

Imam Khattab's Views On The Treatment of Repentant Sinners and Islamic Da'wa

The Inter-relatedness of Repentance, Islamic Da'wa, and The Rules of Interpersonal Relationships Imposed by the Qur'ān

Before we start our talk today, I would like to inform you that the father of Mrs. Yusuf Ramadan, from Sultan Yāqoob, has passed away in Lebanon. Let us recite Fātīhah¹ for him.

Today I will talk about some of the things I have witnessed in some Muslim countries during my recent travels, and, as a result of which, I consider that Islam is being oppressed even by some of its own people. Some Muslims think that they are serving Islam, but, in fact, they are hurting Islam.

This week, with the loss of Princess Diana and the loss of Mother Teresa, what I have watched on the television screen made me review my understanding and stirred me to think. Based upon what we have seen yesterday in Diana's funeral, how that woman traveled East and West, North and South for humanitarian reasons, we wonder if she is going to be equal to someone who says *Ashhadu Allah ilaha Illalah Muhammad-ur Rasūlallah*² even though the latter never *did* any

good? It made me think. When Kat Stephen converted to Islam, some of our brothers with narrow minds questioned his past, especially his money: he made that money from music which is haram³ and he should throw that money in the lake because it is haram money. Other similar cases are those of Shadia, Hasan Yusuf and his wife, and other actresses, who changed their lives, started to attire in hijab, and came to be seen in mosques rather than in the theaters. Nowadays, in Egypt, there is a tidal wave of "conversion" to Islam among actors and actresses. I am sure you are familiar with a very famous singer in Egypt by the name of Shadia. Shadia now wears a hijab; has performed Hajj, has given up acting, holds sessions to teach her counterparts Islam, and never misses any opportunity to attend Qur'anic study sessions. All this is very, very commendable, because, as you know, those actors and actresses have many admirers; when these admirers see them changing their way of life, I am sure they will follow. But, some of our Muslims are very anxious and have enquired

¹ The opening chapter of the Qur'an

² I bear witness that there is no God but one God, and I bear

witness that Muhammad is His prophet

³ That which is forbidden or sinful

whether the money Shadia earned from her acting is halal⁴ or haram. According to them, if she truly would like to clear herself of her sinful past, she should burn all that money and get rid of any real estate she owns; in other words, divest herself and make a pauper of herself. That is the sort of "encouragement" which is being offered to actors and actresses there. It is a sad situation. The Qur'anic verse, in this respect, says: [Imam quotes Arabic. The translation is:]

"Say: [Thus speaks God] 'O you servants of mine who have transgressed against your own selves! Despair not of God's mercy: behold, God forgives all sins [whenever the sinner repents and returns to Him] – for, verily, He alone is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace'" [39:53].

And the Prophet said: "Following the road of Islam will abolish everything you had done before starting that road." And another Qur'anic verse says: [Imam quotes Arabic. The translation is:]

"Those who repent and attain to faith and do righteous deeds: for it is they whose erstwhile bad deeds God will transform into good ones – seeing that God is indeed much forgiving, a dispenser of grace, and seeing that he who repents and henceforth does what is right has truly turned unto God by this very act of repentance" [25:70-71].

When we combine all these Qur'anic verses and hadith,⁵ I don't know why people are questioning such a woman about her past and her sincerity. If a person has changed her way of life entirely, why are we inquiring about her wealth which is a thing of the past?

Even more amazing is the story of a new actress in Egypt who decided to be a good Muslim. She went to one of the shaykhs⁶ – who belongs in the category of "very strict Muslims" – who said to her: "Before you come to repent for your past, I would like you to clean the washrooms of the mosque, so, at least, you will lower yourself to the level of the maids and the servants who serve you in your home." To me, this is nothing but sheer humiliation. If I were in his place, I would have told her, "Welcome to the fold of Islam!" and then encouraged her and taken her step by step to reach her goal. But that is the way some shaykhs treat those people. In view of the saying of Allah, "Call thou all mankind unto thy Sustainer's path with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with

them in the most kindly manner: for, behold, thy Sustainer knows best as to who strays from His path, and best knows He as to who are the right-guided",⁷ I wonder where such treatment on the part of the shaykhs fits in.

