

Fast 17: God as the only and ultimate Judge of who is on the right path and who is not (2)

- It is only God Who best knows who is good and who is bad in reality:

“And when it is said to them, Come to what Allah has revealed and to the Messenger, they say: ‘Sufficient for us is that on which we found our fathers.’ What! even though their fathers knew nothing and had no guidance!

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ تَعَالَوْا إِلَىٰ مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ وَإِلَىٰ الرَّسُولِ قَالُوا حَسْبُنَا مَا وَجَدْنَا عَلَيْهِ آبَاءَنَا ۗ أَوْ لَوْ كَانَ آبَاؤُهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَهْتَدُونَ ﴿١٠٣﴾

O you who believe, take care of your souls — he who goes astray cannot harm you when you are on the right way. To Allah you will all return, so He will inform you of what you did.” (5:104–105)

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا عَلَيْكُمْ أَنْفُسُكُمْ ۚ لَا يَضُرُّكُمْ مَن ضَلَّ إِذَا اهْتَدَيْتُمْ ۗ إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٠٥﴾

The first verse refers to the response of the Holy Prophet Muhammad’s fellow-countrymen when he invited them to accept the revelation of the Quran. They insisted that they would follow their inherited beliefs and practices, even though, as the Quran pointed out, their forefathers were ignorant and misguided. Unfortunately, the same is the response of many Muslims today when it is pointed out to them that certain of their social customs and attitudes are opposed to the teachings of the Quran, and in fact are based on ignorance. They respond that those customs are what they have inherited from previous generations, and their forefathers could not possibly have been wrong.

The second verse urges Muslims to think about and look at their own selves and to reform themselves, instead of worrying about being misled and influenced by others to take the wrong path. The words “take care of your souls” may also be translated as “you are responsible (or accountable) for your own souls”. For a Muslim to use force to make people act on the right path is contrary to this instruction, because that Muslim is then considering himself as accountable before Allah for the actions of others. By taking care of your own soul, you are showing others the right path by your example, which is usually more effective than preaching by word. The verse ends by repeating what has been said elsewhere in the Quran: that the reality and true motive behind your deeds, and the deeds of others, are known only to God Who will make them plain to all on the Day of Judgment.

- Another similar verse reads:

“Say: Everyone acts according to his manner. But your Lord best knows who is best guided on the path.”
(17:84)

قُلْ كُلٌّ يَعْمَلُ عَلَىٰ شَاكِلَتِهِ ۗ فَرَبُّكُمْ أَعْلَمُ
بِمَنْ هُوَ أَهْدَىٰ سَبِيلًا ۗ

While striving to follow the right way, and believing that others are on the wrong path, it must be remembered that it is only Allah Who truly knows who is best guided. To all appearances, a person may be on the right path, but what he is inwardly we cannot know. We cannot even know it about our own selves. As to a person who seems to be misguided, we cannot know of his circumstances which led him to be that, his real intentions, and possibly his inner struggles for self-improvement.

It may also be that the expression “your Lord best knows who is best guided” is used to indicate in a polite, inoffensive way that Islam is the right path of guidance. It would be crass to say: “We are best guided”. Such words also imply that we are attributing being rightly guided to our own selves and not to the grace of God.

The word for “manner” here means a person’s natural inclination which he is bound to follow. Acting “according to his manner” may also mean that when following the teachings of Islam, or interpreting the Quran, one person shows a certain tendency and another person a different tendency. In some cases the first one is right, and in other cases the second one is right.

- Addressing Muslims, and cautioning them not to disobey the Holy Prophet (24:63), the Quran then adds:

“Now surely Allah’s is whatever is in the heavens and the earth. He knows indeed your condition. And on the day when they are returned to Him, He will inform them of what they did. And Allah is Knower of all things.” (24:64)

أَلَا إِنَّ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمٰوٰتِ وَالْاَرْضِ ۗ قَدْ
يَعْلَمُ مَا اَنْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ ۗ وَيَوْمَ يُرْجَعُوْنَ اِلَيْهِ
فَيُنَبِّئُهُمْ بِمَا عَمِلُوْا ۗ وَاللّٰهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ
عَلِيْمٌ

Allah does not stand in need of any Muslim to obey the Prophet, and their disobedience cannot harm Him, since to Him belongs everything in the universe. He knows their inner condition, as to whether someone has a genuine reason for being unable to carry out a certain command, or is merely lax and indifferent. Only when people return to God, will the full reality be known, and not in this life.