

We have bestowed upon you from on high revelations clearly showing the truth, and lessons from [the stories of] those who have passed away before you, and admonition for the God-fearing.
(34)

وَلَقَدْ أَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكُمْ آيَاتٍ مُبَيِّنَاتٍ وَمَثَلًا
مِّنَ الَّذِينَ خَلَوْا مِن قَبْلِكُمْ وَمَوْعِظَةً
لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ

Overview

We mentioned previously that in the clean and healthy society it establishes, Islam does not rely on punishment; rather its main line of defence is prevention. It does not suppress natural desires. It regulates them within a clean atmosphere that is free of deliberate stimulation. The main element in the Islamic method of educating its followers is

I to reduce the chances of error, eliminate temptation, and remove all impediments that prevent the satisfaction of natural desires in a perfectly natural and clean way.

It is in this light that we should look at the way Islam accords a certain sanctity for homes. When they are at home, people should not be surprised by strangers coming in without first asking leave to enter. Otherwise, people's privacy would be invaded when they least expect it. In addition, Islam requires both men and women to lower their gaze and not expose what may arouse sexual desire.

From the same perspective, Islam facilitates marriage for poor men and women, because marriage is the best guarantee against adultery. It prohibits sending slaves into prostitution, because prostitution encourages people to indulge in prohibited sex. Let us now consider these points in more detail.

Before Entering a House

Believers, do not enter houses other than your own unless you have obtained permission and greeted their inmates. This is best for you, so that you may take heed. If you find no one in the house, do not enter it until you are given leave; and if you are told to go back, then go back, as it is most proper for you. God has full knowledge of all that you do. You will incur no sin if you enter uninhabited houses in which you have something of use. God knows all that you do openly, and all that you would conceal.
(Verses 27-29)

God has made homes places of comfort where people may relax and enjoy privacy and reassurance. At home, they do not feel the need to be cautious or on the alert. Thus, they may relax and take things easy. But homes cannot be so unless their

privacy is strictly respected. No one may enter a home without its occupier's knowledge and permission, at the time they choose, and in the manner they prefer.

Should we be able to go into other people's homes without first seeking permission, we may see them in situations they want to keep private, or we may see what arouses desire and opens the way to error. This could come about through a chance meeting, or a casual glance. When these are repeated, they become deliberate, motivated by the desires aroused by the casual glance in the first place. It may even develop into a sinful relation or cause a suppressed desire leading to a psychological problem.

In pre-Islamic days in Arabia, visitors used to enter a home and then announce themselves. It could be that inside a man may be with his wife in a position they did not want anyone to see; or that the man or woman were undressed. All this used to hurt people, and deprived them of a sense of security at home. Furthermore, when visitors saw charm and beauty, temptation might be strong or even irresistible.

For all such reasons, God laid down the requirement to observe fine manners, making it necessary for a Muslim to announce himself and greet the people inside before entering. This establishes a friendly atmosphere right from the first moment.

"Believers, do not enter houses other than your own unless you have obtained permission and greeted their inmates." (Verse 27) Seeking permission is expressed in the Arabic original in an unusual way, *tasta'nisū*, which implies friendliness. Thus we may say that we should not enter other people's houses until we have obtained friendly and cordial permission. This implies that the visitor should be gentle in his approach so as to be welcomed by the people inside. Such refinement is characteristic of Islamic manners.

When permission is sought, it follows that the house is either empty or people are inside. If there is no one in, then the caller cannot enter, because entry follows permission. *"If you find no one in the house, do not enter it until you are given leave."* (Verse 28) But if there is someone in, seeking permission is not enough for entry. It is merely a request, and if the request is not granted, entry is prohibited. It is better to leave without delay: *"If you are told to go back, then go back, as it is most proper for you."* (Verse 28) The person who is told to go back should do so without feeling upset or offended. People have their secrets and they may have good reason for not receiving a visitor at a particular time. It is up to them to determine their own situation.

"God has full knowledge of all that you do." (Verse 28) He knows people's secrets and motives.

Visiting People When They Are Not Ready

Places that are more or less public, like hotels, guest houses and reception halls which are separate from the main house are treated differently. We may enter such places without first seeking permission, because the very reason for seeking permission before entry does not apply to them. Requiring permission first may be inconvenient in such places.

“You will incur no sin if you enter uninhabited houses in which you have something of use. God knows all that you do openly, and all that you would conceal.” (Verse 29) The point here is that of God’s knowledge of all our situations and what we do in public or private. The feeling that God watches us in all situations should make people more obedient and willing to observe the refined manners which He has outlined in His book that lays down a code of living for all humanity.

