

ANSWER

وَلَا يَغْتَابَ بَعْضُكُم بَعْضًا أَيُحِبُّ أَحَدُكُمْ أَنْ يَأْكُلَ لَحْمَ أَخِيهِ مَيْتًا فَكَرِهْتُمُوهُ

And do not backbite one another. Does one of you like that he eats the flesh of his dead brother? You would abhor it

[49:12]

COMMENTARY

[A] social evil this verse prohibits is *ghibab* [backbiting]. This connotes speaking ill of a person behind his back which if he heard would hurt or injure his feelings, even if what was said about him was the truth; if what was said about him was untruth, it is slander or false accusation. The prohibition of slander is prohibited elsewhere in the Qur'ān. In the definition of backbiting the phrase “behind his back/in his absence” appears. This does not mean that it is permissible to say hurtful things in the presence of somebody. This may not be backbiting, but it certainly falls under *lamz* which is prohibited in the preceding verse.

(Does one of you like that he eats the flesh of his dead brother? - 49:12) This verse sternly warns against disgracing a Muslim and compares it to eating the flesh of a human being. If the victim of disgrace is present before the offender, it is like eating the flesh of a living person, and the Holy Qur'ān has termed it as '*lamz*' which is prohibited in **verse 11**, as well as in another Sūrah by saying, '**Woe to every backbiter, derider**' [104:1]

And if the victim is not present, and someone speaks ill of him in a way that he is insulted, then it is like eating the flesh of a dead human being. Just as it does not cause any physical torture to a dead body, backbiting does not hurt the victim when he is not aware of it, but just as eating the flesh of a dead body is an extremely inhuman act, so is the backbiting. Both are prohibited. Otherwise also, speaking ill of someone in his absence is an unkind, mean and malicious act; it is not an act of valour and bravery.

[Verse 12] prohibits three social evils: unfounded suspicion, unjustifiable search for faults and backbiting. However, backbiting is most severely and harshly condemned. It is compared to eating the flesh of a dead Muslim, thus bringing out the gravity of its prohibition, unkindness and meanness. The wisdom of it lies in the fact that saying hurtful things to the face of someone is prohibited, but the man, being present, will be able to defend himself. Further, for fear of defense not everybody will have the courage to utter hurtful things to the face of someone, and usually it does not last long. It is unlike backbiting where there is no one to defend it, and thus the most mean person would pluck the courage to backbite the greatest of men. Because it is not defended, generally the ball keeps rolling, and more and more people get involved. Therefore, backbiting is prohibited most severely and harshly. It is necessary for the general body of Muslims to defend their brother, if possible, when

people speak ill of him in his absence. If that is not possible, they should at least abstain from listening to it, because listening to it wilfully and intentionally is like backbiting itself.

In a narration of Sayyidnā Anas Ibn Mālīk *radi'allāhu 'anhū* relating to Holy prophet's ﷺ experience of Mi'rāj, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: *"When I was taken up to the heaven, I passed by people who had fingernails of copper and were scratching their faces and breasts violently. I asked Jibra'il: 'Who are these people?' He replied: 'They are those people who were given to backbiting their brothers and who aspersed their honour.'"*

[transmitted by al-Baghawī as cited in Mazharī]. Sayyidnā Abū Sa'īd and Jābir *radi'allāhu 'anhumā* report that the Holy Prophet ﷺ has said: *"Backbiting is worse than adultery. The noble Companions inquired: 'How so, Messenger of Allah?' He replied: 'A person may commit fornication, repent of it and his sin is forgiven. But the sin of backbiting is not forgiven unless the injured party forgives.'"* [Transmitted by Tirmidhī and Abū Dāwūd, as cited in Mazharī].

This hadīth indicates that backbiting is not only a violation of the Divine right, but also a violation of human right. Therefore, it is necessary to seek the forgiveness of the injured party. Some of the scholars express the view that backbiting does not become a human right unless the injured party comes to know about it. Therefore, seeking his pardon is not necessary [Quoted in Rūh-ul-Ma'ānī from Hasan, Al-Khayyātī, Ibn-us-sabbagh, An-Nawawī, Ibn-us-Salāh, Az-Zarakshī, Ibn 'Abd-ul-Barr from Ibn-ul-Mubārak]. This is quoted in Bayān-ul-Qur'ān and explained as follows: If the victim of backbiting is not aware that someone has spoken ill of him, it might not be necessary for the backbiter to beg pardon of the victim, but it is necessary that he falsifies himself before the person whom he addressed when backbiting, or at least confesses his guilt before him. If the victim is dead or has disappeared, the atonement is recorded in a narration of Sayyidnā Anas *radi'allāhu 'anhū* where the Holy Prophet ﷺ has said: *"The atonement of backbiting is to invoke forgiveness of Allah for the victim in the following words: O Allah, forgive our sins and his sins."* [Transmitted by Baihaqī and cited in Mazharī]

End.

