

يَتَأْتِيهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا لَا تُحَرِّمُوا طَيِّبَاتِ مَا أَحَلَّ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ وَلَا تَعْتَدُوا إِنَّ

اللَّهُ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُعْتَدِينَ ﴿٨٧﴾

Al-Ma'idah (The Table Spread) 5:87

O You Who Believe!

- Make not unlawful the good things which Allah has made lawful for you.
- But commit no excess.
- For Allah loves not those given to excess.

Commentary

Allamah Tabai (AR)

These three verses together with the following ones [up to the verse 108] give details of various commandments related to branches of religion. This whole group is inserted between the verses describing the story of the Messiah (AS) and the Christians. These verses consist of various groups laying down diverse orders, each being independent and complete in its theme. As such, it is difficult to decide whether a given group was revealed separately or had accompanied other verses, because context supports neither alternative. As for the traditions showing reasons of revelation, important ones shall be quoted under Traditions.

ar-Raghib says in al-Mufradat:

al-Haram denotes the forbidden things, be it by divine subjugation or forcible obstruction; whether this prohibition is by reason or shari'ah or by one whose orders are followed.

Apparently the contraposition between *hill* (lawfulness) and *hurmah* (unlawfulness), and opposition between *hill* (area beyond a sanctuary) and *haram* (sanctuary) or *ihram* (the robe worn when entering haram) is based on imaginary tying of knot when forbidding something, i.e. unlawfulness; then it (*hurmah*) is put opposite *hill* (which is metaphorically used for lawfulness). The two words *hill* and *hurmah* were generally used for lawfulness and unlawfulness respectively, even before Islam; it is not that shari'ah or its followers have coined them.

The verse: “*O you who believe! Do not forbid (yourselves) the good things which Allah has made lawful for you.*” prohibits to the believers forbidding themselves what Allah has made lawful for them. This forbidding what has been made lawful by Allah can be done either by laying down a legislation contrary to divine legislation, or by forbidding others or abstention, i.e. one leaves out a lawful thing by abstaining from it or prohibiting it to oneself or others. All this behavior is tantamount to forbidding what Allah has made lawful, and it is equal to fighting Allah and His Power; this transgression against Him is contrary to the belief in Allah and His communication. That is why the verse begins with the phrase: “O you who believe!” it implies that you are believers in Allah and have submitted to His commandments; therefore you should not forbid yourself what Allah has made lawful. This explanation is further supported by the end clause of the next verse: and fear Allah in Whom you believe.

“the good things which Allah has made lawful for your”: The addition of the word “good”, -- although the sentence would be complete even without it – aims at completing the cause of prohibition: If the believers forbid themselves the things which Allah has made lawful for them, then it is not only that they commit transgression against Allah in His authority and defy the demands of their belief in, and submission to, Allah, but also go against the law of nature, which takes these lawful things as good without reservation. Allah has pointed to it where He says about His prophet (S) and the shari’ah which he has brought: *Those who follow the Messenger Prophet, the ummi, whom they find written down with them in the Tawrat and the Injil (who) enjoins them good and forbids them evil, and makes lawful to them the good things and makes unlawful to them impure things, and removes from them their burden and the shackles which were upon them; so (as for) those who believe in him and honor him and help him, and follow the light which has been sent down with him, these it is that are the successful (7:157).*

The above description supports the following:

First

Forbidding the good things what Allah has made lawful means abstaining, and making others desist, from lawful things.

Second

Lawful, as opposite of unlawful, includes the permissible and the commendable, even the obligatory things.

Third

Addition of “the good things” to that “which Allah has made lawful for you” aims at further elaboration of the same idea.

