

Chapter Ten

LISTENING TO OTHERS AND LEARNING

Our Islam teaches us to listen and to learn. We should accept sincere advice and seek counsel before we make important decisions. This way we are less likely to make mistakes and to benefit from the wisdom and experience of others.

Important concepts discussed

- 1- We should never stop learning and improving
- 2- We should listen attentively to advice and not be arrogant
- 3- We should seek input and counsel before making decisions
- 4- Our example of listening to others and seeking input is Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

We should never stop learning and trying to improve

Islam recognizes the importance of knowledge and learning. The order came from God to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to seek true knowledge:

﴿ وَقُلْ رَبِّ زِدْنِي عِلْمًا ﴾ [طه: ١١٤]

but say, "O my Lord! advance me in knowledge."

Ta Ha 20 : 114

The Qur'an also praises those who know and understand:

﴿ قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ۗ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ ﴿٩﴾ ﴾

[الزمر: ٩]

Say: "Are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who are endowed with understanding that receive admonition.

Az-Zumar 39 : 9

How can we increase our knowledge?

- By careful reading and reflecting on what we have read
- By critical thinking
- By listening to others and learning from them
- By putting our knowledge into good use and applying what we know

Many people gloss over what they read and do not analyze or carefully consider or reflect on what they have read. Such reading does not benefit them or leave an impact on their behavior. We must think critically and try to utilize and benefit from what we have learned. One of the companions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was asked: Who is a learned person and a scholar? He said: (A scholar is a person who applies what he knows and what he has learned).

We can learn a great deal through listening to others carefully, and benefiting from their experience and wisdom. Only a fool or an arrogant person refuse to listen or learn from others. The Qur'an relates to us the story of Prophet Sulaiman (Solomon) who learned from a bird things that he was not aware of:

﴿ وَتَفَقَّدَ الطَّيْرَ فَقَالَ مَا لِيَ لَا أَرَى الْهَدْهَدَ أَمْ كَانَ مِنَ الْغَائِبِينَ ﴿٢٠﴾ ﴾

[النمل: ٢٠]

And he took a muster of the Birds; and he said: "Why is it I see not the Hoopoe? Or is he among the absentees?

An-Naml 27 : 20

﴿ لَاَعْدِبْتَهُ، عَدَابًا شَدِيدًا أَوْ لَأَذْنَحْتَهُ، أَوْ لَيَأْتِيَنِي بِسُلْطَنٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴿٢١﴾ ﴾

[النمل: ٢١]

"I will certainly punish him with a severe penalty, or execute him, unless he bring me a clear reason (for absence)."

An-Naml 27 : 21

﴿ فَمَكَثَ غَيْرَ بَعِيدٍ فَقَالَ أَحَطْتُ بِمَا لَمْ تُحِطْ بِهِ - وَجِئْتُكَ مِنْ سَبَإٍ بِنَبَأٍ يَقِينٍ ﴿٢١﴾ ﴾

[النمل: ٢٢]

But the Hoopoe tarried not far: he (came up and) said: "I have compassed (territory) which thou hast not compassed, and I have come to thee from Saba with tidings true.

An-Naml 27 : 22

﴿ إِنِّي وَجَدْتُ امْرَأَةً تَمْلِكُهُمْ وَأُوتِيَتْ مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهِيَ عَلَى عَرْشٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿٢٢﴾ ﴾

[النمل: ٢٣]

"I found (there) a woman ruling over them and provided with every requisite; and she has a magnificent throne.

