

Al-Nu'mān ibn Bashīr narrated saying: I heard God's Messenger (peace be upon him) say; and al-Nu'mān pointed to his ears with his two fingers:

- 1 What is lawful is plain and what is unlawful is plain;
- 2 and in between are doubtful matters unknown to many people.
- 3 Whoever avoids doubtful matters clears himself in regard to his religion and his honour;
- 4 but the one who slips into the doubtful will fall into what is unlawful. [He is] like a shepherd who pastures close to a sanctuary, all but grazing therein.
- 5 For certain, every king has a sanctuary, and for certain God's sanctuary is His prohibitions.
- 6 Indeed, there is in the body a morsel of flesh which, if it be whole, all the body is whole, and which, if it be diseased, all the body is diseased. Indeed, it is the heart.<sup>(1)</sup>

1 Related by al-Bukhari, 2051; Muslim, 1599.

### From the Qur'an

- ﴿He it is who has sent down to you the Book, containing verses which are clear and precise – and these are the essence of the Book – and others are equivocal. Those whose hearts have swerved from the truth pursue that part of it which is equivocal, seeking to create dissension and trying to give it an arbitrary meaning. None knows its final meaning other than God and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge. They say: We believe in it; it is all from our Lord. But only those who are endowed with insight take heed.﴾ (3: 7)
- ﴿If any matter pertaining to peace or war comes to their knowledge, they make it known to all and sundry; whereas, if they would only refer it to the Messenger and to those from among them entrusted with authority, those of them who are engaged in obtaining intelligence would know it.﴾ (4: 83)
- ﴿Let me not suffer disgrace on the Day when all shall be raised from the dead; (87) the Day when neither wealth nor children will be of any benefit; (88) but only the one who comes to God with a sound heart [will be happy].﴾ (26: 87-89)

### The Narrator

Al-Nu'mān ibn Bashīr ibn Sa'd ibn Tha'labah of the Anṣār was a companion of the Prophet, as was his father. Scholars are in agreement that he was one of the Prophet's young companions. He became a scholar and a governor. Mu'āwiyah appointed him Governor of Kufah for a period of time. He was subsequently appointed as Judge of Damascus, succeeding Faḍālah. He then became Governor of Homs in Syria. He narrated a small number of hadiths, but his hadiths are related in all six authentic hadith anthologies. He died in Year 64 AH 684 CE.

### Summary

The Prophet (peace be upon him) clearly states that lawful and unlawful things are made plain for people. However, some matters may appear doubtful to most people who do not have sufficient scholarly knowledge. A person who avoids such doubtful matters maintains the purity of his religion. Those who slip into them run the risk of committing what is unlawful.

The Prophet also makes clear that the well-being of a person depends on keeping one's heart sound and well.



# Message and Meaning

This is one of the most important hadiths. Indeed some scholars say that it represents one-third of Islam, and that Islam is based on this hadith and the two hadiths that say: 'Actions are but by intention', and 'A clear indication of a person's good adherence to Islam is that he abandons what is of no concern to him'. Abu Dāwūd said that Islam is based on four hadiths, and the first is the one that says: 'What is lawful is plain and what is unlawful is plain', which is the present hadith.



The Prophet (peace be upon him) mentions that the rulings of Islam are plain and clear. What is lawful and permitted by God is plain, admitting no doubt. The same applies to what is unlawful, forbidden by God. Its prohibition is made clear. Every person who gets to know Islam and accepts it will easily realize that.

A perfectly lawful thing is to eat of the wholesome food which God states in the Qur'an as lawful, the enjoyment of pleasure with one's lawful spouse, and wearing lawful clothes that are unstained by impurity.

Clear and readily recognizable forbidden things include associating partners with God, the reasons and means that lead to it; eating impurities, carrion and pig meat; drinking alcohol; dealing unjustly with people, and taking their money by false claims, etc.



In between these two states of clearly lawful things and clearly unlawful ones, there are matters that appear doubtful to many people. They do not know whether they are permissible or not. This is not due to their being unexplained by Islam. God sent His Messenger (peace be upon him) to fully explain Islamic rulings. God says: 'This day I have perfected your religion for you and have bestowed on you the full measure of My blessings and have chosen Islam as a religion for you'. (5: 3) However, the ruling concerning such matters may be unknown to many people because they do not have the required standard of knowledge. Furthermore, they may not be readily apparent to some scholars for some reason or another. However, other scholars will have their rulings clear, with evidence from the Qur'an, the Sunnah, the unanimity of scholars or analogy.



A person who steers away from doubtful matters and prefers not to get involved in them clears himself in regard to his religion. He incurs neither blame nor punishment. He also clears himself with regard to his honour, as no one can criticize him.

This is indeed the properly cautious attitude that avoids what is in doubt and abandons what may cause an adverse result in the life to come. By contrast, *zuhd* or ascetism means abandoning what is permissible because it may lower one's status in the life to come. As such, ascetism is a higher grade, but not required as a duty, while proper caution is necessary for all Muslims.