Fourth

Exceeding the limits (in “do not exceed the limits”) means transgression against Allah in His legislative authority; or over-stepping the limits laid down by Allah by revolting against His obedience, refusing to submit to Him, and forbidding what He has made lawful. As Allah says, inter alia, describing the laws of divorce: These are the limits of Allah, so do not exceed them, and whoever exceeds the limits of Allah then these it is that are the unjust (2:229). Likewise He says at the end of the verses of inheritance: These are Allah’s limits; and whoever obeys Allah and His Messenger, He will cause him to enter gardens beneath which rivers flow, to abide in them; and this is the great achievement. And whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger and transgresses His limits, He will cause him to enter Fire to abide in it, and he shall have an abasing chastisement (4:13-14).

In short, the verse prohibits one from forbidding oneself what Allah has made lawful, by keeping away from it and avoiding it, because it goes contrary to the belief in Allah and his signs. Also, it opposes the fact of their being lawful and good, and of their being free of impurity; otherwise, why should one abstain from them? It is nothing but exceeding the limits, and Allah does not love those who exceed the limits.

Some people have said: Exceeding the limits means over-stepping the line of moderation regarding the lawful things, by throwing oneself down to enjoying them without restraint, contrary to discarding them abstemiously. So, the verse would mean: *Do not forbid yourselves the good and tasteful things that Allah has made lawful for you. Do not intentionally avoid enjoying them abstemiously believing that it would bring you nearer to Allah. And do not exceed the limits by transgressing the line of moderation, going to extravagance and excess which would be harmful for your bodies or souls.*

Or, exceeding the limits may mean overstepping the good and lawful things, indulging in bad and unlawful things. Then the connotation will be as follows: *Do not avoid lawful things and do not use unlawful things. In other words, do not forbid yourselves what Allah has made lawful for you and do not indulge in what Allah has forbidden you.*

Although these two meanings are correct in themselves and the Qur’an clearly supports both themes, but neither fits the verse under discussion as its context and that of the following verse shown. Obviously, not every correct theme can be applied to every word without looking at its context and position.

Al-Qummi narrates under the verse: *O you who believe! Do not forbid (yourselves) the good things which Allah has made lawful for you.* Narrated to me my father, from Ibn Abi Umair, from some of his men, from Abu Abdillah (AS) that he said,

This verse was revealed about the Leader of the Faithful (AS), Bilal and Uthman ibn Maz'un. As for the Leader of the faithful (AS), he had sworn that he would never sleep at night; and as for Bilal, he had sworn that that would never eat during day-time [i.e. would always keep fast]; and as for Uthman ibn Maz'un, he had sworn that he would never indulge in sexual relation.

Then Uthman's wife came to Aishah – and she was a beautiful woman. Aishah said to her - *Why do I see you without make-up?* She said - *For whom should I make myself up? By Allah! My husband has not come near me since a long time, because he has become a monastic, wears coarse clothes, and has become an ascetic.*

When the Messenger of Allah (S) entered (the house) Aishah informed him of it. So, he came out, and call was given for congregational prayer. People assembled and (the Prophet (S) ascended the pulpit. He thanked Allah and praised Him; then said, 'What has happened to (some) people that they have forbidden themselves good things? Well, surely I sleep at night, and establish sexual relation and eat during day-time; so whoever disliked my sunnah, he is not from me.'

Then people stood up and said, 'But O Messenger of Allah! We have sworn to it. Then Allah revealed to him: Allah does not call you to account for what is vain in your oaths, but He calls you to account for the making of deliberate oaths; so its expiation is this is the expiation of your oaths when you swear.'

(at-Tafsir)

Imam al-Hasan ibn Ali (AS) said to Mu'awiyah and his companions inter alia, in a hadith:

I adjure you by Allah, do you know that Ali was the first among the companions of the Messenger of Allah (S) to forbid the desires to himself; then Allah revealed: *O you who believe! Do not forbid (yourselves) the good things which Allah has made lawful for you.*

(al-Ihtijaj)

[at-Tabrisi] writes under the above-mentioned verse: The exegetes have said,

The Messenger of Allah (S) sat one day and reminded the people and described the resurrection. The people were overwhelmed and cried; and ten companions gathered in the house of 'Uthman ibn Maz'un al-Jumahi, and they were: Ali, Abu Bakr, Abdullah ibn Mas'ud, Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, Salim mawla Abu Hudhayfah, Abdullah ibn Umar, al-Miqdad ibn al-Aswad al-Kindi, Salman al-Farisi and Mu'qil ibn Muqrin.