Then, after asking humiliating questions about their past, the next condition put up for them is that they should get out of the business of acting. If I were in place of those shaykhs, I would tell them to continue their acting profession, but simply change the way their industry works. We have Qur'anic stories: we have the story of Syyedna Yusuf – a whole chapter in the Qur'an – they could make a movie of that episode and it may explain the lessons in it better than 100 *'alims*⁸ could. And it would be very nice if such movies would be dubbed into other languages and distributed all over the world. This will be *da'wa*.⁹ We have 25 other stories in the Qur'an such as the story of *Al Kahf*, the story of *Ashab ul Okhdood*, we have the story of *Al Fil* and the attack on Al Ka'bah. Movies can be made out of all these great stories.

If I were in a position to say something to those actors and actresses I would say this: "Now that God has guided you to the right way, serve Islam by turning into a preacher in your own profession." But we don't take advantage of such opportunities, while here, in America, when Israel wants to put something in the hearts and minds of the American people, they enlist their partisans in Hollywood to make a movie and send it around the world. We have seen a movie, here, depicting a Muslim man getting arrested by the FBI while praying on his prayer rug, because he was going to blow up the White House.¹⁰ The effect this has upon the minds of the American people is that every Muslim who prays is a killer. That's how the people are influenced; that is how the television is influencing the people. But, when people in Muslim lands who are in that profession and have the experience want to be good, practicing Muslims, we shoo them away.

We study our old books of tafseer¹¹ but we never look at the realities of life – our prevailing circumstances. When you are in a mosque like this¹² either for a dinner or attending a wedding, a lot of our people, nowadays, say that the

⁴ That which is permitted or allowed

⁵ A report or account of what the Prophet said

⁶ A religious leader

⁷ 16:125

⁸ Scholars

⁹ Preaching (Islam)

¹⁰ Released in 1990

¹¹ Qur'anic exegesis

¹² Islamic Center of Greater Toledo, Ohio, USA

ladies should be on one side, and the men should be on the other side, and it would be even better if we have a partition between the two, one preferably made of concrete. This is the way we act. And, yet, I meet the same ladies in the shopping center. Is it, then, prohibited only to see them in the mosque but not in the shopping center? Is it not prohibited to see them in the street, on the bus, or in the house? We look into our books of tafseer and follow what is in them literally; we don't look at the realities of life and we don't compare the life of today with the life of yesterday. I will give you an example of another incident I know.

Some people were invited to a house, here, in Toledo. The coffee was delivered from the restaurant to the house but the guests refused to drink it. When they were asked why they refused to drink the coffee since they had requested it, the reply was: "O, I thought you were going to make it at home, but you ordered it from a Christian restaurant, so that is Christian water!" Do not forget that the water I have in my house is "Christian" too! This means that I have been drinking "Christian" water for eight years and I must be a *kafir* by now! This is the mentality of some Muslims, and that is why, as long as we don't change our thinking, we are going to stay oppressed forever. We have to think about and understand Islam in a new way. We need to "renew" our Islam if we are to live in America.

We have to look to the world around us. Islam is like moldable clay. You could shape it the way you want and yet not violate the spirit of the faith. There are some very, very essential things in Islam and no two people will differ about them. For example, you will never find a Muslim who will say that pork is halal. No one says Hajj is not necessary, or zakah is not *fard*, or salah is not *fard*,¹³ because these are the essentials of the faith, but, when it comes to the very, very insignificant and trivial things, that is where our heated debates and bitter disagreements occur; our efforts are wasted, and our time is wasted over these very minor things.

A man came, one day, to the Prophet and asked him to guide him to something which would take him to heaven. The Prophet said: "Say, 'I believe in God' – *aamanto billah* – and then follow the Straight Way." So, the first thing recommended by the Prophet is simply an oral declaration. In other words, when you hear someone recite *Ashhadu Allah ilaha Illalah wa Ashhadu anna Muhammad arRasoolallah*, that is enough to judge

him as a Muslim, be that he is saying it from his heart or not – only God alone knows how he will be accounted for that; it is not your business and it is not my business. We believe that there is only one Judge – Allah – He is the one who will judge us. We cannot judge anybody in this life.