A person who indulges in such doubtful matters, using no caution, may ultimately find himself committing what is prohibited. Complacency may become a habit and he will then find it easy to do all sorts of doubtful things, and this will ultimately lead to doing what is forbidden, either deliberately or in ignorance. A shepherd who takes his sheep and other animals to graze close to a sanctuary, or a preservation area, may be unable to keep his animals off it, as one of them may break loose without his notice. Or he may even experience an urge to go into it. Such a shepherd is liable to the punishment stated for unauthorized entry of the sanctuary. The same is the case of one who indulges in doubtful matters. These become the preliminaries of what is forbidden and he may commit the sin of indulging in what God has forbidden, incurring His punishment.



Every king has a sanctuary which he preserves and prevents entry to, imposing a punishment for unauthorized entry. Yet to God applies the attributes of all that is most sublime. His sanctuary is the total sum of what He has forbidden, i.e. disbelief and sinful practices. Whoever commits a sin violates God's sanctuary and incurs His punishment. Whoever gets close to it runs the risk of entry. The one who is cautious and steers away from whatever doubtful matters that bring him close to sin ensures his safety.



The Prophet (peace be upon him) tells us that in everyone's body there is a small piece of flesh, which is the heart. This physical heart is closely related to the conceptual heart where faith resides and which either remains sound and healthy or becomes corrupt.



If the heart is in sound and healthy condition, a person is physically healthy, but when his heart is diseased, he feels very sick. The heart is the king and all the body organs are its troops. When the king is healthy, the troops are in good condition, and the reverse is also true.

A sound heart is one which is full of the love of God, believes in God's oneness and is free of whatever God dislikes. It loves what God loves and hates what God rejects. A corrupt heart is the very opposite.

God has made the heart the place where both faith and disbelief settle. He says: 'God has caused [your] faith to be dear to you, and has given it beauty in your hearts, and has made hateful to you unbelief, wrongdoing and disobedience of God. Such indeed are they who follow the right course'. (49: 7) 'Pay no heed to any whose heart We have left to be negligent of all remembrance of Us because he always followed his own desires, and whose case has gone beyond all bounds.' (18: 28)

# Implementation

1

God has made all His legislation clear and plain for His servants. Everyone should learn these from scholars, and should refer to them when one is unsure of something. No one has any excuse for failing to ask scholars whether a certain action is permissible or not.

2

God has perfected the blessing He has bestowed on His servants by giving them a complete religion in which all that is lawful or unlawful is made clear. No one can make any idle claim that religious rulings do not cover the entire faith.

3

Scholars and advocates of Islam must explain what is lawful and what is not. They should teach people God's legislation and give them rulings concerning new types of deals and contracts.

4

The hadith refers to the special status of scholars, as they are the ones who can identify doubtful matters. Whoever wants to join their ranks should be keen to acquire a thorough knowledge of Islamic law.

5

That some matters are doubtful is due to the fact that most people are unaware of the Islamic verdict concerning them and the evidence supporting such verdicts. Some rulings are well known to the majority of people, while others remain known only to Islamic scholars. No one should ever think that the divine faith of Islam has not been given to people in full.

6

When a Muslim is faced with a situation and he is unaware of the Islamic ruling regarding it, he should refer to Islamic scholars, as they are the ones who know the religious rulings and their detailed evidence.

7

Every Muslim should steer away from doubtful matters in order to keep himself clear in regard to his faith and honour.

8

Every Muslim should safeguard his honour from people's idle talk.

9

Steering away from doubtful matters reflects obedience of the Prophet's order: 'Abandon that which makes you doubt for that which does not make you doubt'.<sup>(1)</sup>

1 Related by al-Tirmidhī, 2518; al-Nasā'ī, 5711.

10

A person who slackens in being God-fearing and indulges in doubtful matters will find himself drawn into what is forbidden. His complacency in regard to what is doubtful will lead him to be careless about committing what is unlawful. Some scholars said that a minor sin will lead to a major one and the major sin will lead to disbelief. Another scholar said: 'Sins are the way leading to disbelief'. It is imperative then to steer away from what is doubtful so as to prevent ourselves from being swept away by a flood of sins.

11

When a person takes a complacent attitude, particularly regarding what is discouraged, under the pretext that they are not forbidden, this may put him on the wrong course. This is especially true if he does not have a good share of recommended and voluntary worship. He may in time come to think of his religious duties as burdensome and tempted by what is forbidden.

12

Satan does not start whispering to a person to commit major sins or to disbelieve all at once. He always takes a gradual approach, lulling him first into negligence of duty, then steering him into what is doubtful or discouraged. When a person has done this time after time, it becomes easy for him to trespass into the forbidden area. Therefore, we should always be wary of Satan's devious approach and shun him right at the start.

13

The Prophet (peace be upon him) uses images and similes to illustrate his meaning and make it easily understood. In this hadith, he likens a person who indulges in doubtful matters to a shepherd grazing close to a sanctuary. He also compares the punishment of a sinner to the punishment of one who trespasses into a king's sanctuary. Advocates of Islam and educators should make their meanings clear to their audience, using similes and other figures of speech.

14

Devout worshippers focused on ensuring that their hearts were sound, healing them of any ills. This is the right approach, because a person's heart is a king commanding other organs. They move in the direction the heart points out to them, whether it follows guidance or leads to error.

15

A person whose open conduct is improper should not imagine that he is right internally. The hadith implies that when the inner self is right, the apparent conduct is right. Thus, when one's heart is God-fearing, one's organs will definitely follow. Therefore, the one who commits what is wrong and indulges in what is forbidden, disrespecting God's limits, cannot be good at heart.