An-Naml 27 : 23

﴿ وَجَدْتُهَا وَقَوْمَهَا يَسْجُدُونَ لِلشَّمْسِ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَزَيَّنَ لَهُمُ الشَّيْطَانُ أَعْمَالَهُمْ

﴿ فَصَدَّهُمْ عَنِ السَّبِيلِ فَهُمْ لَا يَهْتَدُونَ ﴿٢٤﴾ ﴾ [النمل: ٢٤]

"I found her and her people worshipping the sun besides Allah: Satan has made their deeds seem pleasing to their eyes, and has kept them away from the Path, so they receive no guidance,

An-Naml 27 : 24

Prophet Musa (Moses) was told to listen to and learn from the wise righteous servant of God: Al-Khidr, who taught him not to jump to conclusions and to be patient. Moses did not understand why this righteous wise man made a hole in the ship, or killed a young boy for no reason, and why he helped support the wall in the village after the people in the village refused to help them. Once he was provided with answers he could see things clearly and could understand the man's behavior. Before he was enlightened he was impatient and jumped to conclusions and made wrong assumptions:

﴿ أَمَّا السَّفِينَةُ فَكَانَتْ لِمَسْكِينٍ يَعْمَلُونَ فِي الْبَحْرِ فَأَرَدْتُ أَنْ أَعِيبَهَا وَكَانَ وَرَاءَهُمْ

مَلِكٌ يَأْخُذُ كُلَّ سَفِينَةٍ غَصْبًا ﴿٧٩﴾ [الكهف: ٧٩]

"As for the boat, it belonged to certain men in dire want: they plied on the water: I but wished to render it unserviceable, for there was after them a certain king who seized on every boat by force.

Al-Kahf 18 : 79

﴿ وَأَمَّا الْغُلَامُ فَكَانَ أَبُوَاهُ مُؤْمِنِينَ فَخَشِينَا أَنْ يُرْهَقَهُمَا طُغْيَانًا وَكُفْرًا ﴿٨٠﴾ ﴾

[الكهف: ٨٠]

"As for the youth, his parents were people of Faith, and we feared that he would grieve them by obstinate rebellion and ingratitude (to Allah and man).

Al-Kahf 18 : 80

﴿ فَأَرَدْنَا أَنْ يُبَدِّلَهُمَا رَبُّهُمَا خَيْرًا مِنْهُ زَكَاةً وَأَقْرَبَ رُحْمًا ﴿٨١﴾ ﴾ [الكهف: ٨١]

"So we desired that their Lord would give them in exchange (a son) better in purity (of conduct) and closer in affection.

Al-Kahf 18 : 81

﴿ وَأَمَّا الْجِدَارُ فَكَانَ لِغُلَامَيْنِ يَتِيمَيْنِ فِي الْمَدِينَةِ وَكَانَ تَحْتَهُ كَنْزٌ لَهُمَا وَكَانَ أَبُوهُمَا صَالِحًا فَأَرَادَ رَبُّكَ أَنْ يَبْلُغَا أَشُدَّهُمَا وَيَسْتَخْرِجَا كَنْزَهُمَا رَحْمَةً مِنْ رَبِّكَ وَمَا فَعَلْتُهُ

عَنْ أَمْرِي ذَٰلِكَ تَأْوِيلُ مَا لَمْ تَسْطِعْ عَلَيْهِ صَبْرًا ﴿٨٢﴾ ﴾ [الكهف: ٨٢]

"As for the wall, it belonged to two youths, orphans, in the Town; there was, beneath it, a buried treasure, to which they were entitled; their father had been a righteous man: so thy Lord desired that they should attain their age of full strength and get out their treasure a mercy (and favour) from thy Lord. I did it not of my own accord. Such is the interpretation of (those things) over which thou wast unable to hold patience."

Al-Kahf 18 : 82

Humility is a virtue in learning. The more we acquire knowledge, the more we realize that our knowledge is indeed limited. We then appreciate

God's blessings and we are humble and not arrogant and willing to listen and learn. The Qur'an explains:

﴿ نَرْفَعُ دَرَجَاتٍ مِّنْ نَّشَاءٍ ۗ وَفَوْقَ كُلِّ ذِي عِلْمٍ عَلِيمٌ ۙ ﴾ [يوسف: ٦٧]

We raise to degrees (of wisdom) whom We please: but over all endued with knowledge is One, the All-Knowing.

