

SPEAKING GOOD TO ALL PEOPLE



Allah, the Exalted, said:

«Remember when We took a pledge from the Children of Israel: ‘Worship none but God; be good to your parents and kinsfolk, to orphans and the poor; speak good to all people; establish the prayer and pay the prescribed alms.’ Then all but a few of you turned away and paid no heed.»¹

The Universality of Values and Moral Qualities

Character [*khuluq*] is a firmly rooted attribute of the soul [*nafs*] from which actions originate without any thought or deliberation.

Good moral qualities are human values that all religions called to. Today we see grave shortcomings in upholding these qualities. Good character is an attribute of the human primordial disposition [*fitra*]. Principles and values are constant—they are not influenced, defined by or subject to prejudice or discrimination towards others. It is imperative that we understand this point in light of the many misunderstandings that abound today because it has led to there being a deficiency on the part of the Muslim community at the individual and collective level to uphold the value of speaking and doing good to all people regardless of who they are.

All this begs us to answer several important questions related to the aforementioned verse.

- Does the verse address the Children of Israel specifically, as some claim it does, or does it **apply to the entire Muslim community**? Has it been **abrogated by verse of the sword (9:5)**, as others claim, or is it still applicable today?
- Who is meant by ‘**people**’ in the verse?
- What is meant by ‘**speak good**’ in the verse?
- What relation does the command to ‘**speak good**’ have to the other instructions in the verse?

Who is being addressed in the verse?

The context of the verse makes it plainly clear that its instructions are applicable to Muslims. Allah commanded us to profess His Oneness and be good to our parents, kinsfolk, orphans and the poor; to establish the prayer and pay the prescribed alms (*zakaat*). The command to speak well to all people is mentioned among these instructions.

It is inconceivable that the command to good character is a specific injunction to the Children of Israel and not applicable to the sacred law of Islam. Likewise, it is not possible for good character and values to be liable to abrogation or change since they are a permanent attribute of the primordial disposition, as previously explained. The Prophet ﷺ affirmed this understanding when he said "I was only sent to perfect noble character."² The perfection of something implies its existence before its requiring perfection.

In their Quran exegeses, Imām Fakhr al-Rāzī (al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr,) and Imām Ibn Ḥayyān al-Andalūsī (al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ), cited proofs from the Quran that affirm the applicability of these Quranic instructions to the Muslim umma and the fact that they are not abrogated. They said, "Abū Ja'far Muhammad ibn 'Alī al-Bāqir has declared that [the verse] is to be understood literally and that there is no need for specification. This is the strongest opinion. The proof³ for this is that despite the majestic status of Moses and Aaron, they were commanded to speak kindly and gently to Pharaoh. Similarly, our Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was commanded to kindness and to abandon coarseness. Allah, the Exalted, said: ﴿[Prophet], call [people] to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good teaching.﴾⁴; ﴿[Believers], do not say crude words to those who call upon other than Allah, lest they use crude words about Allah in revenge without knowledge.﴾⁵; ﴿when they see some frivolity, pass by with dignity.﴾⁶ and: ﴿pay no attention to the ignorant.﴾⁷

In his exegesis, the 18th century Moroccan scholar Ibn 'Ajība said, "For every covenant taken from the Children of Israel, a similar one is taken from the nation of the Prophet (*umma*). This is the wisdom behind mentioning their stories and acts of disobedience; so that we are wary of falling into what

2 Musnad al-Bazzār 15/364. In another narration: "I have only been sent to perfect righteous character."

3 Tafsīr al-Rāzī and Tafsīr al-Baḥr al-Muḥīṭ by Ibn Ḥayyān

4 Surah an-Nāḥl:125

5 Surah al-An'ām:108

6 Surah al-Furqān:72

7 Surah al-A'rāf:199

they fell into, and perish as they did.”⁸

Despite their transmission of some reports that state the contrary, the majority of Quranic exegetes endorse the opinion that these instructions include the Muhammadan nation and remain intact and are not abrogated. The 19th century Iraqi scholar, Mahmud al-Alūsī, said, “Whoever says that this verse is abrogated by the verse of the sword, or that ‘people’ refers to righteous believers – because good words should not be spoken to disbelievers and the dissolute because we have been commanded to curse, dispraise and fight them – is way off the mark!”⁹

Who are meant by ‘people’ in the verse?