The declaration of *Ashhadu Allah ilaha Illalah wa Ashhadu anna Muhammad arRasoolallah* can be turned into what we call *iman* if the person will manifest that saying in his actions. What are those actions? According to many books of tafseer, those actions are prayers (salah), fasting, paying the zakah, and going for pilgrimage: if a person does these things, then, he is manifesting *Ashhadu Allah ilaha Illalah wa Ashhadu anna Muhammad arRasoolallah* in action. I say, personally, this is not enough. There are a lot of people who do these four, among them are some who live and do business around the Ka'bah, and when you go and buy a piece of cloth from them they will cheat you, lie to you, and overcharge you, but, as soon as they hear the *adhan*,¹⁴ they go very fast to the Ka'bah for prayer. So this means that praying, fasting, zakah, and Hajj are not enough. [Imam quotes:]

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ ثُمَّ اسْتَقَامُوا¹⁵.

Thummas-thaqāma. What is *isthaqāma*? *Isthaqāma* means every minute of your life; it means you have to observe God and be conscious of Him while doing every action of your life – it is not just the prayer, fasting, zakah, and Hajj. So what are these four obligations then? They are a sort of refresher course. You know, when a doctor graduates from medical school, his education is not finished. Every seven years he is required to take and pass a test to make sure he is keeping abreast with developments in the field of medicine. Similarly, the prayer, the fasting, the zakah, and the Hajj are refresher courses to remind the Muslim that he is Muslim and to refresh his *iman*.

When you say *aamanto-billah* – I believe in God – and then you are mindful of God in every action you do, and in all your intentions, then, this is called *isthaqāma*. In every rak'at of our ritual prayer, we say, "O God, You alone we worship and You alone we ask for help. Show us the Straight Way." We ask Allah's help to be shown the Straight Way which is to be followed every minute of our lives: in our walking, in our sleeping, in our sitting, in our business, our relationships at all levels; in all these situations we have to keep God in mind.

¹³ Obligatory

¹⁴ Call for prayer

¹⁵ 41:30,46:13

That is the meaning of "Straight Way" in the advice given by the Prophet to that man.

What will be the end of those people who follow this Straight Way? The Qur'an talks about it. At the time of death, when the soul is separating from the body, the angels come to such people saying, don't be scared of what is awaiting you, because you followed the Straight Way and you are going to receive your reward. **لَا تَحْزَنُوا** Don't be sad for what you have left behind of children and wealth because that is of no concern for you now, and of no benefit for you any more; don't be sad for these things, but have the glad tidings that you are going to receive the Paradise which you were promised, if you acted according to the rules of God and according to the rules of *isthaqāma*. The angels will continue to say: "We are your supporters in this life and will be your supporters in the life to come; and in that life to come you shall have all that your souls may desire, and in it you shall have all that you ever prayed for, as a ready welcome from your God the *Ghafūr-ur Rahīm*" [41:30-32].

Note the description of heaven here. It is a description which does not provide any details or specifics of Heaven. On the other hand, there are some other Qur'anic verses which describe heaven for you in terminology that human beings can understand: it has raised couches, rows of decorations, grapes, and the flesh of fowl, and... And, in Saudi Arabia, especially, they emphasize *al-hūra'yeen*:¹⁶ they say it means you will get all the women you want in the form of marrying *hūra'yeen*, although there is no indication that the *hūra'yeen* are women. *Hūra'yeen* could be men – what do you think, there is no equality even in Heaven? That's why I say we, we need a new look at the Qur'an. Our tafseers are full of Israeli hadith – things which the Prophet never said – this is why we need to utilize our minds, but we don't: our Muslim brothers and sisters quote these ahadith to this day. The angels described heaven in terminology that is malleable, just as the Prophet, peace be upon him, said: "In Heaven there is what no eye has ever seen, and no ear has ever heard, and no heart of man has ever conceived."

