

Piety (birra) Defined

Surah-2, Al-Baqara, Medina 87

[The first chapter after the Hijra or exodus to Medina in 622]

The Quran's Text and Yusuf Ali's Translation

لَيْسَ الْبِرُّ أَنْ تُوَلُّوا وُجُوهَكُمْ قِبَلَ الْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ ... ^{up}

2:177. It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces toward East or West;

... وَلَكِنَّ الْبِرَّ ...

but it is righteousness

... مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ وَالْكِتَابِ وَالنَّبِيِّينَ ...

to believe in God and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers;

... وَآتَى الْمَالَ عَلَى حُبِّهِ ذَوِي الْقُرْبَى ...

to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin,

... وَالْيَتَامَى وَالْمَسَاكِينَ وَابْنَ السَّبِيلِ وَالسَّائِلِينَ وَفِي الرِّقَابِ ...

for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves;

... وَأَقَامَ الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَى الزَّكَاةَ وَالْمُوفُونَ بِعَهْدِهِمْ إِذَا عَاهَدُوا ...

to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfil the contracts which ye have made;

... وَالصَّابِرِينَ فِي الْبَأْسَاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ وَحِينَ الْبَأْسِ...

and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic.

... أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ صَدَقُوا وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُتَّقُونَ ﴿١٧٧﴾

Such are the people of truth, the God-fearing.

Transliteration *Laisal birra an tuwallu_ wuju_hakum qibalal masyriqi wal magribi wa la_kinnal birra man a_mana billa_hi wal yamil a_khiri wal mala_'ikati wal kita_bi wan nabiyyin(a), wa a_tal ma_la 'ala_ hubbihi zawil **qurba_** wal yata_ma_ wal masa_kina wabnas sabil(i), was sa_'ilina wa **fir riqa_b(i)**, wa aqa_mas sala_ta wa a_taz zaka_h(ta), wal mu_fu_na bi 'ahdihim iza_ 'a_hadu_, was sa_birina fil ba'sa_'i wad darra_'i wa hinal ba's(i), ula_'ikal lazina sadaqu_, wa ula_'ika humul muttaqu_n(a).*

Muhammad Asad's Translation

True piety does not consist of turning your faces towards the east or the west – **but truly pious is he who** believes in God, and the Last Day, and the angels, and revelation, and the prophets; and spends his substance – however much he himself may cherish it – upon his near of kin, and the orphans, and the needy, and the wayfarer, and the beggars, and for the freeing of human beings from bondage; and is constant in prayer, and renders the purifying dues; and [truly pious are] they who keep their promises whenever they promise, and are patient in misfortune and hardship and in time of peril: it is they that have proved themselves true, and it is they, they who are conscious of God.

Pickthall's Translation

It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces to the East and the West; but righteous is he who believeth in God and the Last Day and the angels and the Scripture and the Prophets; and giveth his wealth, for love of Him, to kinsfolk and to orphans and the needy and the wayfarer and to those who ask, and to set slaves free; and observeth proper worship and payeth the poor due.

And those who keep their treaty when they make one, and the patient in tribulation and adversity and time of stress. Such are they who are sincere. Such are the God fearing.

Ali's comments :

177 As if to emphasize again a warning against deadening formalism, we are given a beautiful description of the righteous and God-fearing man. He should obey salutary regulation, but he should fix his gaze on the love of God and the love of his fellow-men. We are given four heads: (1) our faith should be true and sincere; (2) we must be prepared to show it in deeds of charity to our fellowmen; (3) we must be good citizens, supporting social organization; and (4) our own individual soul must be firm and unshaken in all circumstances. They are interconnected, and yet can be viewed separately. (2.177)

178 Faith is not merely a matter of words. We must realize the presence and goodness of God. When we do so, the scales fall from our eyes: all the falsities and fleeting nature of the Present cease to enslave us, for we see the Last Day as if it were today. We also see God's working in His world and in us; His Powers (angels), His Messengers and His Message are no longer remote from us, but come within our experience. (2.177)