As a complete code for human life, the Qur’ān emphasizes this point of detail in social life because it aims to regulate life in all its aspects, bringing its details in line with its fundamental issues. Thus, seeking permission before entering other people’s homes respects the sanctity which makes the home a place of relaxation. It spares its people the embarrassment of being taken by surprise, or being seen in a situation that they prefer not to be seen in. We are not talking here only about the parts of the human body which should be covered. At home people may be in a situation which they simply do not like others to see. It could relate to their personal appearance, the way they dress or lay their furniture, or anything else. It could also relate to feelings and emotions. Who of us would like to be seen in a situation of weakness, crying or angry or in pain or distress?

The Qur’ānic code of manners attends to all these details through the requirement of seeking permission before entering someone else’s home. It also seeks to reduce chances of casual meetings or sightings that could arouse desire and develop into unacceptable relations that Satan may stealthily encourage. The first Muslim community to be addressed by the Qur’ān clearly understood such directives and their purpose. The Prophet himself was the first to implement them.

The Prophet visited Sa`d ibn `Ubādah, the chief of the *Anṣār*, at home and sought permission, saying: *“Assalāmu `alaykum wa raḥmatullāh”*, meaning, peace and God’s mercy be bestowed on you. Sa`d replied in a low voice. His son, Qays, asked him: *“Are you not letting God’s Messenger in?”* Sa`d said: *“Let him wish us peace more.”* Again the Prophet repeated his greeting and Sa`d replied in a low voice twice more. Therefore, the Prophet departed, but Sa`d ran after him and explained what happened, saying: *“Messenger of God, I certainly heard your greetings and replied quietly hoping that you would wish us peace more and more.”* The Prophet went in with him. Sa`d ordered water to be brought for the Prophet to wash. Then he gave him a small blanket dyed with saffron to cover himself. The Prophet then raised his hands, praying: *“My Lord, shower Your blessings and grace on Sa`d ibn `Ubādah’s*

family.” [Related by Abū Dāwūd and al-Nasā’ī]

The Prophet taught his Companions how to approach someone else’s home, saying: “If you come towards a home, do not face the door straight, but stand to the right or to the left, and say: *Assalāmu alaykum! Assalāmu ‘alaykum!*” At that time, there were no screens on doors. [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

Sa’d ibn Abī Waqqāṣ came to the Prophet and stood facing the door, seeking permission. The Prophet said to him: “Move this way or that way, because permission is sought before a person looks in.” [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

An authentic *ḥadīth* quotes the Prophet as saying: “If a person overlooks you without having obtained permission, and you hit him with a small stone, and cause him a severe injury in his eye, you have nothing to answer for.” [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim]

Rib’ī, a Companion of the Prophet, reports: “A man from the `Āmir clan sought permission to enter the Prophet’s home, saying: ‘Can I enter?’ The Prophet said to his servant: ‘Go to this man and teach him how to seek permission. Tell him to say: ‘*Assalāmu `alaykum. May I come in?*’ The man overheard the Prophet and said exactly that. The Prophet gave him permission and he entered.” [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

`Abdullāh ibn `Umar was walking, troubled by the heat, and he urgently needed to relieve himself. He approached a Qurayshi woman’s place, and said: “*Assalāmu `alaykum. May I come in?*” She said: “Enter with peace.” He repeated what he said, and she repeated her reply. He was unable to stand still. He told her to say: “Come in”, if she wanted to give him permission and she did so. He then entered.

`Aṭā’ ibn Rabāḥ, a scholar who studied under `Abdullāh ibn `Abbās, the Prophet’s cousin whose scholarly knowledge was recognized as highly authoritative, reported: “I asked Ibn `Abbās: ‘Should I seek permission before entering when only my orphan sisters are at home considering that I look after them and they live with me in the same home?’ He said: ‘Yes.’ I asked him again so that he might give me a concession, but he refused. Instead, he asked me: ‘Do you like to see your sister undressed?’ I answered in the negative. He said: ‘Then seek permission before entry.’ I repeated the question once more, but he asked me: ‘Do you love to obey God?’ I said: ‘Yes.’ He said: ‘Then seek permission.’”

An authentic *ḥadīth* makes it clear that the Prophet prohibited a man from entering his own home unannounced so surprising his wife. In another version the prohibition is attached to such a surprise being made at night, implying that his family might be doing something unacceptable.