This verse informs us of a general pledge Allah took from the Children of Israel. It was preceded by an admonishment of those of them whose espousal of noble values was tarnished by the discriminatory ways in which they chose to apply them. When they interacted and mixed with their own people they upheld those values, but when it came to others they ignored them. The Quran mentions in this regard:

﴿There are People of the Book who, if you [Prophet] entrust them with a heap of gold, will return it to you intact, but there are others of them who, if you entrust them with a single dinar, will not return it to you unless you keep standing over them, because they say, ‘We are under no obligation towards the gentiles.’ They tell a lie against God and they know it. No indeed! God loves those who keep their pledges and are mindful of Him.﴾¹⁰

It is inconceivable that Allah would take a pledge from the Children of Israel that could be understood to allow the selective application of values. The objective of the verse (2:83) applies to people in general and does not condone the discriminatory application of moral values and principles.

Among the scholars who said that “speak good to all people” applies to all people in general, include:

Imām ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (may Allah ennoble his countenance), Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir ibn ‘Alī Zayn al-‘Abidīn ibn al-Ḥusayn and ‘Aṭā ibn Abī Rabāḥ as transmitted by al-Suyūṭī in al-dur al-manthūr. It is also the view of the Shaykh of Exegetes, Ibn Jarīr as well as Imām Fakhr al-Rāzī, al-Ḥafīz Ibn Kathīr, Imām Ibn Ḥayyān al-Andalusī, Imām al-Qurtubī, Imām

8 Tafsīr Ibn ‘Aṭba

9 Tafsīr Rūḥ al-Ma‘ānī by al-Alūsī

10 Surah Āl ‘Imrān:75-76

al-Māwardī, Imām al-Ṣawī, Imām al-Bursawī, Imām al-Biqā'ī and al-Ṭahir ibn 'Ashūr in their respective exegeses of the Quran.

Imām al-Qurṭubī said on this verse: "A person's words to people ought to be gentle. He should show a cheerful face to the good as well the bad, the sunni as well as the innovator, without fawning."¹¹

What is meant by 'good' in the verse?

It is clear from the context of the verse that '[speak] good' is general. It does not refer to specific types of good action, but any action that can be described as good. Since the command to 'speak good' was preceded by the mentioning of specific good deeds, it would not make sense for a general command ("speak good") that followed specific instructions ("goodness to parents, kinsfolk, orphans and the poor") to also have a specific meaning.

Despite the fact that there are narrations of 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās that specify the meaning of 'good' in this verse, al-Hāfiẓ Ibn Kathīr clarified in his exegesis that this does not negate the general meaning of the term (to speak good in general). Rather, he explains, these specific interpretations of Ibn 'Abbas fall under the general meaning of the term. He said, "It means, 'Speak pleasantly to them and be lenient with them.'

'Speaking good' also includes commanding good and forbidding evil as explained by Ḥasan al-Baṣrī in his explanation of the verse. He said, "Good speech includes commanding good; forbidding evil; being patient, clement and forgiving; and speaking well to people as Allah commanded. It includes every good type of behaviour that Allah is pleased with."

Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir linked the meaning in the verse to the concept of fairness in principles. He said, "Speak to them as you would like them to speak to you."¹²

One of the predecessors (*salaf*) would give [Islamic] greetings to non-Muslims from the People of the Book. When asked about this he said, "Allah the Exalted says, ﴿Speak good to all people﴾. This means the greeting of peace".¹³

In summary, ﴿Speak good to all people﴾ includes all good speech in general

11: Surah al-Baqarah:83 in Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī

12: Tafsīr Zād al-Masīr by Ibn al-Jawzī

13: Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr

and is not specific to any single type of good speech.

