

Be Gentle and Even in Punishment

There are clear examples of how caring the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) was, even to those of his Companions who slipped and violated Islamic rules.

The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) always showed exemplary care for those who accepted the message of Islam. He would not deny his care to anyone, even when they might have perpetrated a serious violation of Islamic teachings. Indeed, he received everyone with a smile, and was genuinely pleased to meet his followers. He never showed anyone that he was not welcome at any time. This was absolutely genuine. The Prophet is not known to have ever wished ill for anyone, not even those who opposed him and took a hostile attitude towards Islam. While he dealt with the enemies of Islam in a serious way, seeking to stop their hostility, he was keen that they also should consider Islam. Therefore, he was never tired of advocating his message, even to the most hardened of its enemies, such as Abu Jahl and Huyay ibn Akhtab.

Yet, public behavior may not indicate one's true feelings. We sometimes speak about adopting a diplomatic attitude when we deal with those who are outspoken in their hostility to Islam. What is meant here is to show friendliness, even though it is not genuine. The aim is to reduce the hostility of such people. While this may be expedient and may be acceptable if it prevents harm and hardship, it does not change the fact that the outward appearance does not reflect true feelings.

It is pertinent to ask whether the Prophet resorted to such pretense in his dealings with people. In answering that, we may quote the following reported by `Amrah bint `Abdur-Rahman, a scholar who belonged to the generation that succeeded the Prophet's Companions: I asked `A'ishah, "What was the Prophet like when he was alone?" She answered, "He was the most caring, most generous of people, always smiling and laughing, may Allah shower His blessings on him." (Ibn Hibban, Ibn Kathir)

Another version of this quotation goes as follows: “Allah’s Messenger was the most friendly and generous of people. He was just like anyone of you, except that he was always smiling and laughing.”

This is a report by one of the closest people to the Prophet, his wife `A’ishah, answering a specific question on his manners when he was at home, not attended by anyone of his Companions. The questioner, a lady scholar of Hadith, was keen on learning the Prophet’s genuine attitude in a situation when one does not need to hide his feelings. Indeed, we often breathe a sigh of relief when we are left alone after having had to put up a less-than-genuine friendly attitude. But we are told here that the Prophet did not do that. On the contrary, he was kind, caring, and generous, with a smile on his face in all situations. This is the perfect attitude.

Indeed, his care for his followers surfaced in all situations, even with those who committed some serious violations of Islamic teachings. The following story illustrates this. Once a man was brought to the Prophet because he had been drinking alcohol. The Prophet told his Companions to give him a beating. [Abu Hurairah](#), the reporter of the hadith said: One person beat him with his hand, another with his robe. When it was over and the man was leaving, some of us said to him, “May Allah humiliate you.” The Prophet said to us, **“Do not say that to him because you would be helping Satan against him. Say instead, ‘May God have mercy on you.’”** ([Al-Bukhari](#), Ahmad, Abu Dawud, and Ibn Hibban)

We see here how the Prophet taught his Companions to be genuinely caring. We have to clarify first that the man was beaten because this is the punishment for drinking in Islam. When a person drinks, he loses some of his mental power; thus his sensitivity is reduced. Admonition is not effective with him. He has to be made to feel the effects of his offense, and this can only be done by beating him. The physical pain would sharpen his senses so as to bring him back to the proper level, when he will feel the shame he brought upon himself.

Yet the Prophet did not approve of anyone going beyond what is prescribed as the proper punishment. When some of those who took part in beating the man added a curse, praying that God should humiliate the man, the Prophet ordered them not to do so. He explained this by saying that cursing the man would help Satan against their brother in faith. This means that if the punishment were carried beyond the appropriate level, it would start to be counterproductive. Satan would use it to try to seduce the man again into committing further sins, either by repeating the same one or doing other prohibited acts.

Another hadith which attains a superior grade of authenticity is reported by Abu Hurairah: A man came to the Prophet and said, “I am perished!” The Prophet asked him what was the matter, and the man said, “I have had intercourse with my wife during the day in [Ramadan](#).” The Prophet asked him whether he could free a slave. The man answered in the negative. The Prophet then asked him, **“Can you fast two consecutive months?”** The man answered again in the negative and said that he could not. The Prophet’s next question was **“Can you feed sixty needy people?”** Once more, the man answered in the negative. The Prophet told him to sit down. After the man sat for a while, a large container was brought to the Prophet full of dates. The Prophet said to the man, **“Take this and give it away in charity.”** The man said, “Is there anyone poorer than me and my family to give it to?” The Prophet laughed heartily that his back teeth were apparent. He then said to the man, **“Take it and feed it to your own family.”** (Related in all six authentic anthologies and by Malik, Ahmad, and others)

This hadith outlines the atonement for the grave offense of having sexual intercourse with one’s wife during the day of fasting. The man who does it will need to free a slave in addition to his repentance of this sin. If he cannot afford this, or in our situation today when, by the grace of God, slavery has been abolished, the atonement takes the form of fasting. If the man cannot do it because of physical weakness or old age, then he should feed sixty needy people, two meals each.

In this case, the Prophet's Companion who committed this offense could not afford to buy a slave, and was too weak to fast. He was also too poor to feed anyone. The Prophet's caring attitude is seen here when he told the man to sit, hoping that something would come up which could help him. When a sufficient quantity of dates was brought to the Prophet, he gave it to the man and told him to give it away in charity. This would have been the atonement. This means that the Muslim state or the Muslim community could help an offender in making the atonement for a serious sin he might have committed.

A special case came up when the man pleaded his own poverty. He wondered whether he could give the dates to anyone poorer than himself. In another version, the man said, "By Allah, no household within the two barren areas surrounding Madinah is poorer than my own family." Hence the Prophet said to him, **"Then eat the dates with your family. This will do for your atonement, but it will not do for anyone else in future."**

This means that for the offender to feed his own family by what he pays in atonement for a sin is not permissible, except in this special case that the Prophet treated as an exception. It is a clear example of how caring the Prophet was, even to those of his Companions who slipped and violated Islamic rules.