Every Muslim man or woman, in his or her own profession, and in his behavior and daily conduct and relationships, is a *da'wa* for Islam. This is in sharp contrast to other religions. In Christianity, for example, there is the

institution of priesthood. What the priest says is final. You have no right to argue because he is the ordained man and he is the one who knows and the rest don't know. In Islam it is not like that. There is no priesthood in Islam. When an imam¹⁷ gives a speech, anyone may oppose the view(s) being expounded, if they have proof to back up their dissenting position, and prove him wrong. We have an example of that in Islamic history which has some bearing upon what we see these days in the Arab world. When a man wants to get married and goes to ask for the hand of a girl, her parents will ask for the impossible: a very large dowry; the ceremony to be held in a certain hotel, preferably in Switzerland; 1000 guests should be invited for dinner – all to be paid for by the groom. The groom concludes that he cannot bear the financial burden so he buys a ticket for one thousand dollars to America, and gets a girl, here, free of charge. It's cheaper! And blue eyes and fair skin, also!

At the time of Omar bin Khattab, similar practices were prevalent. Once Omar, while giving his sermon, said to the people: "We have to limit the size of the dowry and fix it at a certain amount." Omar bin Khattab was the emperor of the Muslim empire and when he said that, a woman in the back of the mosque stood up and said to him: "Omar, you are wrong." Can you say this to any president nowadays? If you do, your family will not find you; you will disappear. This, also, is an indication that the women did not have a concrete wall between them and the imam at that time. "You are wrong. How can you say this when the Qur'an says: "But if you desire the exchange of a wife in place of a wife, and you have given one of them a *qintār*,¹⁸ do not take away anything thereof. . ." Omar listened to the Qur'anic verse and waited for a moment, and said: "This woman is right and Omar is wrong." That is the way of Islam. So, as Muslims, you are not supposed to listen to a "Muslim priest" and take his word for gospel. If it does not make sense, and if you have proof from the Qur'an or the hadith which contradicts what any imam is saying, interrupt him; that is Islam. Islamic *da'wa* is not the job of the imam; it is the job of every Muslim. The Qur'anic verse states: who is better than the one who is preaching to the way of God by doing good deeds and he says, "I am a Muslim?"¹⁹

¹⁷ A religious leader

¹⁸ The word "qintār" literally means a Talent of gold, which is equivalent to 1,200 ounces of gold

¹⁹ 41:33

¹⁶ Companions

In the olden days, people used to travel between Makkah and Medina on camelback. It took them one month. Some people used to walk the distance. Some people from far away countries would start their travels for the pilgrimage one year ahead. Today, we travel to Hajj 24 hours before it commences because of the speed of air travel. We utilize that *ni'ama*.²⁰ The plane is air-conditioned and has very nice hostesses to serve us while we are going for pilgrimage. Given a choice in choosing an airline, sometimes we select, say, Air France. Why? Because we trust it more than we trust a Muslim-owned/operated airline or, at least, we expect better service than on the Muslim airline. Why? Why do we trust the non-Muslims more than the Muslims? That is because the conduct and behavior of the non-Muslims is more Islamic than that of the Muslims; we are neglecting our Islam and they are practicing it more than us.

Islam constitutes relationships on a variety of levels: the relationship between man and man, between husband and wife, between governments, between Muslims and non-Muslims. Essentially, this is Islam, and the Qur'an is full of rules governing such relationships and showing the Muslims how to act according to them.

The state of communications is one measure of the advancement of a country. Nowadays there are telephones, fax machines, and cellular phones. When I go to Egypt, I visit my sister, but before I go, I phone her and I say that, *insh'allah*, I'll be there tomorrow at around 10A.M. Then, when I go to her house, I find that the house is ready to receive me. That is what Islam recommends us to do. If I go and knock at the door without any prior phone call, she has sisters-in-law and may be one of them is not attired in the right clothes, and I am a stranger to them. The Qur'anic verse says: "O you who believe, don't enter houses other than your own unless you have obtained permission and greeted the people in the house."²¹ This is one of the basic rules of Islam in our relationship with one another. We read that verse and pass over it, and we don't discern the depth of its meaning.

Suppose someone knocks at my door, especially in America, at a late hour of the night, immediately I'll assume it is a thief. But if this person greets me by saying *Assalam-u-Alaykum*, it means he is giving me security, because a thief will never say *Assalam-u-Alaykum* to me. America is an advanced

country, advanced even in crime. People are killed in the street without notice. Personally, I have seven big locks on the doors of my house, in addition to the normal locks. Why? Because we are in a country where there is no security. This country has unusual laws which are different from those in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and every other Muslim country. In Saudi Arabia, if a man kidnaps a woman, he is beheaded. In America, if a man kidnaps a woman, he will be put, if convicted, in a prison cell furnished with a TV – a colored one – a radio to listen to music and enjoy, and he is fed chicken at noon and steak for dinner. So he will kidnap again when he is released early on good behavior. This is the system here.