Yusuf 12 : 67

And:

﴿ وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ ۗ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا ۙ ﴾

[الإسراء: ٨٥]

They ask thee concerning the Spirit (of inspiration). Say: "The Spirit (cometh) by command of my Lord: of knowledge it is only a little that is communicated to you, (O men!)"

Al-Isra'a 17 : 85

Continuing to improve is a sign of understanding and proper faith. It shows that we understand our responsibility and accountability to Allah. Aesha related that Allah's messenger (PBUH) said:

(Allah loves for you to know and to perfect your work)

Narrated by Baihaqi

How can we perfect our work?

- By study, understanding what we need to do and what is important
- By careful planning and improving the areas that we are deficient in
- By adapting to change and being willing to learn new skills
- And by caring about others and having a genuine desire to help them

Listening to others and learning from their experience and wisdom

There are certain **guidelines for listening** to other people. These include the following:

- Listening attentively and having the desire to learn and understand what they have to say
- Not interrupting the person talking, even though he may have a different or opposing point of view
- Not rushing to end the conversation
- Being polite and civil

To whom should we Listen?

- To our spouses for they care deeply about our welfare
- To our friends and colleagues
- To the scholars
- To our children
- And to those who have a different view point

If we only listen to those who share our views we cannot learn much. Listening to a different or opposing point of view allows us to examine our position and critically analyze its strength and weakness. We then look at things from a different prospective and we gain new insight. This is clear when Muslims get in discussion with and dialogue with Christians and Jews. They have a different understanding and approach. Listening to them allows us to gain more insight into our own faith. When we are sincere the Qur'an comes to our mind and answers many of the questions people of other faiths pose. This may be the meaning of the Qur'anic verse:

﴿ وَلَا تُجَادِلُوا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ إِلَّا بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا مِنْهُمْ ﴾

[العنكبوت: ٤٦]

And dispute ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury

Al-Ankabut 29 : 46

Dialogue with others of different faith also allows fear and ignorance to be replaced with understanding and respect. Bias and prejudice has no place since we realize that others of different religious convictions and traditions are similar to us in many ways, with similar hopes and fears.

Our diversity should be a source of strength

God created us to be different, and each person looks at things from his own prospective. Each person has something to offer and we should learn from each other. Our own life is enriched by different experiences and different prospective. We should not be afraid of listening to or learning from people who are different from us, rather our goal is to reach the truth and to accept it, whether it comes from our effort and our own experience, or from the experiences of other people. The Qur'an explains this diversity:

﴿ وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ خَلْقَ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاخْتِلَافُ أَلْسِنَتِكُمْ وَالْوَلَوْنِكُمْ إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ

لَآيَاتٍ لِّلْعَالَمِينَ ﴾ [الروم: ٢٢]

And among His Signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colours; verily in that are Signs for those who know.

Ar-Rum 30 : 22

﴿ وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَجَعَلَ النَّاسَ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً ۗ وَلَا يَزَالُونَ مُخْتَلِفِينَ ﴾ [هود: ١١٨]

If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one People: but they will not cease to dispute,

Hud 11 : 118

﴿ إِلَّا مَنْ رَّحِمَ رَبُّكَ ۗ وَلِذَلِكَ خَلَقَهُمْ ۗ وَتَمَّتْ كَلِمَةُ رَبِّكَ لَأَمْلَأَنَّ جَهَنَّمَ مِنَ الْجِنَّةِ

وَالنَّاسِ أَجْمَعِينَ ﴾ [هود: ١١٩]

Except those on whom thy Lord hath bestowed His Mercy: and for this did He create them: and the Word of thy Lord shall be fulfilled: "I will fill Hell with jinns and men all together."