179 Practical deeds of charity are of value when they proceed from love, and from no other motive. In this respect, also, our duties take various forms, which are shown in reasonable gradation: our kith and kin; orphans (including any persons who are without support or help); people who are in real need but who never ask (it is our duty to find them out, and they come before those who ask); the stranger, who is entitled to laws of hospitality; the people who ask and are entitled to ask, i.e., not merely lazy beggars, but those who seek our assistance in some form or another (it is our duty to respond to them); and the slaves (we must do all we can to give or buy their freedom). Slavery has many insidious forms, and all are included. (2.177)

180 Charity and piety in individual cases do not complete our duties. In prayer and charity, we

must also look to our organized efforts: where there is a Muslim State, these are made through the State, in facilities for public prayer, and public assistance, and for the maintenance of contracts and fair dealing in all matters. (2.177)

181 Then come the Muslim virtues of firmness and patience. They are to "preserve the dignity of man, with soul erect" (Burns). Three sets of circumstances are specially mentioned for the exercise of this virtue: (1) bodily pain or suffering, (2) adversities or injuries of all kinds, deserved and undeserved and (3) periods of public panic, such as war, violence, pestilence, etc. (2.177)]

Asad's Comments:

143 – Thus, the Quran stresses the principle that mere compliance with outward forms does not fulfill the requirements of piety.....

144 – In this context, the term "revelation" (al-kitab) carries, according to most of the commentators, a generic significance: it refers to the fact of divine revelation as such. As regards belief in angels, it is

postulated here because it is through these spiritual beings or forcesthat God reveals His will to the prophets and, thus, to mankind at large.

145: The expression “ibn as-sabil (lit., “son of the road”) denotes any person who is far rfrom his home, and especially one who, because of this circumstances, does not have sufficient means of livelihood at his disposal.....

146 – Ar-raqabah (of which ar-raqab is the plural) denotes, literally, “the neck”, and signifies also the whole of a human person. Metonymically, the expression “fi’r-raqib denotes “in the cause of freeing human beings from bondage”, and applies to both the ransoming of captives and the freeing of slaves.At the time of the revelation of the Quran, slavery was an established institution throughout the world, and its sudden abolition would hve been economically impossible. In order to obviate this difficulty, and at the same time to brig about an eventual abolition of all slavery, the Quran ordains in 8:67 that henceforth only captives taken in a just war (jihad) may be kept as slaves. But even with regard to persons enslaved in this or – before the revelation of 8:67 – in any other way, the Quran stresses the great merit inherent in the freeing of slaves, and stipulates it as a means of atonement for various transgressions (see, e.g., 4:92,

5:89, 58:3). In addition, the Prophet emphatically stated on many occasions that, in the sight of God, the unconditional freeing of a human being from bondage is among the most praiseworthy acts which a Muslim could perform. (For a critical discussion and analysis.....see Nayl al-Awtar VI, 199ff.)

Amatulla's comments:

This definition of piety is a recapitulation of all the fundamental ideas of goodness. One who **believes in the Creator and His Supreme Presence and His entire system of creation**, the agents [angels], the Revelations, the Messengers, **and does good work** that consist of charity, freeing slaves, keeping in touch with the Almighty through prayer, keep promises in life [on which others hope, trust and depend], patient. These are the essence of piety and sincerity and come from the true God consciousness. **The emphasis is on the spirit of charity and compassion**– to give, **to free people from bondage**, to care for needy and the helpless, to do good to fellow human beings, are all imbedded in this verse. But all these should come from the consciousness of God and that everything belongs to Him and He is the Cause of all causes and

the Disposer of all affairs therefore patience is a natural characteristic of the pious people in this life.

Here by mentioning in this context of laying down the fundamentals of piety the issue of freeing slaves or people in bondage, it is indicting that it should be the social objective to abolish slavery. **This verse is revealed in Medina at a time when the Muslims are about to acquire a lot of prisoners of war who would be part of the slaves.**