

ANSWER

وَلَا تَجَسَّسُوا

And do not be curious (to find out faults of others) [49:12]

COMMENTARY

Prohibition of Spying

[The] social evil that is prohibited in the verse is *tajassus*, spying or prying secretly into the faults of others. An alternative reading of *tajassus* [with “J”] is *tabassus* [with “H”]. In a hadīth recorded in Sahihain on the authority of Abū Hurairah *radi‘allahu ‘anhu* the Holy Prophet ﷺ said: “...do not spy on one another; do not look for other's faults... .”

The two words in Arabic are near-synonyms. *Akhfash* draws attention to the nuances or subtle differences in their meaning: *tajassus* connotes looking into the affairs of people which they have kept hidden, whilst *tabassus* connotes searching in general as in the following verse of the Holy Qur’ān: ‘...search for Yūsuf and his brother’ - [12:87].

However, the term *tabassus* [searching], like *tajassus* [spying], could have an evil connotation in which case the Holy Prophet ﷺ has prohibited it. The verse signifies that one may take into account what is presented in evidence, but it is not permitted to search for faults that are not overt. The Holy Prophet ﷺ says: “Do not speak ill of Muslims behind their backs, and do not search out their faults, for he who searches out their faults will have his faults searched out by Allah, and he whose faults are searched out by Allah will be exposed by Him, even though he should be in the interior of his house.” [Qurtubī].

Bayān-ul-Qur’ān interprets that *tajassus* [spying] and *tabassus* [searching] include the sense of listening to people without their permission when they are talking, or eavesdropping at their doors. However, if there is an apprehension that some member of the Muslim community may be harmed by some mischief-makers, it is permitted for others to spy to protect the innocent and peaceful people, and search furtively for the intentions and conspiracies of such people who are a danger to the society.

End.