Hud 11 : 119

There are certain manners or ethics in giving advice or listening to advice:

- We should be sincere in our intent to give helpful advice that will guide and help others
- Advice should be given in a kind caring manner
- Advice should be based on proper knowledge not conjecture
- Advice is given seeking Allah's pleasure, not for personal gain

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) explained that giving sincere advice is a fundamental concept in Islam, for it illustrates our commitment to other Muslims as well as to our faith. He said:

(Religion means that you should give advice) He was asked: To whom should this advice be given? He said: (To Allah, and to His Book, and to His messenger, and to Muslim leaders and to every Muslim)

Narrated by Muslim.

Advice to Allah implies obeying His orders. Advice to the Qur'an implies understanding and applying its guidelines in our life. Advice to Allah's messenger implies following His Sunnah (tradition). Advice to Muslim leaders implies correcting their mistakes and obeying them as long as they obey Allah and His messenger. Advice to every Muslim implies helping and guiding them to what is useful and good, and not harboring ill-feelings towards other Muslims.

Listening to Allah may take several forms:

- Tawba (Repentance) means turning to Allah and renewing the pledge to obey Him and to live our life as He has commanded us to do
- Enaba (Devout obedience and submission) means turning to Allah, submitting to Him and obeying Him with devotion
- Istighfar (seeking forgiveness) is to realize our mistakes and to turn to Allah seeking His forgiveness and making a pledge not to repeat these mistakes

The Qur'an explains our obligation towards Allah:

﴿ فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ وَأَسْمِعُوا وَأَطِيعُوا وَأَنْفِقُوا خَيْرًا لِأَنْفُسِكُمْ ۚ وَمَنْ يُوقِ شَحْحَ نَفْسِهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْفَالِحُونَ ﴾ [التغابن: ١٦]

So fear Allah as much as ye can; listen and obey; and spend in charity for the benefit of your own souls. And those saved from the covetousness of their own souls; they are the ones that achieve prosperity.

At-Taghabun 64 : 16

We should seek counsel and advice before making decisions

We can learn valuable information from talking to others and discussing issues with them. We learn from their approach and different way of thinking. Such counsel and advice is invaluable before making important decisions. Sometimes we miss something or may not be aware of an important issue. Conversation with other people will reveal our shortfall. The Qur'an ordered Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to consult his companions before making decisions:

﴿ فَاعْفُ عَنْهُمْ وَاسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ وَشَاوِرْهُمْ فِي الْأَمْرِ فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ

سُحِبُ الْمُتَوَكِّلِينَ ﴾ [آل عمران: ١٥٩]

so pass over (their faults), and ask for (Allah's) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs (of moment). Then, when thou hast taken a decision, put thy trust in Allah. For Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him).

Al-Imran 3 : 159

The Qur'an also explains that seeking counsel is a characteristic of those who have faith and understand their accountability to their Lord:

﴿ وَالَّذِينَ اسْتَجَابُوا لِرَبِّهِمْ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَى بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ

يُنْفِقُونَ ﴾ [الشورى: ٣٨]

Those who hearken to their Lord, and establish regular prayer; who (conduct) their affairs by mutual Consultation; who spend out of what We bestow on them for Sustenance:

Ash-Shura' 42 : 38

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also explained to us the importance of seeking counsel and of giving sound advice based on true guidance and the desire to help others, not misleading them. He said:

(Whoever said about me something I did not say will be in his place in Hell Fire; and whoever was asked by his Muslim brother for advice, but gave him advice not based on the truth and reason, he has truly betrayed him; and whoever gave an opinion without knowledge he bears the sin of misguiding others)

Narrated by Ahmad & Hakim

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) sought advice from his companions

- He sought counsel in the battle of Badr: Before he engaged the enemy he consulted his companions. He also listened to advice and accepted it when the Muslims encamped near the water. He also sought counsel regarding the fate of the prisoners of war.
- He sought counsel before going to battle in Ohod.
- He sought counsel regarding the hypocrites in Madina.
- He listened and valued the opinions of his companions and friends.