26964 - Prohibition against spying on others

the question

I work for a company and my boss has asked me to tell him what the employees are saying about him personally, despite the fact that some of what they are saying is true. Is the money that I receive in return for this spying halaal or haraam?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

It is not permissible for you to do this haraam action, because it involves nameemah (malicious gossip) and spying, and the reward you receive for this is haraam earnings.

You should note that nameemah is a major sin. Nameemah means telling some people what others have said about them in order to cause trouble among them. This is the most common definition of nameemah. Ibn Hajar al-Haythami narrated it in his book al-Zawaajir ‘an Iqtiraaf al-Kabaa’ir, then he said: “It says in al-Ihya’: it is not limited to that, rather it refers to disclosure of anything that may hurt or offend somebody if it is disclosed, whether it is the person who is spoken about who is offended, or the person who hears the gossip, or a third party, whether it is disclosed verbally, in writing or by means of a hint or a gesture, and whether what is transmitted is an action, a word, a fault or a shortcoming in the person who is being talked about, or in someone else. The definition of nameemah is uncovering secrets and disclosing that which it is not appropriate to disclose. Hence we should keep silent and refrain from telling everything that we see of people’s situations, unless speaking of it will bring some benefit to a Muslim or ward off some harm. For example, if you see a person taking someone else’s property, you have to bear witness to that, in contrast to if you see someone hiding his own money, in which case speaking of it would be nameemah and disclosing a person’s secrets. If what is spoken of is a fault or shortcoming in the person of whom one speaks, then this is gheebah (backbiting) and nameemah

(malicious gossip).”

(al-Zawaajir, no. 252: al-Nameemah)

It was narrated that al-Haafiz al-Mundhiri said: “The ummah is unanimously agreed that nameemah is forbidden and that it is one of the greatest sins in the sight of Allah.”

From this we know that your passing on to your boss what your colleagues say is a kind of disclosing secrets and creating mischief and falling into this major sin, in addition to it being spying, which is haraam.

There are many texts which condemn nameemah and spying and seeking out people’s faults, which will deter the Muslim from committing these haraam actions:

1 – The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “No person who spreads nameemah will enter Paradise.” According to another report, “No eavesdropper (qattaat)…” Narrated by al-Bukhaari, 6056; Muslim, 105.

A qattaat is someone who spreads nameemah. It was said that the one who spreads nameemah is the person who is with a group who are speaking, then he spreads gossip about them, and that the qattaat is the one who listens to them without them realizing, then he spreads gossip about them.

2 – In al-Saheehayn it is narrated that Ibn ‘Abbaas said: “The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) out of one of the gardens of Madeenah, and he heard the sounds of two people who were being tormented in their graves. He said, ‘They are being punished, not for something that was difficult to avoid, but it is nevertheless a major sin. One of them did not protect himself from urine (i.e., take measures to avoid contaminating himself or his clothes) and the other used to walk about spreading nameemah.’”

(al-Bukhaari, 216; Muslim, 292).

3 – It is also narrated in al-Saheehayn from Abu Hurayrah that the Prophet (peace and blessings of

Allah be upon him) said: ‘Beware of suspicion, for suspicion is the falsest of speech. Do not eavesdrop; do not spy on one another; do not envy one another; do not forsake one another; do not hate one another. Be, O slaves of Allah, brothers.”

Al-Bukhaari, 5144; Muslim, 2563.

Al-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said: “Some of the scholars said that tahassus [‘eavesdropping’] means listening to other people’s conversations, and tajassus [‘spying’] means seeking out their faults. Or it was suggested that tajassus means looking for secrets. The word is mostly used in the sense of evil. The jaasoos (spy) is the one who seeks out secrets for evil purposes and the naamoos is the one who seeks out secrets for good purposes. And it was said that tajassus means looking for information for someone else, and tahassus means looking for information for oneself. This was the view of Tha’lab. And it was said that they mean one and the same, which is seeking out information about people’s circumstances.”

4 – al-Bukhaari (7042) narrated from Ibn ‘Abbaas that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “Whoever speaks of a dream that he did not actually see will be ordered [on the Day of Judgement] to tie two grains of barley together, and he will never be able to do so. Whoever listens in on other people’s conversations when they do not like that will have molten lead poured into his ears on the Day of Resurrection. Whoever makes an image will be punished and will be ordered to breath life into it, and he will not be able to do so.”

