49016 - The real meaning of ‘uboodiyyah (true submission to Allah)

the question

I read in question no. 11804 that the purpose for which mankind was created was to devote their worship to Allah alone. Can you explain to me the real meaning of worship?.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

and blessings and peace be upon the Messenger of Allah.

‘Ibaadah (worship) in Arabic means submission and humbling oneself. The Arabs use the phrase tareeq mu’abbad to describe a smooth path which has been become smooth because so many feet have walked on it.

In Islamic terminology the word ‘ibaadah is used in two senses:

1 – The actions of a person, such as praying or paying zakaah, which are described as ‘ibaadah. The scholars defined it as follows:

It means obeying Allah by doing that which He has commanded and avoiding that which He has forbidden, whilst loving Allah, fearing Him and putting one’s hopes in Him.

2 – It also refers to the action itself in abstract terms, such as prayer, zakaah, etc. The scholars defined it as follows:

This is a comprehensive word which includes all word and deeds that Allah loves and is pleased with, both outward and inward.

These enjoined actions are called ‘ibaadaat (acts of worship) because people do them in humility and with love for their Lord. In worshipping Allah there has to be complete love as well as

complete submission to Him.

Our Lord has told us that the ultimate purpose behind the creation of the jinn and mankind is so that they will worship Him alone with no partner or associate. Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And I (Allah) created not the jinn and mankind except that they should worship Me (Alone)” [al-Dhaariyaat 51:56]

How can we achieve this purpose and fulfil this goal?

Many people think that ‘ibaadah only refers to a number of rituals that Allah has commanded should be done at certain times – such as prayer, fasting and Hajj – and that this is the end of the matter. But it is not as these people think.

How long does it take to do these rituals of worship every day and night. Indeed how long does it take in a person’s lifetime? What about the rest of his life then? What about the rest of his energy? What about the rest of his time? How should it be spent and where does it go? Should he spend it in worship or something else? If he is going to spend it in something other than worship, then how can he fulfil the purpose for which mankind was created, which the verse limited completely to worship of Allah? How can he fulfil the words of Allah (interpretation of the meaning):

“Say (O Muhammad): Verily, my Salaah (prayer), my sacrifice, my living, and my dying are for Allah, the Lord of the ‘Aalameen (mankind, jinn and all that exists)” [al-An’aam 6:162]

‘Uboodiyyah is a holistic matter that encompasses the life of the Muslim. When he strives in the land seeking provision he is worshipping Allah, because Allah has commanded him to do that, as He says (interpretation of the meaning):

“so walk in the path thereof and eat of His provision. And to Him will be the Resurrection” [al-Mulk 67:15]

When he sleeps, he sleeps so as to gather strength to worship Allah, as Mu’aadh ibn Jabal (may

Allah be pleased with him) said: “I seek reward for my sleep just as I seek reward for praying qiyaam” (narrated by al-Bukhaari, 4342). Indeed the Muslim is not content unless his pleasure in eating, drinking and marital relations is counted in the scale of his good deeds, as the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “In the intimacy of one of you there is sadaqah (charity, a good deed).” They said: “O Messenger of Allah, if one of us satisfies his desires will he be rewarded for that?” He said: “What do you think, if you were to do it in a haraam way, would you not have a burden of sin?” They said, “Yes.” He said: “Similarly if he does it in a halaal way he will have a reward.” Narrated by Muslim, 1006.

The way to attain this great status is for a person always to remember his Lord whatever he is doing in all spheres of life, and to ask himself whether he is in a situation where his Lord will be pleased with him or angry with him. If he is in a situation where Allah will be pleased with him, then let him praise Allah and do more good. If it is otherwise then let him seek Allah’s forgiveness and repent to Him, as Allah describes His pious slaves as doing when He says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And those who, when they have committed Faahishah (illegal sexual intercourse) or wronged themselves with evil, remember Allah and ask forgiveness for their sins; — and none can forgive sins but Allah — and do not persist in what (wrong) they have done, while they know.

