



Backbiting

SOCIAL ISLAM

LEVEL 5

الغيبة

Objectives >>>

Students should:

- Be reminded of what it means to backbite/gossip and be able to distinguish it from slander
- Understand the motivations for backbiting and slander and how to avoid them
- Know the social and emotional effects of backbiting and slander
- Understand that backbiting is forbidden in Islam
- Understand the exceptions to the rules about backbiting
- Know how to seek forgiveness for backbiting

Backbiting

We have learnt in the past that backbiting (Ghībah) is regarded as a major sin in Islam, and that the reality of backbiting which will be shown to us in the hereafter is illustrated by the following āyah:

“...nor let some of you backbite others. Does one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother?...”

Holy Qur'an 49:12

Revealing a bad quality of a believer which is in reality found to be true is called Ghībah (backbiting). However, accusing someone of something in their absence which is untrue is called Tohmah (slander). In English, we often describe these both with the term 'gossip'.

These evil acts can be performed in a number of ways:

1. In our face to face conversations or gatherings.
2. Over the phone when speaking to others.
3. Through online communications such as chatting (iMessage, Whatsapp, Viber etc.) or sharing posts (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc.). Insulting others publicly or highlighting their sins and mistakes whether true or not come under this category.
4. Listening to someone else backbiting without taking actions to stop or discourage is also not permitted.

The Holy Prophet (saw) has said:

“The one who listens to Ghībah is one of those who perform Ghībah”ⁱ

WHAT ARE THE MOTIVATIONS?

There are various reasons as to why one might backbite or slander others. We must understand these motivations and identify them if they exist within ourselves and then remove them. Backbiting is mainly due to the evil traits of jealousy, pride and hatred, and might occur because one wants to:

- Damage other people’s reputation in order to make themselves look better.
- Gain revenge on a person that they have a grudge or grievance against.
- Entertain those around them by mocking someone who is absent.
- Pass the time by having something to talk about.

EFFECTS OF BACKBITING

The following two quotes from Prophet Muḥammad (saw) exemplify the effect of backbiting on a believer:

“Allah will not keep a person who reveals the fault of a Mu’min, along with him in Paradise, and if he accuses him of faults the Mu’min does not have, the pure relationship of their faith will be destroyed and the back biter will forever dwell in Hell, which is a dreadful place.”ⁱⁱ

“Ghība affects the religion of a person faster than leprosy spreads in human body.”ⁱⁱⁱ

As stated in these narrations, backbiting destroys the faith of a believer and cuts the beautiful relationship that they have with Allah (SWT).

There is also a deep and disturbing social effect of backbiting. Backbiting destroys trust within a community and takes away the reputation of members. It creates enmity and division in friendships, partnerships and even families and marriages. One of the traits of Allah (SWT) is that he is The Concealer and we must aspire to be like Him and cover up the faults of others rather than revealing them. It is by concealing the shortcomings of others that we can give them a chance to grow and protect their dignity.

Imam al-Ṣādiq (as) says,

“Ghība is exposing that aspect of your brother which Allah had concealed.”^{iv}

FORBIDDEN IN ISLAM

In the Holy Quran, Allah (SWT) says:

“Wayl (Hell) is for every Slanderer, defamer,”
Holy Quran 104: 1

From all that we have learnt so far, it is clear that backbiting and slandering are both among the major sins and severe punishments have been promised for them. This is because they spoil the character and name of people and cause others to think badly about them, all this while they are not even given the chance to be there to defend themselves.



Backbiting & slander are therefore regarded as betrayal and must be removed from our communities if we are to be able to trust each other and unite with one another. The first step of this process is that we take action ourselves, and block those around us from this evil by:

1. Telling them that we do not want to listen to this
2. Leaving that gathering or conversation, unless we really cannot
3. Defending the person who is being criticised

SLANDER

As we have learnt, slander is accusing others in their absence of what is not true, and circulating myths about them. Allah (SWT) in Surat al-Nūr describes the punishment of those who perform this act:

“Surely those who love that slander should be spread concerning those who believe, theirs will be a painful punishment in the world and the Hereafter. Allah knows, and you know not.”
Holy Quran 24:19

This surah goes on to warn that the punishment for slander is especially severe if a person accuses another of immoral sexual acts, because such accusations are especially hurtful and damaging.

WHEN IS BACKBITING PERMITTED?

There are some circumstances when mentioning a person's sin in their absence is not considered Ghībah:

- When a person sins openly and his sins are known to all, such as if a person roams the streets with a bottle of wine on his lips.

“One who sins openly is not worthy of respect and his Ghībah is not Ḥarām”^v

- When an oppressed person complains about the oppressor and mentions his acts of injustice, it is not Ghībah
- When one discusses the defects of a patient with their doctor in order to help treat the patient.
- When a person enquires about another person whom they are interested to marry, one should let the person making the enquiry know of any necessary issues that may affect the future marriage.
- ^{vi}When a person narrates false narrations and gives false testimonies or brings new innovations into religion. Ghībah of such a person is allowed to ensure that people are not misled by his falsehood.

SEEKING FORGIVENESS

In order to repent from this sin, we must:

1. Regret the act.

2. Seek forgiveness from Allah (SWT).
3. Have the intention of never repeating the act.
4. If the person has heard of what we have said about them, we must seek their forgiveness and try to repair their reputation. However, if he has not, there is no need to ask forgiveness from them directly, but we must make sure we seek Allah’s forgiveness and try to stop the things we said from spreading.
5. We must make up for the ill which we have said by speaking well about the person to others.

Review Questions

Q1. Ghībah means to:

- a. Tell a lie about someone behind their back
- b. Tell a good thing about someone behind their back.
- c. Tell a true defect or sin of someone behind their back.

Q2. Slander is defined as:

- a. Falsely accusing someone of something in their absence.
- b. Accusing someone of something which is true in their absence.
- c. Speaking well of someone in their absence.

Q3. Which of the following should one NOT do when seeking forgiveness for backbiting?

- a. Regret the act and never intend to do it again.
- b. Try to restore the person’s reputation by speaking well about them in their absence and retracting their ill words.
- c. Repeat the backbiting after 40 days.

ⁱ Makasibul Muharima

ⁱⁱ Makasibul Muharima

ⁱⁱⁱ al-Kāfi Vol. 2 page 357

^{iv} Makasib, al-Kāfi Vol. 2 page 358

^v Makasib Muharima page 27, Vol. 4

Further References:

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