Another *ḥadīth* mentions that the Prophet arrived with his Companions at Madīnah during the day. So, he encamped at the outskirts, explaining his purpose:

“Wait until the end of the day, so that a woman has a chance to attend to her uncombed hair, or remove unwanted hair on her body.”

Good Manners and High Morals

Such refined manners were characteristic of the Prophet and his Companions after God had taught them the Islamic way. Today, however, we find that such fine considerations are largely meaningless despite our being Muslims. A man may just turn up at his brother’s door at any time of the day or night, knocking hard and caring little for disturbing the people inside, until the door is opened. The people may have a telephone which provides an excellent way of seeking permission to visit before starting out.¹⁷ He could thus easily find out a time suitable to his hosts. Nevertheless, people simply do not take such steps. A man may arrive at someone’s home without a prior appointment or permission. What is worse, our social tradition makes it imperative that a visitor who has come unannounced be received, even though his visit might be extremely inconvenient.

We are certainly Muslims, but we surprise our friends at any moment, even at meal times. If we are not invited to a meal, we may feel aggrieved. We may even surprise them late at night, and if they do not invite us to stay the night, we are offended. We allow our hosts no excuses either way.

All this takes place simply because we neglect Islamic manners. We do not bring our own preferences in line with what has been taught by God’s Messenger. We insist on following a mistaken social tradition that has no divine authority.

We look at other, non-Muslim communities and find that their social traditions are closer to the values and manners Islam wants us to adopt. Sometimes we admire these, but at other times we may even ridicule them, without even trying to look into what Islam wants us to do.

Proper Control of a Natural Desire

Having dealt with the proper manners of entering homes after taking permission, the *sūrah* moves on to prevent desire from running loose. It simply prevents looking at what is bound to excite desire, and it prohibits action that encourages sin.

Tell believing men to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity. This is most conducive to their purity. God is certainly aware of all that they do. And tell believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity, and not to display their

¹⁷ At the time this was written telephones were largely uncommon in people’s houses in Egypt. – Editor’s note.

charms except what may ordinarily appear thereof. Let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms and not display their charms to any but their husbands, or their fathers, or their husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their womenfolk, or those whom they rightfully possess, or such male attendants as are free of physical desire, or children that are as yet unaware of women's nakedness. Let them not swing their legs in walking so as to draw attention to their hidden charms. Believers, turn to God in repentance, so that you may achieve success. (Verses 30-31)

Islam wants to establish a clean society where desire is not aroused at every moment, and erotic scenes are not displayed everywhere. Continual excitement of the sexual urge leads to an insatiable desire that may become unstoppable. A stealthy look, a seductive move, flagrant make-up and thinly-dressed bodies are meant only to add to such insatiable and uncontrolled excitement. Thus, prudence and self control are heavily taxed. Hence, there remains one of two alternatives: either total permissiveness that disregards all checks and values, or psychological problems and disorders that result from having to suppress a desire that has been strongly aroused. This borders on unmitigated torture.

One way Islam uses for achieving its goal of establishing a clean human society is to prevent such uncontrollable excitement of the sexual urge. It wants the natural sexual urge, of both men and women, to remain healthy, maintaining its natural strength and to satisfy it in the proper, clean manner.

At some point in time, the idea was promoted that easy mixing between the two sexes, playful conversation and revealing physical attractions help to provide a relaxed social atmosphere, with no rigid inhibitions. It was said that this is necessary as a preventive measure against arbitrary suppression of natural desires and psychological complexes and disorders. It reduces the pressure of the sexual urge and prevents an uncontrollable explosion, etc.

Such ideas were promoted as a result of the advancement of theories that aimed to deprive man of his distinctive characteristics that separate the human race from animals, and which put man at the same level as animals. The most important of these theories was Freud's. But all this was no more than theoretical assumptions. I have seen with my own eyes, in a permissive society that abandoned all social, moral and religious restrictions, solid evidence to undermine its very foundation.¹⁸ I have seen in a country that does not place a single restriction on exposing the human body or on sexual relations, in all forms and types, that such freedom in no way refines or controls the sexual urge. On the contrary, it led to an insatiable quest for sexual pleasure. I also saw much of the psychological problems and disorders which were

¹⁸ The author is referring here to his stay in the USA in 1949-1951. — Editor's note.

claimed to be triggered only by deprivation and isolation from the other sex. They were on the increase, as were all types of sexual perversion. And all this was a direct result of free, unrestrained mixing between the two sexes, total permissiveness, exposure of much of the human body in the street, seductive gestures, suggestive glances, etc. This is not the place for recording such scenes in detail, but I only have to say that all this indicates the need to revise those theories, which are contradicted by what prevails in society.