They agreed among themselves that they would fast in the day and stand (for worship) in the night, would not sleep on bedding; would not partake of meat or fat, nor would near women or perfume. (They decided) to wear coarse fabrics, discard the world and roam into the earth; some of them even intended to cut off their genitals.

This news reached the Messenger of Allah (S). He went to the house of Uthman (ibn Maz'un) but did not find him there. So he said to his wife – her name was Hawla and she was a perfume vendor – 'Is it true what I have been informed about your husband and his companions?' She did not like to tell lie to the Messenger of Allah (S) nor did she like to speak against her husband; so she said, 'O Messenger of Allah! If Uthman has told you so then he has told you the truth.' So the Messenger of Allah (S) returned.

When Uthman entered (his house) she informed him about it. So, he and his companions came to the Messenger of Allah (S); and the Messenger of Allah (S) said to them, 'Have not I been informed that you have agreed on such and such?' They said, 'Certainly, O Messenger of Allah! And we did not intend except good.' The Messenger of Allah (S) said, "I have not been ordered this." Then he said, 'Surely your souls have rights on you; so keep fast and eat, stand (at nights) and sleep. Certainly, I stand (at nights) and sleep, and keep fast and eat, and I partake meat and fat, and I go to women; and whoever dislikes my sunnah, is not from me.'

Then he gathered the people and spoke to them; and said,

What has happened to some people that they have forbidden themselves women, food and perfume, as well as sleep and desirable things of the world? Well, certainly I have not ordered you to become monks, because it is not in my religion to abstain from meat or women, nor (to live in) hermitages; and surely the wandering of my ummah is fast, and their monasticism is jihad.

Worship Allah and do not associate anything with Him; perform hajj and umrah, establish prayer, pay zakat and keep fast of Ramadan; and remain straight, it will be right for you. Those who were before you fell in perdition only because of zealotry. They put heavy burdens on themselves, so Allah intensified their load. So, these are their remnants in hermitages and monasteries. Then Allah revealed this verse.
(Majmaul-bayan)

As for those numerous narrations, none of them mentions names of those companions together. The most comprehensive of them says, Uthman ibn Maz'un and his companions; some other say, a group of the companions of the Prophet (S); still others say, some people among the companions of the Prophet (S).

Likewise, the different sentences of the Prophet's talk and his detailed sermon are found scattered in various traditions. In the same way, the narratives do not say clearly that each of those companions had intended to avoid all those good things. Rather some traditions clearly show that various companions had wanted to leave out various things.

Al-Bukhari and Muslim narrate from Aishah that some companions had asked the wives of the Prophet (S) about his life in secret. Then some of them said: "I'll not eat meat"; some said: "I'll not go to women"; and some others said: "I'll not sleep in bedding." This news reached the Prophet (S), so he said,

What is the matter with the people, that some of them say this and this? But as for me, I keep fast and eat, sleep and stand (in prayer), and eat meat and to the women; so whoever dislikes my sunnah is not from me.

Probably, when at-Tabrisi says that "they agreed among themselves that they would fast", he does not mean that each of them had intended to do all those things; he only means that those people among themselves had decided to do one or the other of those things.

Although the traditions vary in their themes and they are weak, mursal and reliable ones among them, yet meditation on all of them creates a certainty that a group of the companions had decided to adopt that type of abstinence and asceticism, and Ali (AS) and Uthman ibn Maz'un were among them, and that the Prophet (S) had said to them, "Whoever dislikes my sunnah is not from me." And Allah knows better. You should refer to the books of exegeses which explain the Qur'an with the help of traditions, like at-Tafsir of at-Tabari, ad-Durrul-manthur, Fathul-qadir and so on.

