



COMMUNITY SERVICE

SOCIAL ISLAM

LEVEL 4

Objectives >>>

Students should:

- Know the meaning of community service and the main categories of this
- Know the importance of meeting the needs of the believers
- Understand the importance of social obligations in comparison to ritual obligations
- Know the concept of Zakāt of one's position, talent, ability and time
- Know the main conditions of helping believers
- Outline the benefits of community service to our personal lives

Lesson 1: Benefits of Community Service

Community service is defined as any activity done for the benefit of the community as a whole or an individual. It can be as simple as picking up some rubbish or helping an old person with their shopping bags to serving the community as a public servant.

Allah (SWT) has given us many blessings and talents and He expects that we will use our blessings to help those who are not that fortunate. If we were to just imagine that every Muslim who had any talent in anything, donated some of his or her talent to Islam, today Muslims would have been the most advanced and powerful people in the world!

Islam has emphasised this aspect of the social lives of Muslims with the Almighty (SWT) placing tremendous reward and benefit for participating, supporting and promoting serving our fellow human beings.

Indeed our Imams (as) have informed us that:

“The most beloved of the slaves of Allah is the one who serves the slaves of God the most.”

In this and the next lesson we shall discuss the meaning of community service in Islam and how we can fulfil this obligation.

WHY MEET THE NEEDS OF OUR FELLOW MUSLIMS?

Although as Muslims we are required to serve humanity and all creatures of Allah (SWT), the obligation to help our fellow Muslims is even greater. Here we will discuss some of the benefits of helping others, especially Muslims, to our own lives.

IT IS A SOURCE OF HAPPINESS

To help another person out or to serve the community has immense rewards in the hereafter as we shall discuss but its most apparent reward in this world is that of making us happier and more fulfilled. Many studies over the years in psychology have shown thatⁱ:

- Giving and even just thinking about giving in a spirit of generosity are linked to health and well-being.
- People who think too much about themselves and their own desires – or their own troubles – are not very happy.
- Helping is also a form of self-help when the giver has experienced the same problems as those receiving.
- Volunteerism has positive impacts on happiness, mood, self-esteem, physical and mental health.
- Giving can be a lifelong benefit for those who start young.
- Altruism is associated with a substantial reduction in mortality rates and is linked to longevity.

IT IS A SOURCE OF BLESSING

The spiritual benefit of helping others is also immense as it not only increases our rizq in this world it has tremendous benefits in the hereafter. One of the companions of Imam al-Ṣādiq (as) was accompanying the Imam during Ḥajj, and the Imam was explaining to this man the rewards of each of the acts of Ḥajj. The companion was amazed by this and wondered at the great rewards of each action.

The Imam then asked:

“Do you want me to teach you something that brings greater rewards?” The companion said: “is there such an act?” The Imam (as) said: “yes, fulfilling the need of a believer is better than a Ḥajj, and a Ḥajj and a Ḥajj...” until he counted ten Ḥajj pilgrimages.

IT IS A FORM OF WORSHIP

Imam al-Ṣādiq (as) once said:

“By Allah, Allah has not been worshipped by anything better than fulfilling the rights of a believer. Surely, the believer has a greater right than the Ka’bah”ⁱⁱ

This narration clearly shows that one of the best ways of worshipping Allah (SWT) is by serving His creatures and fulfilling the rights we have over our brothers. The important point to remember here is that, because it is worshipping, helping others should only be done purely for the sake of Almighty (SWT) not to gain fame, to be liked or to become popular.

As we have learnt before, this form of worshipping has far more reward than even the Ḥajj or any other form of ritual prayers!

“Whoever helps his Muslim brother in a need that he has, it is as if he worshipped Allah for nine thousand years, in which he stood on his feet during the night and fasted during the day”.

IT HAS GREAT REWARDS!

One ḥadith by Imam al-Sajjād (as) captures the rewards of helping others, Imam (as) says:

“The one who meets the need of a believer has begun by meeting the need of God and because of it God will meet one hundred of his needs. One of these needs is paradise. The one who relieves the sorrow of someone else, God will relieve the sorrow of the Hereafter from him. If one visits an ill person, the angels will surround him and pray for him until he leaves. The angels say: ‘may Paradise be for you purely’. By Allah, meeting the need of a believer is more dear to Allah than fasting two consecutive months while performing I’tikāf in Masjidul ḥarām”

SOCIAL AND RITUAL OBLIGATIONS

We often judge religiousness by ritualistic things like prayer, Ḥajj and fasting. However, often these things are not so difficult and the only barrier between us and prayer, for example, is laziness. However, when it comes to social obligations, these can often be extremely difficult to practice and it can hurt so much to put these Islamic obligations into practice in our family life. Similarly, when a person comes to us in need, another

sign of true faith is to help that person in the way that we can. This is a major obligation in Islam.