Attraction to the other sex is both natural and profound, because God has made it the means by which human life continues and by which man can fulfil his task on earth. It is a permanent attraction that subsides for a while and then regains strength. To stir it at all times will undoubtedly keep it on the boil. Thus, it requires physical satisfaction. If this does not take place, tension will rise and man finds himself in a sort of permanent torture. Excitement takes place through a look, a move, a smile, a joke and even the tone in one's speech. The best safeguard is to reduce such excitement so that the mutual attraction between man and woman remains within its natural limits, and finds its satisfaction in the proper and natural way. This is the line Islam prefers.

The two verses we are now discussing give us some examples of how Islam helps to reduce the chances of excitement and sin: *"Tell believing men to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity. This is most conducive to their purity. God is certainly aware of all that they do."* (Verse 30)

Lowering their gaze is an act of refining men's manners. It represents an attempt to rise above the desire to look at women's physical charms. As such, it is a practical step to ensure that the first window of temptation is shut. Minding their chastity is the natural result of lowering their gaze. It is indeed the second step that comes after strengthening one's will and rising above the natural urge right at the beginning. Hence, the two are stated in the same verse as a cause and effect, or as two consecutive steps both in personal conscience and in reality.

"This is most conducive to their purity." (Verse 30) It ensures that their feelings remain pure, unaffected by licentious desire and promiscuous action. Thus, feelings retain their noble human standards, and do not sink to animal levels. This protects honour, integrity and sanctities within the community. Besides, it is God who lays down such preventive measures, fully aware as He certainly is of people's psychology, natural instincts thoughts and motives: *"God is certainly aware of all that they do."*

"And tell believing women to lower their gaze and to be mindful of their chastity." (Verse 31) They must not cast hungry or seductive looks at men to arouse their desire. Nor are they permitted any sexual behaviour other than what is lawful and clean. Thus,

children that are born as a result will have nothing to be ashamed of when they have to face society and play their roles in it.

“And not to display their charms except what may ordinarily appear thereof” (Verse 31) The Arabic term *zīnah*, translated here as ‘charms’, has wider connotations than natural beauty. It includes adornments women add to look more attractive. Such adornments are lawful for women to use, because they satisfy a natural female tendency that makes women always want to look beautiful and attractive. Such adornments differ from one time to another, but whatever form they take, they are meant to satisfy the same natural motive of appearing more beautiful and displaying charms before men.

Since this is a natural tendency, Islam does not suppress it; it brings it under control so that a woman displays her charms before one man, who is her spouse who sees her as no one else does. In addition, her close relatives who may not be married to her may see some of her charms as well, because their desires are not excited as a result, considering their close relation. However, the charms or adornments that appear on a woman’s face and hands are permissible to see. The Prophet said to Asmā’ bint Abī Bakr, his sister-in-law: *“Asmā’! When a woman attains puberty, nothing should be seen of her except this [and he pointed to face and hands].”* [Related by Abū Dāwūd]¹⁹

Prompt Compliance with Divine Orders

A further instruction is given to women with regard to their public appearance: *“Let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms.”* (Verse 31) We have a translation problem here because the Qur’ānic verse uses the term *jayb*, which does not mean ‘bosom’. *Jayb* instead means the top opening of a dress which is bound to reveal a part of a woman’s bosom. Hence, women are ordered to bring their head coverings down so as to cover this opening, thus covering their heads, necks and chests. In this way, they cover their charms so as not to be displayed before hungry eyes, not even in a sudden encounter between man and woman. A God-fearing man will always try not to make such a look last long, or repeat it. Yet, it may have a lasting effect if charms and adornments are seen suddenly. Hence, the instruction to keep them covered. What is important to realize here is that God wants to spare people this type of test.

