

YAQeen INSTITUTE FOR ISLAMIC RESEARCH

# 40 HADITHS ON SOCIAL JUSTICE

## LECTURE NOTES

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## A Word of Truth in the Face of an Oppressor

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Last week we went through the conversation of Abu Dhar (ra) with the Prophet (ﷺ) regarding a person's actions based on their capacity. The Prophet (ﷺ) gave different levels and then at the end he said if you can't do any of the above then make sure you refrain from harm.

This is similar to the more famous Hadith: *...من رأي منكم منكرا فل يغيره بيده فان لم يستطع ف*

Out of the five categories mentioned by the Prophet (ﷺ) about demonstrating *imaan*, speaking was the most important. **The vast majority of good or harm you will do will involve your tongue.**

There's a famous Hadith about Luqmaan al-Hakeem (an Abyssinian slave). His master told him to cook the best part of the sheep. He first brought the tongue. Then he was told to bring the worst part of the animal and he brought the tongue again. When his master asked him why he did that he responded, "When the tongue is used for good, it's the best part of the body. And when the tongue is used for evil, it's the worst part of the body."

At the end of the day, your tongue is likely going to be what gets you into *jannah* or the hellfire.

**Words are often the starting point of both good and evil.** The Messenger (ﷺ) mentions to us in numerous ahadith that we often don't consider our words to be actions, and that's very dangerous. If we underestimate the impact of our words, that can make us underestimate the sinfulness of what we're doing and we can end up in eternal punishment. Similarly, if we don't understand the impact of our words, we won't use them to please Allah in a way that could take us to *jannah*.

The first thing we take from this entire notion is that the tongue has severe consequences: for good and for bad. Words are impactful. Words mean a lot. The hadith for today is a famous one. It has two narrations.

From Abu Sayeed:

- 1) **The Prophet (ﷺ) said, "The best form of *jihad* (striving) is to speak a word of truth (*haqq*) in the face of an oppressor."** أفضل الجهاد كلمة حق عند سلطان جائر
- 2) **In another narration, he (ﷺ) said, "A word of justice (*'adl*) in the face of an oppressor is the best form of *jihad*."** كلمة عدل عند سلطان جائر

*Haq* (truth) is more general than *'adl* (justice). Truth can mean many things. The best way to extract the true meaning of a hadith is to look for narrations that are similar in meaning. A word of justice is a very particular type of truth. This hadith is about using your tongue to challenge oppression even in the face of obstacles.

**Oppression usually comes from a false illusion of power.**

This is why the Prophet (ﷺ) mentioned in one of the previous *ahadith* (Chapter 2) that Allah has more power over you.

Imagine you have an oppressive ruler and someone speaks a word of justice to that ruler. This example involves someone who is powerless speaking to a powerful person, while understanding that ultimate power is that of Allah. This hadith shows us that **what matters is our effort, even if it doesn't bring about real change**. Allah is in charge of change; you just do your part.

There are different ways to speak a word of truth to an oppressor:

- 1) The first way involves **naseeha** (i.e., advice to rectify them). It involves reminding a person who has authority that they don't have the right to wrong others. The goal is to show them the error of their ways so they can rectify themselves. Be a sincere advisor. The goal isn't to be celebrated for bravery in challenging an oppressor; the goal is to rid society of oppression.
- 2) The second way involves speaking a word of truth as a form of **objection** to show the oppressor that they do not have unquestioned power and they are to be held accountable. Abu Bakr and Umar (ra) asked to be called out if they made mistakes.

**Why is this the greatest form of *jihad*?**

- 1) Imam Khattabi said that when two people are fighting on the battlefield, they are generally on a level playing field. However, when you speak a word of truth to an oppressor, it isn't a level playing field. This person has a lot of power and all you have is your courage and reliance on Allah.
- 2) Another group of scholars argued that if you are able to correct/rectify the ruler then it benefits so many people without causing bloodshed and avoids all the ill effects of war. So the goal is achieved (benefit to society) without harm. This effect is similar to تصنع لأخرق.
- 3) Another group of scholars talk about it in terms of the realm of personal *jihad* (struggling against the *nafs*). Usually in situations in which someone has more power, fear is what stops a person from speaking up. And this fear comes from a lack of trust (*tawakkul*) in Allah SWT. And it can become a disease of the heart. So, speaking up is a means of fighting that disease.

This is why it can be considered the best form of jihad - because it involves both striving against the self and striving against the oppressor. It benefits oneself and potentially society as a whole. Even if you don't make the ruler change, you might inspire others to speak out who might be more successful. You may also cause the ruler (or even the next ruler) to realize that if they continue their injustice they will be called out by the people. So, even if the impact is not immediate or tangible, the action of speaking up is still meaningful.

**Speaking truth to power is not absolute.**

- It is not praiseworthy if it is reckless or unwise. Or if it is done for the wrong intention (to appear brave).
- It is praiseworthy when it is beneficial.
- It is beneficial to speak truth to power when you are willing to disregard yourself (or your own well-being) for the sake of advancing a noble cause. Sometimes it is wiser (i.e., will be better for advancing the cause of justice) to be silent (even if people call you a coward).
- Trying to appease the masses is no less insincere than trying to appease rulers.
- Selectively choosing to speak truth is sometimes worse than not speaking at all. You may condemn one thing because you can get away with it but not another thing because you won't get away with it. It is extremely important to be consistent in speaking the truth.
- Wisdom (*hikmah*) requires not speaking recklessly. The word *hikmah* comes from the word for "reins." So, you need to know when to hold yourself back. Know when to say something and how to say something. **Your goal is to advance the truth, not yourself as a spokesperson for truth.** You need to take into consideration time and place and not be reckless in your speech.
- **Ambiguity with injustice is not acceptable under any circumstances.**
  - When Hajjaj gained power, some Sahabah revolted because they saw that as the best course of action. The Sahabah who didn't agree with Abdullah ibn Zubair's revolt, such as Abdullah ibn Umar, weren't passive or ambiguous about the oppression. Rather, they clearly condemned and called out Hajjaj and his oppression.
  - Hajjaj was affected by both types of objections (physical revolt and verbal calling out). He even poisoned Abdullah ibn Umar because of this.

**Fear** is usually what stops people from speaking out against oppression.

- Fear of physical harm, loss of career, loss of friends, mockery
- The greatest fear is fear of persecution and therefore the greatest *jihad* is speaking despite this fear.

- Hadith from Abu Sa'eed : لا يحقر أحدكم نفس... The Messenger (ﷺ) said, “Let not one of you belittle himself.” The sahabah asked him (ﷺ): “How do we belittle ourselves?” So, he said, “A person sees something that they should speak about but they don't speak about it. Allah will say to that person on the day of judgment, “What stopped you from speaking about such and such?” The person will say, “Fear of people.” And Allah will say, “And I am more deserving of being feared than people.”  
So we will be called to account if we do not speak out against injustice out of fear of people.
- Hadith of Abu Saeed: لا يمنع أحدكم رهبة الناس “Do not let the fear of people prevent you from speaking the truth if you see something that should be spoken about. Doing so will not cause your lifespan to be shortened and it will not decrease your wealth.”
- Hadith: If my Ummah comes to a time when a person cannot say to an oppressor, “O oppressor,” then you might as well walk away from them.
  - The prophet wasn't saying to abandon the ummah. He was saying what goodness could be left in them if things reach such a point that they cannot call oppression what it is.