A man came to Imam al-Bāqir (as) and said:

“Thanks to God, I come from a village where most people are Shii.” The Imam (as) asked: “(In your village), do the rich show mercy upon the poor? Do the good people forgive those who have wronged them? Do they share their wealth with one another?” The man replied: “we are not like this”. The Imam (as) said: “these are not our Shi’ah”

This narration emphasises how we should be so diligent in meeting our brothers’ needs. In fact, the Imams tell us:

“You are not really brothers until you can put your hands into the pocket of your brother and take money when you need it, and then put the money back when you no longer need it.”

Class Activity

Explore the different community service projects in your immediate and wider community. Which one inspires you? Use this discussion to involve yourself in one of these projectsⁱⁱⁱ

Review Questions

Q1. Is helping my parents with housework community service?

- Yes- as you are assisting your parents
- No- community service is only for helping people outside the family
- No- my family is not a community

Q2. The least form of helping others is:

- Praying for them
- Smiling at them
- Giving them money

Q3. One of the worldly benefits of helping others is:

- We are often poor and sad
- We live longer and are happy
- We have few friends

Lesson 2: ZAKĀT OF BLESSINGS

As Muslims, one of the obligations we have is that of Zakāt (or Ṣadaqah). This Zakāt does not only mean giving money! It means giving out of whatever blessing we have received from Allah (SWT). If we have blessing of time, talent or money, we have to spend a part of them for the sake for Allah (SWT). As we have seen in the previous lessons, the way we can use our talents, money and time is to help our fellow Muslims!

The Imam quotes from the Prophet (saw):

“Charity is obligatory upon every Muslim every day” When the Prophet (saw) said this, he was asked: ‘who can afford to pay charity every day?’ He (saw) said: “Removing harm from the path of believers is charity.”

This narration indicates that Zakāt applies to each and every blessing given to a person. Zakāt applies to blessings such as health, strength, knowledge, time and talent.

ZAKĀT OF OUR POSITION

One form of zakāt is that of our position. When we become leaders in our school, at work or in any situation in our life, we are obliged to help everyone we can due to our influence.

Let us consider an example of this from the lives of our Imams (as). ‘Ali ibn Yaqtīn was a sincere Shi’ī who was close to Imam al-Kāḍim (as). ‘Ali’s father was a minister to the Abbasid Caliphs, and when his father died, ‘Ali himself was offered the position of minister. This was a very powerful and influential position. However, ‘Ali had heard that something as minor as sharpening a pencil for a tyrant is a sin, and so he went to Imam al-Kāḍim (as) to ask for advice about taking this position.

The Imam (as) said that because this position would allow ‘Ali to help the believers and make things easier for them, he should take it. However, the condition was that he must make sure to meet the needs of people:

“Don’t resign, for we are more comfortable with you, and your brothers will gain some dignity through you. I hope that Allah will heal some wounds through you, or will stop the fire of the enemies through you. O ‘Ali, whoever makes a believer happy, has begun with God, and then pleased the Prophet, and then pleased us.”

'Ali took the position. However, one day, a Shi'ī Kufan man travelled all the way to Baghdad to speak to 'Ali ibn Yaqtīn and ask for a need. However, 'Ali had guards at his door that turned away this poor man. This man came back to Kufah broken-hearted.

Later on, 'Ali went to Ḥajj and while there he went to visit Imam al-Kaḍim (as). The Imam asked his servant to refuse entry to 'Ali and to turn him away. 'Ali was extremely upset by this. He found the Imam later and asked the reason for this treatment. The Imam (as) told him it was because he had turned people away from his door and not used his position to benefit them, and so the Imam (as) had treated him the same. The Imam (as) told him that even his Ḥajj would not be accepted if that Kufan man would not forgive him.

'Ali was extremely sorry and asked the Imam (as) how he could make up for what he did. The Imam (as), in a miraculous manner, gave 'Ali the opportunity to travel to Kufah the same night. 'Ali went to the house of Ibrahīm (the man whom he had turned away) and sought forgiveness. The man was still upset and was not willing to forgive him so easily. Initially, Ibrahīm said: 'may God forgive you'. However, 'Ali insisted that he wanted the forgiveness of the man himself also, because the Imam had made this a condition. However, 'Ali persisted and humbled himself in front of this man, even asking him to place his feet on his cheeks, until the man forgave him, and they hugged one another and cried.