Despite their natural desire to want to appear beautiful, the Muslim women who received this instruction did not slacken to put it into effect because their hearts were resplendent with God’s light. In pre- Islamic ignorant days, women used to go out in

¹⁹ This *ḥadīth* is classified as *mursal*, which means that it is poor in authenticity.

public revealing their bosoms, just like women do today in non-Islamic societies. Yet when the order was revealed requiring women to cover themselves and reveal only what appears naturally of their charms, their response was as `Ā'ishah describes: "May God bestow His grace on the early Muslim women: when God revealed His order, 'Let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms,' they tore their dresses and used them to cover their heads." [Related by al-Bukhārī]

Şafiyah bint Shaybah reports: "We were at `Ā'ishah's place when some women spoke about Qurayshi women and their virtues. `Ā'ishah said: There is no doubt that Qurayshi women have their virtues, but I have seen none like the Anşār women in their ardent belief in God's book and undoubted faith in divine revelations. When the verse was revealed in *Sūrah al-Nūr* stating, 'Let them draw their head-coverings over their bosoms,' their men went home and read to them what God had revealed. A man would read this to his wife, daughter, sister and other relatives. Every single woman of them took out her printed dress and wrapped it over her head, in obedience to what God had revealed in confirmation of its application to them. In the morning they prayed behind God's Messenger, wearing their head coverings as though they were carrying crows on their heads." [Related by Abū Dāwūd]

Islam has refined the tastes of Islamic society and its sense of beauty for it no longer seeks the lewd and licentious. Exposing bodily charms attracts a man's physical instinct. Modesty, on the other hand, shows a clean type of beauty that refines man's sense. It is the type of beauty worthy of man, because it imparts a sense of purity and chastity.

Today, Islam produces the same effect among women believers, despite the fact that the general taste in society has sunk so low as to encourage the revealing of physical charms and the exposure of other parts of the human body. Nevertheless, women believers voluntarily cover themselves as God requires them to do, while other women around them try to attract men by their physical presence.

Maintaining such modesty in appearance is another preventive measure Islam puts in place to protect both the individual and society. Hence, it is not required in situations where temptation is inconceivable. Thus, close relatives who are barred from inter-marriage are excluded. Normally there is no sexual attraction between such relatives who include fathers, sons, fathers-in-law, stepsons, brothers and nephews. Also excepted are Muslim women, as the verse makes clear: "*or their womenfolk.*" Women generally are not included in this exception, because they may describe Muslim women and their charms to their husbands, brothers and other men. An authentic *ḥadīth* quotes the Prophet as saying: "No woman should describe another woman to her husband as though he is seeing her." [Related by al-Bukhārī and Muslim] Muslim women, on the other hand, are reliable. Their faith prevents them from describing the physical charms of a Muslim woman to their husbands.

Another exception applies to slaves: *"or those whom they rightfully possess."* Some scholars say that this applies to women slaves only, while others include male slaves too because a slave does not look up to his mistress in a carnal way. But the first view is more logical because a slave is a man with all the desire any other man has, even though he is placed in a special or unfavourable situation. Also excepted are *"such male attendants as are free of physical desire,"* who may not be attracted to women for one reason or another, such as being impotent or feeble minded. In this case, a woman's physical beauty causes no temptation. Similarly excepted are *"children that are as yet unaware of women's nakedness."* These are children who do not yet feel any sexual desire because they are too young. When they are older and become sexually aware and attracted to women, even though they might not have attained their puberty, nonetheless the original rules apply to them.

All these – with the exception of husbands – may see a woman uncovered, except for the area between her waistline and knees, because the cause that prevents such looks does not apply in their case. A husband, on the other hand, may see his wife without restriction.

Since this is a preventive measure, the Qur'ānic verse goes on to prohibit the movements a woman may make in order to attract attention to her adornments or charms that are not readily visible. Such movements may be exciting even though the adornments themselves may remain invisible.

"Let them not swing their legs in walking so as to draw attention to their hidden charms." (Verse 31) This order results from profound knowledge of human psychology. Sometimes, the human imagination may be a more powerful trigger for desire. Many are the men who, on seeing a woman's shoes, dress or jewellery, are more excited than by seeing her body. Many are the ones that are sexually excited by the mental image they draw of a woman than by seeing her in person. Psychiatrists have identified such cases which may need treatment. The tinkle of jewellery or the smell of perfume may excite some people and kindle their sexual desire. With some, this could become irresistible. The Qur'ān takes effective and appropriate action against all this, because its message is sent by God the Creator who knows His creation and who is kind to, and fully aware of, them all.

The verse concludes with turning people's hearts to God, opening the door of repentance and forgiveness for all that was done before its revelation. *"Believers, turn to God in repentance, so that you may achieve success."* (Verse 31) Thus, it enhances their feelings that God watches over them, and that He is kind to them, taking care of them. He helps them overcome their weakness in respect of sexual desire. Yet nothing can bring this under proper control more effectively than faith and fearing God.