5 – Ahmad (19277) and Abu Dawood (4880) narrated that Abu Barzah al-Aslami said: “The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: ‘O you who have spoken the words of faith but faith has not truly entered your hearts! Do not backbite about the Muslims, and do not seek out their faults. For whoever seeks out their faults, Allah will seek out his faults, and if Allah seeks out a person’s faults He will expose him even in his own house.’” Classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh Abi Dawood, 4083.

We do not think that a believer would read these great ahaadeeth and then volunteer to spy on his fellow-Muslims, or seek out their faults, or spread nameemah among them. We think that you are

one of those who will benefit from this and pay attention, in sha Allah. Hence we say that you must refuse to do this task, no matter what encouragement or threats you may receive, whilst also advising your colleagues to stop gossiping about their boss and telling them off for doing so.

You should also advise your boss to stop spying on his employees and not be suspicious about them, because that will corrupt them and make them lose trust, as the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “If you seek out people’s faults you will corrupt them or almost corrupt them.”

Narrated by Abu Dawood, 4888; classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh Abi Dawood, 4088.

We will conclude with a few points about the attitude of the Muslim towards nameemah or malicious gossip when it is passed on to him.

Ibn Hajar al-Haythami said in his book al-Zawaajir ‘an Iqtiraaf al-Kabaa’ir:

“The person who hears some malicious gossip, such as being told ‘So and so said this about you’ or ‘he did this to you,’ must do six things:

1 – He should not believe it, because the one who spreads nameemah is a faasiq (evildoer) according to scholarly consensus, and Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“If a Faasiq (liar — evil person) comes to you with any news, verify it, lest you should harm people in ignorance, and afterwards you become regretful for what you have done”

[al-Hujuraat 49:6]

2 – He should tell him not to repeat this evil action, which is evil in both religious and worldly terms.

3 – He should hate him for the sake of Allah if he shows no sign of repenting.

4 – He should not think badly of the one of whom it was said, because he does not know whether that person really said it or did it.

5 – What he has been told should not make him spy on others or look for their faults for the purpose of verifying what was said, because Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Avoid much suspicion; indeed some suspicions are sins. And spy not…”

[al-Hujuraat 49:12]

6 – He should not approve for himself that which he has told the other person not to do, so he should not pass on the malicious gossip and say, ‘So and so told me this,’ otherwise he will also be gossiping and backbiting, and he will be doing that which he told someone else not to do.

‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azeez (may Allah be pleased with him) said to someone who passed on some malicious gossip to him: “If you wish, we can look into the matter. If you are lying, you will be one of the people mentioned in the verse ‘If a Faasiq (liar — evil person) comes to you with any news’ [al-Hujuraat 49:6 – interpretation of the meaning]; and if you are telling the truth, you will be one of the people mentioned in the verse, ‘A slanderer, going about with calumnies’ [al-Qalam 68:11 – interpretation of the meaning]. Or if you wish, we will forgive you.” He said, “Forgive me, O Ameer al-Mu’mineen, I will never do it again.”

The caliph Sulaymaan ibn ‘Abd al-Malik rebuked someone who had spread nameemah about him, in the presence of al-Zuhri. The man denied that and Sulaymaan said to him, “The one who told me about it is one who does not tell lies.” Al-Zuhri said: “The one who spreads nameemah (malicious gossip) cannot be truthful.” Sulaymaan said, “You are right,” and he let the man go in peace.

Al-Hasan said: “The one who tells malicious gossip to you will tell malicious gossip about you. This indicates that the person who spreads malicious gossip should be hated and not believed or trusted. How can he not be hated when he persists in lying, backbiting, slandering, betraying, deceiving, envying, spreading mischief among the people and cheating? He is one of those who try to sever the ties which Allah has commanded must be upheld and who spread mischief on earth. Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

‘The way (of blame) is only against those who oppress men and rebel in the earth without justification; for such there will be a painful torment’

[al-Shoora 42:42]

- and the one who spreads malicious gossip is one of them.”

And Allah knows best.