It has been narrated by at-Tirmidhi (who said that it was good), Ibn Jarir, Ibn Abi Hatim, Ibn 'Udayy (in al-Kamil), at-Tabarani and Ibn Marduwayh, from Ibn Abbas that he said,

A man came to the Prophet (S) and said, 'O Messenger of Allah! Whenever I eat meat I become roused and overcome by sexual desire; and I have forbidden meat to myself.' Then the verse was revealed: *O you who believe! Do not forbid (yourselves) the good things which Allah has made lawful for you.*
(ad-Durrul-manthur)

Abdullah ibn Sinan said,

I asked him [the Imam] about a man who said that his wife would be divorced, or his slaves would be free, if he drank any unlawful or lawful (drink). (The Imam) said,

As for the unlawful he should not go near it, whether he swore the oath or did not swear; and as for the lawful he should not leave it, because he has no right to forbid what Allah has made lawful, because Allah says: *O you who believe! Do not forbid (yourselves) the good things which Allah has made lawful for you;* therefore, there is nothing on him regarding his oath concerning lawful things.
(at-Tafsir, al-Ayyashi)

Ibn Jarir has narrated from Ibn Abbas that he said,

When the verse: *O you who believe! Do not forbid (yourselves) the good things which Allah has made lawful for you,* was revealed regarding those who had forbidden women and meat to themselves, they said, 'O Messenger of Allah! What should we do with the oaths which we have made?' Then Allah revealed: Allah does not call you to account for what is vain in your oaths.
(ad-Durrul-manthur)

Mir Ahmed Ali (AR) and Aqa Mahdi Puya (AR)

Islam does not allow to forbid the good things Allah has made lawful, as the self-denying Christians do.

Aqa Mahdi Puya says:

Some well meaning Muslims, imitating certain self-denying Christians, had vowed not to partake of delicious foods and to abstain from going in to their wives. This the Holy Prophet strongly disapproved, declaring in the assembly of his companions that there is no place for monks and ascetics in Islam because due to asceticism and severity many nations had been destroyed.

Verse 93 of this surah, verse 2 of Ta Ha and verse 1 of Tahrim also discourage asceticism. So forbidding anything allowed by Allah and His Prophet is transgression, because either forbidding the lawful or allowing the forbidden (as had been done by many Muslim rulers) amounts to breaking the bounds of the divine law.

Ayatullah Sayyid Kamal Faqih Imani and a Group of Muslim Scholars

It happened that one day the Messenger of Allah (S) was speaking for people about the Hereafter and the scenes of the gatheringplace of Resurrection. The audience were so touched at heart and wept that some of them decided, from then on, not to consume any good food, to prohibit comfort unto themselves, to observe a fast, to abandon their wives, and to sleep at nights less than before. They swore over that decision to be loyal to it.

When the Prophet (S) was informed of it, he mustered people in the mosque and told them :

I eat food, I sleep at nights and do not abandon my wives.
Our religion is not the creed of retreat and monasticism.
The monasticism of my ummah is the holy struggle.
Whoever goes a direction other than my style is not a Muslim.

Some of them asked what they would do for the oaths they had taken. The subsequent verses were revealed saying that Allah does not call them to account for their vain (unintentional) oaths.

Imam Sadiq (AS) said:

Whoever makes a lawful thing unlawful for himself (through a vow) , the one must accomplish it, and there is nothing upon him. ...
(Mustadrak-ul-Wasa'il, vol. 3, p. 52)

Explanations

1. Islam is the religion of `Fitrah' (nature) , wherein retreat and monasticism, or excess and defect is forbidden.

2. A Muslim submits to the command of Allah. He neither turns a lawful thing into an unlawful one, nor vice versa.

The holy Prophet (S) said : *"O' people! what I have made lawful is lawful until the day of Judgement, and what I have forbidden is forbidden until the day of Judgement."*

3. Edible things, clothings, and the whole lawful pleasures have been created for the usage of humankind.

4. When using the lawful things, be careful of avoiding extravagance.
"... do not transgress ..."

5. The vows, covenants and oaths which are against the explicit prohibitions of the text of the Qur'an, are worthless and invalid.