

Al-Baqara (The Cow) [2:268]

الشَّيْطَانُ يَعِدُكُمُ الْفَقْرَ وَيَأْمُرُكُمْ بِالْفَحْشَاءِ وَاللَّهُ يَعِدُكُمْ مَغْفِرَةً مِّنْهُ
وَفَضْلًا وَاللَّهُ وَاسِعٌ عَلِيمٌ

The evil one threatens you with poverty and bids you to conduct unseemly. Allah promises you His forgiveness and bounties. And Allah cares for all and He knows all things.

MUHAMMAD HUSAIN TABA TABAI (AR)

The context of the verses indicates that they must have been revealed all together. Their theme is spending in the way of Allah. They begin with a parable to show that charity increases in the hands of Allah, one to seven hundred or even more, by the per-mission of Allah. Another parable shows that this increase is sure to happen; it cannot fail. They go to forbid insincerity in spending, that is, spending to show others how generous one is, and give one more parable to demonstrate the futility of this, that such spending does not increase and bears no fruit. Also, they admonish the believers not to follow charity with reproach and injury, because these two evils nullify alms and make their reward forfeit. Then they say that spending should be from their good and lawful wealth, and not from unlawful or worthless things, as it shows niggardliness and miserliness. Thereafter they prescribe who should be given charity - the poor men who are besieged in the way of Allah. Finally it again reminds them of the great reward of charity which they shall find with Allah.

In short, the verses exhort the believers to spend and explain to them the following things:

First: The purpose of spending: It should be to seek the pleasure of Allah, not to show off to people.

Second: The fashion and condition of this good work: It should not be followed by reproach and injury.

Third: The quality of the wealth to be spent: It must be lawful and good, not unlawful or worthless.

Fourth: The qualification of the receivers: It should be given to those poor who are besieged in the way of Allah.

Fifth: The rewards of such spending in this world and in the next.

SPENDING IN THE WAY OF ALLAH

One of the two pillars of Islam is the Rights of the people; and spending for the welfare of the people is one of the things to which Islam pays the utmost attention. It exhorts a believer to spend for this purpose, and has laid down the rules and opened up the ways for such spending - some of these ways are obligatory and others highly recommended: zakat, khums (the one-fifth tax), penalties to expiate certain illegalities, various types of redemption, obligatory spending and recommended charities. Then there are laws to establish and regulate endowments, settlements for residence, or for life, wills, gifts and many similar things.

All this has been done to improve the living standards of the poor classes - the people who cannot meet their expenses without help from others. The intention of Islam is to raise their level to bring them nearer to the people of means.

On the other hand, it has strictly forbidden the rich people from pompous living and showing off their wealth. It has allowed them to live in a reasonable and honorable manner; but has prohibited extravagance and the squandering of wealth in a lavish style which is above the reach of the average person.

The aim of both sets of rules was to create a community life that would be neither too low nor too high, whose various groups would be nearer to each other, and would have a fairly uniform standard of life. Such a society would give life to the institution of unity and cooperation; and would eradicate conflicting designs and uproot enmity and antagonism. The Qur'an holds that the true religion must organize life in all its multifarious activities, putting it in order in such a way that man's bliss is guaranteed in this life as well as in the next one. Such a religion will bless man with true knowledge, noble character and pleasant life; he will be free in this life to enjoy the bounties given to him by Allah, and to remove from himself unpleasant things and all types of misfortune.

This will be possible only when society enjoys a good life and all its members share its bliss equally or almost equally. This, in its turn, demands that all their needs are fulfilled and the condition of society reformed. All this needs money and wealth. The way to get that money for this most important purpose is by contributions from the members of society - they are required to spend- out of what they have earned by their labor. Surely the believers are brothers to each other; and the earth is of Allah, and property and wealth belong to Him.

This is a fact, the truth of which was demonstrated by the Prophet during his lifetime when he had the authority in his hands. He showed its correctness and demonstrated how it created a stable society, growing, developing and bearing good results.

It was this society for which the Leader of the faithful, 'Ali (a.s.) felt nostalgia, and the passing away of which he remembered sorrowfully, in one of his speeches:

You live in a period when the steps of virtue are moving backwards, and the steps of evil are moving forward; and Satan is increasing his eagerness to ruin people. This is the time when his equipment is strong, and his traps have been widely spread and his prey has become easy (to catch). Cast your glance wherever you like. Do you see (anything) except a poor man suffering (the pangs of) poverty, or a rich man changing Allah's favor for ungratefulness, or a miser trampling the right of Allah to increase his wealth, or an arrogant person (who behaves) as though his ears hear any counsel with difficulty.
(Nahju 'l-balaghah, Sermon 129).

