



Neighbours and Guests

الاحسان بالجار

Students should understand:

- The importance of goodness to neighbours
- The ways of being good to neighbours, most importantly not harming them
- That Islam encourages us to have guests and to be good hosts

SOCIAL ISLAM

LEVEL 5

Neighbours and Guests

Islam encourages us to have guests and to socialise with other believers and Muslims by inviting them to our homes. In fact, there are great rewards for hosting and visiting other believers. Islam also emphasises the importance of being good to our neighbours. We will quickly review what we have learnt about neighbours in the past, and then discuss issues related to hosting and guests.

OUR DUTIES TOWARDS OUR NEIGHBOURS

We have certain obligations in relation our neighbours whether they are Muslims or not. If we are not careful of our duties toward them, we will be sinful.

REFRAINING FROM HARMING THEM

The least we are expected to be careful of is to avoid anything that may cause harm to our neighbours. Things like making noise, or throwing rubbish near their house, or parking our cars in a way that blocks their driveways are all considered major sins.

In fact, the Prophet (saw) asked Imam 'Ali (as) to go to the mosque and to repeat the following three times:

“A person whose neighbour does not feel safe from his harm has no faith”¹

DOING GOOD TOWARD THEM

In addition to avoiding harming our neighbours, we should always perform acts of kindness toward them.

IMPORTANCE OF HOSTING AND VISITING

Imam 'Ali (as) used to say that if he was deprived of guests, then he was deprived of God's mercy. He did not like it when he had had no guests for one week. The Prophet (saw) used to say:

“a house that guests do not enter, the angels do not enter”

Islam also encourages us to accept others' invitations. In fact, we should accept invitations unless we have a good Islamic reason for not accepting them: Imam al-Ṣādiq (as) says:

“One of the rights of a believer over another is to accept his invitation”

In fact, the Prophet (saw) says that one should accept an invitation within 10 kilometres of his own home.

Another issue mentioned in Islamic narrations is that the guest is the one who is doing the host a greater favour. One of the companions of Imam al-Ṣādiq (as) was telling the Imam (as) that he always made sure he would have guests for each of his meals. The Imam (as) told him that their favour on him was greater than his favour on them. The man was surprised, saying that it is the host who feeds and serves the guests, so why should they have a greater favour on him? The Imam (as) answered:

“When they enter into the house, they come with great blessings and provision from Allah the Exalted, and when they leave, they leave with forgiveness from Allah for you.”

MODERATION

Although there are great rewards in hosting and visiting other believers, however, this should be done in moderation. The first important point to note is that we should not forego other important tasks simply to have gatherings. In addition to this, it is important to note the following etiquettes in order to maintain moderation.

THE HOSTS

- One should not be overly formal. The worst friend is the one with whom one is overly formal.
- Although it is good to be generous to guests, one should not over-extend themselves and their family

when preparing for the guest (e.g. should not borrow/overspend etc...)

- One should not adversely affect one's family (e.g. making wife cook many meals every day or making one's family go hungry for the sake of guests)

Imam 'Ali (as) was asked by a person: “if I invite you to my house, will you accept my invitation?” The Imam (as) said he would accept the invitation on three conditions: “Do not bring anything from outside the house (because people used to keep their supplies for a year in their house, so the Imam means do not overspend or go out of your way too much), do not give me the share of your family, and do not trouble your family”

- One should not allow their guests to do any work while they are guests. Imam al-Ṣādiq (as) would not even allow his guest to help him light a fire saying:

“we are not a family that puts their guests to work.”

- In another example, Imam 'Ali (as) would even bring the jug to the guest to wash his hand. He would get his son Imam al-Ḥasan (as) to do the same for the guest's son, so that the level of honour for the man and his son is appropriate. This also shows that one should serve guests appropriately (e.g. men serving men, women serving women etc...)

BE SELECTIVE

Islam encourages us to be selective about whom we invite to our homes, and whose invitations we accept.

The best gatherings for both the host and the guest are those that are undertaken for the sake of God.

- One should be careful not to invite guests who will commit sins.
- One should be careful not to hold gatherings where time is wasted and nothing beneficial is achieved.
- One should also avoid guests who are used to an extravagant lifestyle and who will not appreciate what is served to them and waste it. Imam 'Ali (as) censured his representative in Basra for accepting an invitation for a very lavish banquet where no poor people were in attendance.

- Finally, one should avoid inviting guests for purposes like business and improving one's social standing. This is not considered part of hospitality.

THE GUESTS

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَدْخُلُوا بُيُوتَ النَّبِيِّ إِلَّا أَنْ

يُؤْذَنَ لَكُمْ إِلَى طَعَامٍ غَيْرٍ نَاظِرِينَ إِنَاهُ

وَلَكِنْ إِذَا دُعِيتُمْ فَادْخُلُوا فَإِذَا طَعِمْتُمْ فَانْتَشِرُوا وَلَا

مُسْتَأْنَسِينَ لِحَدِيثٍ إِنَّ ذَلِكُمْ كَانَ يُؤْذِي النَّبِيَّ فَيَسْتَحْيِي

مِنْكُمْ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَسْتَحْيِي مِنَ الْحَقِّ

“O you who believe! Enter not the Prophet's houses, except when leave is given to you for a meal, (and then) not (so early as) to wait for its preparation. But when you are invited, enter, and when you have taken your meal, disperse, without sitting for a talk. Verily, such (behaviour) annoys the Prophet, and he is shy of (asking) you (to go), but Allāh is not shy of (telling you) the truth. (33:53)

- The Prophet had invited some of his companions to his house for dinner. While most of them left shortly after eating, some remained in the house of the Prophet for a very long time, engaged in long

discussions and conversations. They inconvenienced the Prophet and his family very much. However, the Prophet (saw) was too shy to tell them to leave. Therefore, the above āyāt were revealed, instructing the believers to limit their social visits to reasonable lengths of time, and to not inconvenience their hosts. It is not appropriate for believers to spend hours socializing unproductively. We should learn the habit of not only setting a start time, but also an end time for our social gatherings, in order not to put undue pressure on ourselves and not let our time waste away.

Review Questions

Q1. Islam encourages us:

- To never accept invitations, instead attending to more important things
- To accept all invitations as it is so rewarding
- To accept invitations in moderation

Q2. We should be:

- Generous to our guests, but in moderation
- Be stingy with guests and use the money for better causes
- Spend lavishly on our guests because of the reward of feeding a guest

ⁱ Wasaelu-Shia (12:125)