We find that the Qur'an emphasizes security. The verse says: "Let them worship the God of this house – Al Ka'bah – the One who fed them and satisfied their hunger, and made them secure from fear."²² And, so that everybody should feel secure, Islam teaches us: [Imam quotes Arabic verses. The translation is:]

"Don't enter any house other than your own unless you have obtained permission and greeted the people in the house with the greetings of peace. This is enjoined upon you for your own good, so that you might bear your mutual rights in mind. Hence, even if you find no one within the house, do not enter it until you are given leave [i.e. by the rightful owner or caretaker]; and if you are told, "Turn back", then turn back. This will be most conducive to your purity; and God has full knowledge of all that you do" [24:27-28].

If we look at Islam and realize the beauty of its rules, and follow them, we would be on top. But we think, sometimes, we are serving Islam while we are misrepresenting Islam. Take, for example, the group of men from Pakistan who came to America for *tabligh*.²³ As you know, these people are accustomed to sleeping and cooking in the mosques wherever they go. They came to Toledo and found our mosque locked, so they went to Shaykh Farooq's²⁴ house at 1 o'clock in the morning and started to knock on his door. When Shaykh Farooq saw that there were five or six men, he got scared and did not open the door for them, but, instead, called me on the telephone. The *tablighis* knocked insistently, and when they did not get a prompt response, they started pulling on the storm

²⁰ Bounty of God

²¹ 24:27

²² Chapter 106 in the Qur'an

²³ To preach Islam

²⁴ The imam-in-training, living in the house located on the Islamic Center premises

door. At this point, I told him to call the police right away and I went to his house as well. Three police cars and I showed up simultaneously, and we found that the men were *Tablighi Jama'at*. It was very embarrassing, and I had to explain to the police that these men were not burglars. Of course, I did not tell them that these are men preaching to the way of Islam! That is how we dishonor the reputation of Islam. We are not acting like Muslims ourselves. Before we preach Islam, we have to know what it means to be a Muslim in practice and in behavior every minute of our lives. There are some people who have never entered a mosque, yet they are among the best Muslims because they are actually practicing Islam in their lives. They are praying regularly in their homes, or they pray in the streets, and they are doing every obligation imposed upon them by Islam. The criterion for judging a good Muslim is not that he comes to the mosque. The mosque is only a place for people to gather. For us, Muslims, this whole earth is a mosque. The Prophet said: "The whole earth is, for me, a mosque, and a place of purification" meaning that, when there is no water you perform *tayammum* and perform your obligatory prayer (salah) wherever you are, *in addition to the "prayer" which you must perform every minute of your life because you are in the "mosque" all the time.*

The Qur'an looks at the *Jum'ah* prayer as the only

obligatory prayer to be performed in congregation. Since the *khutba*²⁵ is a part of it, one must listen to the sermon. The Qur'anic verse which imposed that ruling did not tell us to pray and then sit around in the mosque, but says that, as soon as you finish your prayer, get back quickly to your work and earn your living. From this we understand that Islam is a religion that advocates hard work, it is a religion of action, a religion of dynamism. [Imam quotes Arabic verse. The translation is:]

"O you who believe! When the call to prayer is sounded on the day of congregation, hasten to the remembrance of God, and leave all worldly commerce: this is for your own good, if you but knew it. And when the prayer is ended, disperse on earth and seek the provisions of God and earn your living, but remember God often, so that you might attain to a happy state" [62:9-10].

That is Islam. In Islam, you are responsible for certain obligations, and as soon as you complete these obligations, you are free to work and to earn your living, but you are to remember God in every action that you undertake. The first verse of the Qur'an revealed to Muhammad, in the cave of Hira, was: "Iqra'!" It means "Read!" This was the first commandment given to Muhammad and this is the message for his people: "Read!" Education is a must. . . . Education is a must for all Muslims – males and females.²⁶

²⁵ Sermon

²⁶ Sermon of Sunday, May 20, 1990.