The passage of time has proved the validity of this Qur'anic system - that the various classes should be brought together, the poor should be helped through "spending", and the rich forbidden extravagance, pomposity and vanity. When western culture took the upper hand, people's ideals and outlook changed. They clung to the earthly life, tried their utmost to acquire and keep all worldly trinkets coveted by animal greed and sensual desires, and adopted for it whatever means they could. The result: wealth was confined within a limited circle, the pleasures of life were reserved for a wealthy minority, and the only share of the lower class in it was deprivation. The upper classes continued to swallow each other like cannibals, until a very select group monopolized the blessings and bliss of this life and the vast majority, that is, the common people, were denied even the right of life.

This behavior generated all evil tendencies on both sides; it gave rise to the saying, "Every man for himself ". No one leaves anything nor does he spare anything. It has resulted in a class struggle, and open enmity between the two groups, the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots, each side wanting to exterminate the other. This was the basic cause of the World Wars and the emergence of Communism. Truth and nobility have been cast aside, peace of mind and tranquility of heart have departed from the world, and the human species on the whole does not have any feeling of joy in life. This is the position which the chaos of human society has reached today - what tomorrow holds is more grievous and horrible.

One of the most damaging factors in this social disorder is the closure of the gate "spending", and the opening of the doors of interest. Allah has explained the evil of this in seven verses coming after these verses of "spending"; Allah had warned the mankind that if interest becomes widespread, the world will fall in disorder. It is one of the prophecies of the Qur'an which has been fulfilled in these days. When the Qur'an was revealed, interest was a fetus; now it has been born from the womb of western economy and is growing by leaps and bounds.

To understand what we have just mentioned, read the following verses:

Then set your face uprightly for the (right) religion in natural devotion (to the truth) ; the nature made by Allah in which He has made men; there is no alteration in the creation of Allah; that is the right religion, but most people do not know turning to Him. And be careful of (your duty to) Him, and keep up prayer and be not of the polytheists, of those who, divided their religion and became sects, every sect rejoicing in what they have with them. And when harm afflicts men, they call upon their Lord, turning to Him; then when He makes them taste of mercy from Him, lo! some of them begin to associate (others) with their Lord, so as to be ungrateful for what We have given them; but enjoy yourselves (for a while), for you shall soon come to know . . . So give to the near of kin his due, and to the needy and the wayfarer; this is the best for those who desire Allah's pleasure, and these it is who are successful. And whatever you lay out as interest, so that it may increase in the property of men, it shall not increase with Allah; and whatever you give in charity, desiring Allah's pleasure - it is these (persons) that shall get manifold . . . Disorder has appeared in the land and the sea on account of what the hands of men have wrought, that He may make them taste a part of that which they have done, so that they may return. Say: "Travel in the land, then see how was the end of those (who were) before (you); most of them were polytheists." Then set thy face upright to the right religion before there comes from Allah the day which cannot be averted; on that day they shall become separated (30:30-43).

There are verses of the same import in the chapters of Hud, Yunus, the Night journey, the Prophets etc. We shall explain them later on.

This is apparently the reason why these verses of spending exhort the believers and give so much emphasis to "spending".

QUR'AN: Satan threatens you with poverty . . . Allah is Ample-giving, All-knowing

The verse explains that choosing a bad thing for charity is not good for the charity-giver; it is only good property which is good for them to spend. The prohibition is for their own good, as the thing prohibited is bad for them. They dislike giving good items in charity because they believe that a good property makes one wealthy and rich; they therefore resist the idea of giving it away in charity. A bad item is worthless, and so they are ready to donate it in alms. But it is the temptation of Satan who frightens his friends with poverty. The fact is that donating property and spending it in the way of Allah to seek His pleasure is just like any other good trade and dealing - it has its recompense and profit, as Allah has mentioned in these verses. Moreover, it is Allah who makes one rich and bestows abundance; property, by itself, has no power to enrich anyone. Allah says: And that He it is Who enriches and gives to hold (53:48).

In short, it was a mistake on their part to withhold the good and likeable items from their charity because of fear of poverty. Allah points this out in the sentence "Satan threatens you with poverty". This sentence puts the cause (Satan's threatening) in place of its effect (fear of poverty). This figurative expression has been used to indicate that this fear is damaging to their interest, because whatever Satan incites one to do is bound to be wrong and an error - either directly or indirectly, that is, through something disguised as right.

