw) called disobeying parents one of the greatest sins one could commit.

Parents usually have a great deal of influence over their behaviour. There used to be an anti-smoking commercial in this country in which a father sits down and starts smoking and his small son sits next to him and picks up the cigarette package. Then the ad stated, "Like father, like son". This is very true. One time I was visiting a Muslim family and they had a small child. The small child kept looking at my beard and finally said, "You should remove that beard. See, my father does not have a beard".

It is very natural for children to have an extreme love for their parents. Love is one of the greatest factors in following a role model. One loves them and therefore, wants to be like them. In fact, sometimes children take their parents as the standard by which they judge all other peoples and actions. Even to the point that if they are told something from the Qur'aan or Sunnah, they reply, "But my parents don't do that and I believe that my parents are very good Muslims and therefore..."

There is a very important aspect concerning any role model but I want to mention it explicitly here while talking about parents as their children's role models. You have to remember that, as the cliché goes, "Actions speak louder than words". Many parents are very sincere and well-intended with respect to their children. They tell their children that they have to be Muslim and apply the laws of Islaam. They teach this to their children over and over. However, at the same time, their actions display something else. They are telling their children one thing and they are behaving in a different manner. Many times it is your actions that have a much greater effect on your children than the "theoretical teachings" that you are giving them. If you tell your children that they have to pray and you yourself do not pray, they may be more affected by your example than what you are telling them.

You have an obligation to protect your children from the Hellfire. Part of that protection is to teach and guide them properly. However, always remember, the example you set for them may have the greatest influence over them. If it is a good example, praise and thank Allaah. If it is an evil example, seek refuge in Allaah, repent and mend your ways.

Husbands and wives also can be very influential examples for one another. It is not a coincidence that many times you find couples having some of the same characteristics or tendencies. You can find many cases where both spouses are dedicated to Islaam or where both spouses are simply "marginal Muslims". You can even see how many a man or woman changes after marriage because of the influence of the spouse.

Anyone who is in a position of authority may be taken as a role model by others. If you are teacher, for example, your students will be looking up to you and may admire you. They may wish to be like you and will look at you as their role model

Those of you who come from overseas to study here may be in a very special situation. You may be from a country where the majority of the people are illiterate or where it is considered a great thing to go and study in the West. When you return to your country, your friends, colleagues and even people you hardly know may be looking up to you and respecting you. They may greatly admire this man who got his degree from the United States of America! What kind of example are you going to set for them? Are you going to show them, by your deeds and your statements, "Look, I studied in the United States and I saw what it had to offer and it only increased my conviction in Islaam and my realisation that I have to serve Allaah alone". Or are you going to show them, by your deeds and your statements, "Look, I am a very educated person - educated in the West - and I know that it is not necessary to take religion that seriously and it is basically for the ignorant and backwards folk". Allaah has given you the chance to be a very influential example and role model for your people back home. Make sure that you do not set the wrong example for them as that can be very disastrous for both you and the poor Muslims who take you as their role model.

Those people who are committee members of Islaamic Centres or Mosques also must consider their position as examples for other people. What kind of effect do you think it has when the President, Vice-President or any committee member of a mosque does not even attend the mosque? If the leaders of the mosque do not even care about attending the mosque, why should the others care about attending or looking after the affairs of the mosque? What kind of message is the President sending to others when the only time they see him in the mosque is on Friday, Eid and when there is a board meeting? This is a disease that has afflicted many of our communities and many people have come to me to personally complain about the example that these people are setting. I have actually heard Muslims - especially the youth - say, "Why should I attend the mosque when the leaders of the mosque itself do not even attend it?"

Any time we are put into positions of authority, we must consider that a great trust from Allaah. We must think about our behaviour and that effect it is having on others. We must do our best to set the right example for others as we never know who and how many people may be looking up to us and following our example.

Living here in this society, in particular, you are also an example - again, whether you realise it or not - for the non Muslims. In fact, you may be the only example of a Muslim that they may see. What kind of example are you setting for them? Are you setting an example that will lead them to want to know more about Islaam and perhaps eventually become Muslim? Or are you setting an example for them that makes them believe that a Muslim is no different from anyone else today and there is nothing special about Islaam, it is a weak or useless religion like all other religions today? Are you setting an example for them that makes them abhor Islaam by your un-Islaamic behaviour? Are you someone who is bringing people closer to Allaah or taking people further away from Allaah? The answer to that question may have a lot to do with the kind of example that you are setting for the non-Muslims who witness your behaviour.

