

Modesty (part 2 of 3): Stories on Modesty I

Description: Three stories from the prophetic narrations demonstrating the relationship between the character traits of modesty as shyness, and the seemly behavior that results from actively pursuing them.

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Muhammad and Modesty before God

The Prophet, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, said:

"Every religion has its characteristic, and the characteristic of Islam is modesty." (*al-Muwatta*)

Modesty, in the sense of shyly protecting oneself with propriety from the lustful or envious gaze, means one takes care about how to express oneself in word and deed. One does not want others to look at one strangely or as if one is blameworthy. It encourages one to be proper in behavior and thought with other people, and with one's relationship with God. The Prophet once said to his companions:

"Be bashful before God according to His right to modesty before Him".

They said: "O Messenger of God, verily we are shy, praise be to God."

He said: "That is not it. Modesty before God according to His right to modesty is that you protect your mind in what it learns; your stomach in what it ingests. And remember death and the tribulations attached to it; and whoever wishes for the Hereafter, leaves the adornments of this life.

So whoever does all that is truly bashful before God according to His Right to modesty".^[1]

Modesty and shame apply to every aspect of one's life, and awareness of God's presence helps one to be bashful and seemly in the way we comport ourselves in every activity we are engaged in. It crowns the moral ethics of behavior and practice, for it inspires him to do all that is beautiful and prevents him from doing all that is wicked. It is a shield of chastity for the body and of purity for the soul, as private shame concerning one's wickedness stems from being aware that God is watching. The Prophet said:

"Modesty is from the faith, and the faith is in Paradise." (*Ahmed*)

Muhammad and the Wedding Feast

On the occasion of his marriage in Medina with Zaynab, the daughter of Jahsh, the Prophet invited the people to his wedding feast. This was a late morning invitation, and

most people simply rose and left after eating, as was the custom. The bridegroom, however, remained sitting and some people, perhaps thinking that this was a signal that they, too, should remain with him, stayed behind after the other guests had left. Out of propriety, the Messenger of God did not like to tell the people to go away, so he got up and left the room with his ward, ibn Abbas.

He went as far as the room of Aisha, another of his wives, before returning back to Zaynab's room, expecting the guests to have taken the hint. However, they were still there, sitting in their places, so he turned away once again and went back to Aisha's room, still accompanied by his ward.

The second time they returned the people had left, so the Messenger of God went in. Ibn Abbas was going to follow him, but Muhammad took the dividing curtain and drew it across the doorway, blocking the egress^[2]

One of the story's lessons is that a person's home is private and one should be shy of abusing an invitation to it. Moreover, because Muhammad was too nice to ask people to leave, his actions provide an example of how to teach a lesson without being offensive. He used a non-verbal means to show the people they should leave and, once his private space was vacated, he used another non-verbal gesture to drive home the fact that the invitation was over.

Moses and Zaphorah

After waiting for a long time in the queue, being only two females among all the males, someone finally helped them, and they were able to take their flock of sheep and goats home. Their father was old, and they had no brother to do their outside chores. Being one of the most onerous of tasks, drawing water from the well in order to water one's livestock was one performed by men; a lucky day for them to come home early with the drove freshly watered. The father was surprised about their early return, and when he inquired into the occurrence, his daughters told him that a man who seemed a traveler had helped them. The father asked one of them to seek the man out and invite him home. Upon returning to the well, the lady approached him shyly. When she was in earshot, she gave him her father's invitation so that he might recompense him for his help. He kept his gaze low to the ground as he replied to her, saying that he had done it for the sake of God alone, and required no compensation. However, realizing that this was God sent help, he accepted the invitation. As she was walking ahead of him, the wind blew her dress, which revealed part of her lower legs, so he asked her to walk behind him and point out the way he should follow when he reached a fork in the foot path.

Once they arrived at the house, the father presented him with a meal and asked where he was from. The man told him that he was a fugitive from Egypt. The daughter who had brought him home whispered to her father: "O Father, hire him, because the best of the workers is one who is strong and trustworthy."

He asked her: "How do you know he is strong?"

She said: "He lifted the stone lid of the well that cannot be removed except by many

together."

He asked her: "How do you know that he is trustworthy?"

She said: "He asked me to walk behind him so that he couldn't see me as I walked, and when I conversed with him, he kept his gaze low with shyness and respect."

This was Prophet Moses, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, who had run away from Egypt after killing someone by mistake, and the father of the girls was a God fearing man from the tribes of Midian; a man who was sonless, but had had these two daughters.

The verse in the Quran that tells us this story stresses upon the manner of her approaching Moses:

**"So one of the two (daughters) came to him walking modestly..."
(Quran 28:25)**

Both the way Zaphorah approached Moses and his care about not seeing more of her than was needful at the time describe acute senses of propriety. Neither had a chaperone, nor could people see what they did, yet both conducted themselves with the utmost decorum. This was done out of fear of the One who sees everything. The outcome was that when her father proposed to Moses that he marry one of his daughters, Moses considered them a suitable marriage prospect. He and his daughters also saw in him all the virtues a man needs as a mate for a woman to consent to his guidance and nurture through life. Moses accepted, and also ten years hire as a shepherd.

Endnotes:

[1] This paraphrases a prophetic narration found in the collection of *Tirmidhi*

[2] Ibn Abbas reported the story in a Prophetic narration collected by *Al-Bukhari*.

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