14622 - Is it obligatory to change one's name if its meaning is not good?

the question

Is it obligatory to change one's name if its meaning is not good?.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Names have meanings, as the saying goes, and every person is influenced by the meaning of his name. So a person should be given a suitable name that has a good meaning, so that he will be influenced by his name.

Ibn al-Qayyim said:

Because names have meanings, it is wise that there should be a proper connection between the meaning of the names and the object that is carrying the name. It should not be the case that the meaning is not suited to the object and there is no connection between the meaning and the object, because this is what is decreed by the Most Wise, and reality testifies to that. Indeed names have a great impact on the objects to which they are applied, and the objects that carry these names will definitely be influenced by these names, whether these names are good or ugly, whether they refer to meanings of lightness or heaviness, kindness or cruelty."

Zaad al-Ma'aad, 2/336

Hence the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) used to change bad names to good ones.

It was narrated from Ibn 'Umar that a daughter of 'Umar was called 'Aasiyah (disobedient), but the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) renamed her Jameelah (beautiful). Narrated by Muslim, 2139.

The ruling – changing names to good names – has to do with what is mustahabb and preferable; it is not obligatory or binding.

The evidence for that is the report narrated by al-Bukhaari (6190) from Ibn al-Musayyab that his father came to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) and he said, “What is your name?” He said, “Hazn (meaning rough).” He said, “You are Sahl (meaning easy).” He said, “I will not change the name that my father gave to me.” Ibn al-Musayyab said, “And we have had roughness (in character) ever since.”

Roughness means being harsh and difficult to deal with.

Ibn Battaal said:

This shows that improving names and changing names to something better is not something that is obligatory.

Fath al-Baari.

And if it had been obligatory, the Sahaabi would not have refused to change his name, and the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) would have compelled him to change his name.

And Allaah knows best.

But if the name carries a meaning implying servitude to someone other than Allaah, such as ‘Abd al-Nabi (slave of the Prophet) and ‘Abd al-Maseeh (slave of the Messiah), and the like, then these names must be changed, because it is not permissible to be a slave of someone other than Allaah, and because all of creation belongs to Allaah and is subjugated to Him.

Ibn Hazm (may Allaah have mercy on him) said:

The scholars are agreed that every name which implies servitude to someone other than Allaah – such as ‘Abd ‘Amr or ‘Abd al-Ka’bah and so on, is haraam.

Fath al-Majeed, p. 531

And Allaah knows best.