As already being Muslims, you must realise that many newly converted Muslims may also take you as an example. When a person first becomes Muslim, he sees much variation in the practice of Islaam among their application of the teachings of Islaam. He will also see Muslims who practice to some extent but not to a great extent. And he will also see Muslim who virtually do not practice anything at all. He is a new Muslim. He does not have all the knowledge he needs to know which of these different groups is actually applying Islaam

correctly. Which one of these different groups is he going to befriend and take as an example in Islaam? Suppose he takes you as his friend and he is looking to you to show him how he is supposed to behave as a Muslim. The example that you set for him may have a great deal of influence over how much he actually applies Islaam. Again, beware! Beware of that example you are setting for others even when you may not realise that you are setting an example for others!

There is one last group of people who are also role models that I would like to talk about. This last group, in fact, can have the greatest positive effect as a role model or it can have the greatest negative effect. These are those people who are known to be knowledgeable about Islaam. This group includes those who truly have knowledge and other Muslims recognise this fact. And this group also includes those who probably don't have much knowledge but they claim to have a great deal of knowledge and some people might be fooled or misled by them.

One of the worst things that happens in some communities is that those people who are considered the people of knowledge set bad examples for the others in the community. They do not attend the mosque on a regular basis. Their public appearance is not one that reflects true Islaamic knowledge - for example, a man with his beard shaved off or a woman who does not wear hijab. They engage in things that are well-known not to be proper in Islaam.

What is the effect of people of this nature? People will look at them and say, "Look this is a person of knowledge and he doesn't do this and that", or, "and he does this and that". They will conclude that there must not be anything wrong with those deeds as otherwise such a knowledgeable person would not be doing those things. Let us take the simple example of shaving the beard. A Muslim may look at a so-called learned Muslim and see that he has shaved his beard. Then he may say to himself, "I don't have his level of knowledge and those who tell me that I have to grow a beard also do not have his level of knowledge. Therefore it must not really be necessary for me to grow a beard".

Satan may use that bad example as a source of excuses for others. Even if they feel that something is wrong, they will say to themselves, "Ah, but so and so does it so it couldn't really be that bad", and therefore they do it.

At this point, someone might argue that he is not responsible for the example that others get from him. He is only responsible for his deeds and everybody else is responsible for their own deeds. In fact, Allaah says clearly in the Qur'aan in more than one place,

"No bearer of burdens shall bear the burden of another" (al-Anaam, 164)

However, that verse does not mean that you are not responsible for the kind of influence you assert over others. The effect you have over others is, in fact, the result of your own deeds and part of the burden that you must bear. This is made clear in a number of hadith of the Prophet (saw). For example, he said,

"No one is killed unjustly but a share of his blood will be upon the first son of Adam for he was the first to introduce killing" (al-Bukhaari, Muslim)

Obviously, that son of Adam did not teach or encourage the later murderers to commit

murder. But he set the example for them and, therefore, he shares in the sin of all of those who commit murder after him.

Another hadith states, "Whoever introduces some good practice in Islaam which was followed after him (by people) would be assured of reward like the one who followed it without the reward of either fo them being diminished in anyway. And he who introduced some evil practice in Islaam which was followed by others would bear the burden like that of the one who followed this (evil practice), without the burden of either of them being diminished in any way". (Muslim).

This particular hadith shows us the positive result of setting a good example and the negative result of setting a bad example. The story behind the hadith, which was concerned with giving charity, was wherein one Muslim set a good example for the others and the others followed suit. It was not that he had introduced something new into Islaam as some people may mistakenly conclude from that hadith.

Therefore, the effect that you have on others and the examples that you set for others can very well be considered part of your deeds and part of what you earned. If it is a good example, you may receive great rewards for all of those people whom you influenced in a positive manner. If it is an evil example, you may be responsible for all of those people who followed your evil example.

Keep in mind, also, that you may not consider yourself an example or role model for anyone. In reality, as I tried to stress in this khutbah, whether you realise it or not and whether you like it or not, there is a great chance that you are a role model or example for some people around you. Think about your life and think about how you are influencing other people.

Look at the people close to you and see how they are behaving. Try to see if the mistakes they are making are the same mistakes that you make and that they, in fact, got them from you. Look to see if the good things they are doing are the same as the good things that you do and see if they actually got them from you.

Take the time to study this and take the time to think about it. The possibility of setting a good example is a wonderful opportunity to please Allaah. It is an opportunity to follow the Prophet (saw) - the Prophet (saw) set an excellent example and we are supposed to follow his example by also setting an excellent example ourselves.