OUR OBLIGATIONS TO OTHER BELIEVERS

When it comes to the community of Islam, the obligation of meeting the needs of others becomes even greater. Imam 'Ali (as) says:

“a believer has thirty rights over another believer, and that these rights are only met if one fulfils them or is excused from them.”

In a narration that meets the strict criteria of authenticity, and by which the scholars can issue an edict, Imam al-Ṣādiq (as) is asked by al-Mu'alla ibn Khunays about the right of believers over one another. Imam al-Ṣādiq (as) says: (phrases in brackets are not parts of the narration)

“There are seven obligatory rights, and if one does not meet them he will lose exit from the obedience and service of the Lord’. The companion asks: ‘May I be made your sacrifice, what are they?’ The Imam (as) says: ‘I fear for you in case you do not meet them, and that you may learn them but not practice them’. The companion replied: ‘there is no strength except by Allah’.

The Imam then replied:

- » The easiest of these rights is that you love for your brother what you love for yourself and hate for him what you hate for yourself (if we apply this, would we ever cheat anyone? We don't like to be cheated, and thus we would never cheat anyone)
- » Don't make him angry, keep him pleased, and try to follow his wishes
- » Help your brother with your self, your wealth, your tongue, your arms and your legs (social service is so important and is a major part of religious teaching and we should try our best to perform community service.)
- » Be his eyes, his guide and his mirror (if he makes a mistake, gently correct him)
- » Don't satisfy your self with drink and food while your brother is hungry and thirsty, and don't be fully clothed when he is bare (we should not be stuffing ourselves and gaining weight whilst others are poor and starving. We live in the age of information where we don't have the excuse of not knowing about the poor. We know about them and thus we have an obligation to meet their needs as much as we can)”
- » Be to his servant, and if he does not have a servant, send your servant to him to help him.
- » To confirm his oath, accept his invitation, be present at his funeral, visit him when he is ill, and tire your body in meeting his needs, and do not make him ask you his need but you take initiative in meeting his needs”^{iv}

ETTIQUETES OF COMMUNITY SERVICE

In order to reap the benefits of helping others, we have to follow some very simple rules:

- 1- **We must help purely and only for the Sake of Allah (SWT):** not for the sake of fame, or praise or appreciation. If we feel bad or disappointed for having done something and then not being appreciated, it means we did not do that action purely for Allah (SWT).
- 2- **Do it quickly:** we should not delay helping out for it is more pleasurable for the receiver.
- 3- **Make it seem small:** We should try to make the thing we do to seem small as only then will it be big. Do not lord our favour over the person. Rather, act as if it was nothing.
- 4- **Do it secretly:** When we help others, we have to ensure that they and others do not see it. It has to be done very smartly and quietly so as not to show off or embarrass the recipient.

Review Questions

Q1. Which of the following is a type of zakāt:

- a. Using my computer skills to hack into and spy into my teachers computer to help my fellow students get the answers to the exam
- b. Using my computer skills to help design a site that people can use to learn about Islam
- c. Helping with fundraising in the mosque so I can sit at the front stall and everyone can see how generous I am

Q2. If we want the reward of helping others:

- a. We must try to do it so that they never find out that we helped them
- b. We should put it on facebook that we helped them
- c. We should be careful to make sure that we help them the way we think is right

Q3. Which of the following is an obligation we have on our brother?

- a. Correct him when he makes a mistake in front of others so that others learn not to make the same mistake
- b. Get him a bike when you know he needed one but never asked you for one
- c. Eat your lunch in his presence when you know he is thirsty and hungry

ⁱ Post, S. (2011), It's good to be good: 2011 fifth annual scientific report on health, happiness and helping others. International Journal of Person centred Medicine, Vol.1, No.4- 808-813 (Great read for teachers available <http://www.ijpcm.org/index.php/IJPCM/article/view/154>)

ⁱⁱ Biharul Anwar, 74/222

ⁱⁱⁱ Teachers should have a list of activities students can do to fulfil this obligation. This could be things like helping clean up the Islamic centre, visiting the elderly and sick, collecting money for charity etc.

^{iv} Al-Kafi, v.2, p.169 & 174