

Motherhood in Islam

Session Four

From the Holy Qur'an

2. *(This is) a mention of the mercy of your Lord to His slave Zakariya .*
3. *When he called out his Lord (Allâh) a call in secret,*
4. *Saying: "My Lord! Indeed my bones have grown feeble, and grey hair has spread on my head, And I have never been unblessed in my invocation to You, O my Lord!*
5. *"And Verily! I fear my relatives after me, since my wife is barren. So give me from Yourself an heir,*
6. *"Who shall inherit me, and inherit (also) the posterity of Ya'qûb. And make him, my Lord, one with whom You are Well-pleased!"*
7. *(Allâh said) "O Zakariya! Verily, We give you the glad tidings of a son, His name will be Yahya. We have given that name to none before (him)."*

Sura Maryam, verses 2-7

Influence of a good mother

There is no doubt that a good mother can influence her child a great deal. Even when the child becomes an adult, what the mother said and did can still have an effect. Many great people remember their mothers and the role they played in nurturing their greatness. Shaykh Mutaza Ansari, a great Shi`a Jurist also wept bitterly at the death of his mother. One of his scholarly pupils reproached him, saying it did not befit a learned scholar to agonize so much over the death of his mother. The Shaykh replied: It seems you are not aware of the high status enjoyed by a mother. The proper training given by this mother of mine to me, and the numerous hardships borne by her for my sake elevated me to this position. The initial training given by her to me paved the way for my making all this progress and acquiring this high status in the world of knowledge.

Syed ar-Radhi, the compiler of *Nahjul Balgha*, mourned the death of his mother greatly. He wrote a poem for her in which he says:

O Mother! I cry and shed tears for your separation hoping that perhaps the burning drops of tears coming out of my sorrowful eyes may melt and remove the mountain of sadness from my heart.

O Mother! You were such a precious jewel and valuable pearl that for getting you released from the plundering enemy's hand I would have sacrificed everything in my possession as your ransom. But Alas! The death has snatched you away from my hand and nothing can be taken back from its deadly claws.

O Mother! If all the mothers of the world would have been righteous like you, indeed the children of the world would not have required the presence of their fathers.

O Mother! All are witness that you were an honorable and noble lady because you have handed over decent and noble children to society.

Excerpts from Meeting the Pious, Ash-Sharif ar-Radi

Qualities of a good Mother

A good mother has outstanding qualities. These are qualities that are good in all believers. But for a mother they are especially important, for she will be able to influence her child through them. The qualities of a mother affect her child greatly. When a baby is born, he is totally unaware of the outside world. The mother plays an important part in introducing him to the world. The outlook that the child will form towards life depends a lot on the mother. His attitude, his views - religious or otherwise- his perspective on life and its goals, will all be gained from her. Eventually he will mature and perhaps form his own changed views, but the initial years and what he learns in them will always have a lasting impression on his mind.

Through her qualities, a mother can set a good example for the child. Since the mother is the most important person in the life of a child, she is greatly revered. Her habits and behavior become a model for the child. Whatever the child observes from her, such as her housekeeping habits, her manners, her relationships with others, the way she spends money, and in general her lifestyle, will all undoubtedly affect the child's character. A mother is said to be better than a hundred teachers. Her emotional strengths and weaknesses are an example for the child, and will be followed for many years to come even though all of it may not be worthy. People have been reported to be following their mother's ways even when they know the mothers were wrong. It is almost like an unconscious reaction, and it takes effort to behave differently. Thus mothers have an important task of setting forth a good example. It may seem difficult, even impossible. Many mothers think it too great a burden to be acting near perfect all the time, even in the familiarity of their own homes. However it is a good training. What mothers will change in themselves for their children will become a habit, and will lead to a real change. It is not perfection that Islam demands from mothers, but a willingness to accept the responsibility of modeling good acceptable behavior.

Although there may be many qualities of a good mother, only a few have been chosen. These qualities are comprehensive and cover many other qualities too.

1. Awareness of duty to Allah

A good mother is aware that the child is a trust from Allah. Imam Zaynul Abidin (a) says in Risalatul Huqooq: *You are responsible for what [the child] has been entrusted to you . . .* By bringing up the child with a sense of serious responsibility, the mother fulfills the trust that she has been given. She has been endowed with the physical and emotional characteristics that assist her in performing her task in the best manner possible.

Piety and God-consciousness are two important qualities that remind a mother of her duty, and reassure her that what she is doing carries great reward with the Almighty. Without these qualities it is easy to get off track, and sometimes become disillusioned and sluggish. A mother who has the noble aim of raising her child well for the sake of the Almighty, tries her very best for that is what Allah deserves. She expects her reward only from Him, and knows that her actions are being watched, recorded, and rewarded. That is a great motivator towards excellence in child rearing. It is also a deterrent against undue harshness and injustice against the child.

Piety is the most distinguishing factor in the worth and value of a believer. The Holy Qur'an has many verses that praise the pious; *Surely the most noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most pious* (49:13), and *Then whoever is pious and makes amends, there shall be no fear upon them nor shall they grieve*. Imam Ali (a) has said: *Piety acquires the most prominent position in all ethical affairs*. Piety is defined as an internal power of self-restraint that enables the believer to stop himself from all that Allah has forbidden. It is a commitment to obey religious commandments and is a very powerful force that constantly reminds a believer of his duty towards God.