Being good outwardly and inwardly

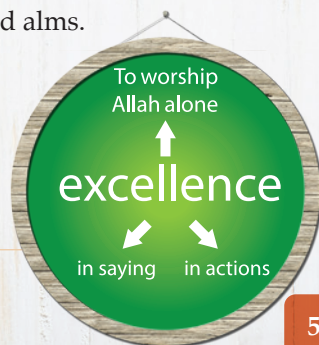
Speaking good words is something that can be employed with all people. However, it should emanate from the heart's conviction in what the tongue is saying. It should not be mere flattery. When a Muslim says good words to people he/she should also bear good will towards them—this is the basis of good interaction with people.¹⁴ The Prophet ﷺ said, "None of you (truly) believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself."¹⁵ Since it is not in everyone's ability to do benevolent acts to all people, Allah prescribed that it may also be done in words. If a person is incapable of helping all people with good acts, they should at the very least show them good conduct speak good words and give sincere advice.¹⁶

What is the link between the command to speak good and the other instructions in the verse?

﴿Remember when We took a pledge from the Children of Israel: 'Worship none but God; be good to your parents and kinsfolk, to orphans and the poor; speak good words to all people; keep up the prayer and pay the prescribed alms.' Then all but a few of you turned away and paid no heed.﴾¹⁷

This verse speaks of a pledge that was taken with the Children of Israel over the following terms:

- To worship Allah alone.
- To have excellence in one's speech and actions with one's parents, followed by kinsfolk, orphans and the poor.
- To speak in a good manner to all people.
- To establish the prayer and pay the prescribed alms.



14 Tafsīr al-Tāhir ibn 'Āshūr

15 Saḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Saḥīḥ Muslim

16 Tafsīr al-Biqā'ī

17 Surah al-Baqarah:83

Allah then rebuked those that did not honour the pledge.

The greatness of the address in this verse can be observed from a number of aspects:

- The Divine instruction to observe both good actions and good speech.¹⁸
- Despite the prayer and prescribed alms being amongst the most important religious obligations and the pillars of Islam, by mentioning excellence in speech and actions before them, Allah demonstrates that excellence is the foundation of all dealings and is prescribed by Him.

In Summary

We can conclude the following in our understanding of the verse, ﴿Speak good to all people﴾:

- The verse speaks about our dealings with all people, not just with the righteous and the believers.
- The verse encompasses all meanings of goodness and is not limited to commanding good and forbidding evil.
- The moral principle of speaking well is one that is well-established in Islamic law and is not specific to the Children of Israel.
- That the instruction to do so remains intact and is not abrogated.

Every wound has a remedy
But bad character has no remedy

‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalīb
(may Allah ennoble his countenance)

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The Messenger of God, ﷺ, said:

‘This knowledge will be transmitted from every generation by its upright; they negate from it the distortions of the extreme, the false claims of the falsifiers, and interpretations of the ignorant.’

Some of those that possess misapprehensions have understood the discourse of God in a manner which does not agree with the academic methodology inherited from the pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*), and does not harmonize with the objectives and greater values of the divine revelation...

They have taken some verses of the noble Qur’ān which were revealed in regard to the non-Muslims, and made them applicable to the Muslims... They have adopted verses which came as exceptions and applied to them general rulings...

They have distorted the meanings of the words of God in a manner that has led to the establishment or formation of grave erroneous concepts within the minds of the general Muslim populace, a result of which are mannerisms and actions that have no correlation with the true intrinsic religion of Islam...

We shall become acquainted through the parts of this continuous series about the distortions of the meanings of the verses of the Noble Qur’ān and the Prophetic traditions (*hadith*) which the adherents of these distorted ideas have fallen within, their misguidance concerning legal rulings, and their embracing of wrong conceptions. All of which distanced them from God’s intended meanings, as well as His Prophet’s ﷺ and the righteous predecessors (*salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) that followed.

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