Someone might have thought that this fear of poverty was reasonable, even if it was caused by Satan. The next sentences do not leave any room for such a misunderstanding: "and enjoins you to abomination". This withholding, this heavy-heartedness in spending good things creates in their souls the trait of miserliness and niggardliness, which in its turn leads one to disobey and reject those commands of Allah that effect one's wealth and property; it is clear disbelief in the Great Lord. Also, it casts the needy people into the perdition of poverty, privation and depression, which in its turn leads to loss of lives, and honor, and to every hope of crime and abomination. Allah says:

And there are those of them who made a covenant with Allah: "If He gives us out of His grace, we will certainly give alms and we will certainly be of the good." But when He gave them out of His grace, they became niggardly of it and they turned back and they withdrew. So He made hypocrisy to follow as a consequence into their hearts till the day when they shall meet Him because they failed to perform towards Allah what they had promised with Him and because they told lies . . . Those who taunt the free-givers of alms among the believers and them who cannot find but their hard earnings, so they scoff at them; Allah will pay them back their scoffing, for them is a painful chastisement. (9:75-79)

"And Allah promises you forgiveness from Himself and abundance; and Allah is Ample-giving, All-knowing.": It further removes the earlier-mentioned possible misunderstanding. Allah had already clearly told the believers that there is either truth or falsehood; there is no third alternative. Truth is the straight path, that is from Allah; and falsehood is from Satan. , Look at the following verses of the Meccan period: . and what is there after the truth but error? (10:32); Say: 'Allah guides to the truth" (10:35) ; . . . surely he (i.e. Satan) is an enemy, openly leading astray (28:15). In short, the above-mentioned sentence reminds them that the idea of niggardliness coming into your mind because of the fear of poverty is based on a bad judgment; forgiveness of Allah and increase in wealth (mentioned in previous verses) come from spending from good property, not from niggardliness or from giving away unwanted items.

The sentence "Allah promises. . ." puts (like the preceding sentence "Satan threatens you . . . ") the cause in place of its effect. Also, it shows the contrast between the promise of Ample-giving, All-knowing Allah and the threat of Satan, so that the spenders may look at both and choose for themselves what is in their own interest.

The verse, in short says:

You choose bad items for spending, instead of good property, because you are afraid of poverty; and because you are unaware of the good results which accrue from spending good things. So far as the fear of poverty is concerned, it is the evil suggestion of Satan, and Satan always wants to put you in perdition and lead you to falsehood and abomination: you should never follow his evil whisperings. What follows a charity of good things is abundance and forgiveness. And it is sure to follow, because it is Allah Who has promised it, and His promise is true; He is Ample-giving - it is easy for Him to fulfill His promise and to give you abundance and forgiveness from Himself; He is All-knowing, not a single thing or condition is hidden from Him; therefore, what He has promised is based on His All-encompassing knowledge.

MIR AHMED ALI (AR)

Fahsha literally means indecency. In this verse it means selfishness or close-fistedness which is, in fact, a worst type of indecency. Shaytan frightens us with loss. He rises in us at the time of giving. So those men of large or moderate means who spend freely to enjoy life but fear that they would be short of those things which they give to the needy, and so withhold them, play in the hands of Shaytan.

Aqa Mahdi Puya says:

Miserliness due to the fear of poverty is an indecent tendency prompted by Shaytan who enjoins selfishness upon those who have devilish characteristics, whereas those who are godly in nature always expect grace and abundance from Allah, therefore, give what they receive from Him.

AYATULLAH KAMAL FAQIH IMANI AND SEVERAL SCHOLARS

At first, the verse admonishes that when you decide to spend in charity or to pay your alms, Satan threatens you of poverty, particularly if you want to give from your worthy and considerable things mentioned in the previous verse. Many a time it happens that this Satanic temptation hinders the act of giving charity and donation. It may affect even on the payment of Alms, Khoms (one fifth levy) , and other obligatory expendings.

"Satan threatens you with poverty ..."

Allah awares man thereby that refraining from giving charity in awe of poverty is a wrong imagination. It is one of the temptations of Satan. Avoiding from thinking that this Satanic temptation looks like a logical scare, it immediately says:

"... and enjoins you to indecency; ..."

Therefore, having awe of poverty and indigency in any condition is wrong, because Satan invites not save to falsehood and aberration.

Basically, any thought which is disappointing, impedimental and short-sighted originates from deviation from natural disposition and following the temptations of Satan. But, any thought which is positive, instructive, and broad-sighted comes from the source of godly inspirations and the pure divine innate disposition.

Keeping in mind that the Satanic temptations are against the law of creation and Allah's commandments and ordinances are paralleled and adapted to creation and disposition, results to a notable livelihood, peacefulness and prosperity.

"...but Allah promises you forgiveness from Himself and abundance..."

In Majma'-ul-Bayan a tradition is narrated about charity from Imam Sadiq (a.s.) who said:

Two things are from Allah and two things are from Satan. Those two from Allah are forgiveness of sins and abundance in sustenance. And those two from Satan are promise to poverty and enjoiment to indecency.

Therefore, as Ibn-Abbas has quoted, the purpose of forgiveness is the forgiveness of sins and the objective meaning of abundance is increase of wealth under the cause of giving charity

It is interesting that Iman Amir-ul-Mu'mineen Ali (a.s.) is narrated who has said:

When you are confronted with poverty, bargain with Allah through charity , (spend out in charity until you get free from poverty) .

The phrase: "Allah is All-Embracing " means that the Power of Allah is vast, and He is All-Knowing unto all affairs and details.