A pious mother is aware of her responsibilities as a Muslim mother. She is confident in the message sent by Allah, and knows that she is accountable for the way she raises her child. The problems that she faces as a mother do not disturb her too much as she knows these are a means of securing the pleasure of the Almighty. When her efforts and actions are focused on such a belief, there is great contentment and satisfaction in what she does. It is not a burden, or an unpleasant task, but a duty which she tries to perform with excellence.

2. Sacrifice and dedication

A mother gives up a great deal for the sake of the child. She gives up her time, her sleep, her pleasures etc. to ensure that the child is happy and comfortable. As Imam Zaynul 'Abidin(a) says when he talks of the rights of the mother, nothing can match the sacrifice a mother gives for her child. That is why he says that it is only with help of the Almighty that one can thank the mother for all her sacrifices and efforts.

A good mother places the needs of the child- both physical and emotional-first. This is an important point to keep in mind, especially in these modern times. Women today are deluded by society into making their own careers and jobs more important than their homes. The home will always remain a woman's most valuable work and that may require all types of sacrifices. It is not really a sacrifice, but is an investment which will reap great dividends.

3. Gentleness

Gentleness and a pleasant temperament have been highly emphasized in Islam. It has been said to be the sign of faith. The Holy Prophet (s) is praised in the Holy Qur'an for his gentleness with his followers. Allah says: *And it is due to the Mercy of Allah that you deal gently with them. Had you been rough, hard hearted, they would certainly have dispersed from around you . . .* (3: 159) Imam Muhammad al-Baqir (a) says; *Whoever has been granted gentleness has been granted faith*.

Gentleness is the oil that lubricates relationships and creates the comfort and pleasure that are the fruits of all good relationships. It is one of the most beautiful traits a human being can acquire. *If gentleness was a creation that could be seen, says the Holy Prophet (s), there would not be any creature more beautiful than it from all the creations of Allah, the Mighty*. When an action is carried out with gentleness, it is the sign of nobility and dignity. Lack of gentleness on the other hand, reveals lack of refinement and character. In another hadith, the Holy Prophet (s) says: *Gentleness is not placed on anything except that it beautifies it, and it is not removed from anything except that it disgraces it*. A person who practices gentleness is actually elevating his own status, both in this world and in the Hereafter.

For a mother it is especially important to be gentle. Children are very vulnerable, and can be greatly distressed by harshness and rigidity. When a child has done wrong, it is better to point it out calmly, without humiliating the child. Gentleness appeals to the heart and mind of the child and strengthens the love between the mother and child. The child will be encouraged to talk often to the mother knowing that he will get a gentle response.

4. Moderation

Moderation is the basis of all teachings of Islam. Islam disliked extremes in anything, and urges its followers to be balanced in all aspects of life such as worship, food, clothing, relationships etc. The Holy Qur'an says: *Thus We have appointed you a middle nation.* (2:143) Imam Ali (a) says: *The best of affairs is the middle (balanced) one.* In the Tafsir of the verse, Allamah Tabatabai says: Islam recommends a golden mean and the path of moderation in the sense that a Muslim should pay attention to the strengthening of his body as well as his soul, because man does not consist of body only just as he does not possess soul only. He is the combination of both and in order to attain real prosperity one must protect and strengthen the combination.

Moderation in all types of behavior is recommended. So Islam likes generosity, but praises those who are neither extravagant nor miserly. Luqman the Wise advises his son about moderation in walking; *Neither walk slowly and listlessly, nor too quickly and rashly,* and in talking; *Do not make your voice loud but speak moderately and make your voice reach others to the extent necessary.* (31:20)

It is necessary for a mother to practice moderation in all aspects. She should love the child, and naturally does so, but that should not be so excessive that it results in coddling and pampering the child. The intense maternal love should be balanced by the desire to do what is right for the child, even if it makes the child unhappy or annoyed. Some parents take love of the child to unreasonable heights. They provide a lot of material goods, give in to all his wishes and demands, act very lenient and soft with the child, etc. This is not really loving the child. Rather, it is spoiling the child.

There should also be moderation in disciplining the child. Firmness is required, and children should face consequences of their actions,. But these actions should be appropriate to factors such as age, seriousness of the action etc. Once when the Holy Prophet (s) explained to someone that physical punishment was not the right way to discipline a child, he said; *give him a time out instead, but do not lengthen (the timing).* Consequences should be in moderation, not a harsh wreaking of anger. Expectations of the mother should also be balanced and reasonable. Children have unique and individual characteristics, and mothers should not expect children to be the same. To have expectations higher than what the child is capable of, creates a feeling of failure in the child. At the same time, children do have potential, and the mother must have some sort of reasonable expectations from the child. These expectations can be modified as the child develops.

When a mother is moderate and reasonable, she becomes approachable for the child. The child knows that he can talk to the mother, and be heard and understood. This is invaluable for their relationship, especially as the child grows. Children who feel that the mother is unreasonable may become distant and aloof from the mother.