136. For such, the reward is forgiveness from their Lord, and Gardens with rivers flowing underneath (Paradise), wherein they shall abide forever. How excellent is this reward for the doers (who do righteous deeds according to Allah’s Orders)” [Aal ‘Imraan 3:135-136]

This is how our righteous forebears, the Salaf and those who followed them, understood ‘ibaadah. They did not limit it just to rituals and the times when they performed those rituals, and make the rest of their lives “outside worship”. Rather any one of them would have felt that his entire life was worship and that the rituals were moments when he could focus and renew his spiritual energy to help him do all the other acts of worship that were required of him. Hence they used to pay a great deal of attention to it just as a traveller acquires pays a great deal of attention to the supplies that will help him on his way.

They were as their Lord described them (interpretation of the meaning):

“Those who remember Allah (always, and in prayers) standing, sitting, and lying down on their sides” [Aal ‘Imraan 3:191]

In all circumstances they used to remember Allah verbally and in their hearts. The idea of Allah’s greatness and fear of Allah were constantly present in their hearts in everything that they did or said. If one of them made a mistake or slipped, he would correct himself as described in the verse quoted above from Soorat Aal ‘Imraan.

And you should note that man is a worshipper by nature; worship is instilled in him. So either he will worship Allah alone, with no partner or associate, or he will worship something other than Allah, alongside Him or instead of Him – it makes no difference. This kind of worship is that which Allah called “the worship of the Shaytaan” because it is a response to the call of the Shaytaan. And Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Did I not command you, O Children of Adam, that you should not worship Shaytaan (Satan). Verily, he is a plain enemy to you” [Yaa-Seen 36:60].

Man cannot worship both Allah and the Shaytaan:

“Is he who walks prone (without seeing) on his face, more rightly guided, or he who (sees and) walks upright on the Straight Way (i.e. Islamic Monotheism)?” [al-Mulk 67:22]

“Say: Is the blind equal to the one who sees? Or darkness equal to light?” [al-Ra’d 13:16]

The Shaytaan tries to lead man away from the worship of Allah gradually. Sometimes he succeeds on a temporary basis, as in the case of sin, as the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, “No one who commits zina is a believer at the moment of committing zina, and no thief is a believer at the moment of stealing…” Narrated by al-Bukhaari, 2475; Muslim, 57. And sometimes he succeeds completely and severs the connection between a person and his Lord, so that he commits shirk or kufr or heresy – we seek refuge with Allah.

This worship of the Shaytaan sometimes consists of worshipping whims and desires, as Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Have you (O Muhammad) seen him who has taken as his ilaah (god) his own vain desire? Would you then be a Wakeel (a disposer of his affairs or a watcher) over him?” [al-Furqaan 25:43]

This person who follows the dictates of his whims and desires – doing whatever he thinks is good and abstaining from whatever he thinks is bad – is obeying the whims and desires of his own self, which calls to him, so it is as if he is worshipping it as a man worships his god. And sometimes it takes the form of worshipping money, as the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “Perish the slave of the dinar and the slave of the dirham and the slave of fine clothing; if he is given he is pleased and if he is not given he is angry. Let him perish and relapse, and if he is pierced by a thorn let him not find anyone to remove it for him…” Narrated by al-Bukhaari, 2887.

This applies to everyone whose heart is attached to something other than Allah of his own whims and desires. If he gets what he wants he is happy and if he does not then he is angry. So he is a slave to whatever he desires, for slavery in fact refers to the enslavement of the heart. The more he is enslaved to these desires, the weaker his submission to his Lord, so if his enslavement to these whims and desires is so strong that it prevents him from adhering to religion completely, then he will become a mushrik and a kaafir. If these whims and desires keep him from doing some of the things that he is obliged to do or they make the idea of doing some of the things that he is forbidden to do, but which do not put a person beyond the pale of Islam, seem attractive to him, then that affects his submission to his Lord and his faith, to the extent to which they keep him from fulfilling his religious commitment.

We ask Allah to bless us by enabling us to submit completely to Him, and to make us among His sincere slaves and close friends, for He is All-hearing, Ever-Near and Ever-Responsive. And Allah knows best.

May Allah send blessings and peace upon His slave and Prophet Muhammad and upon his family and companions.

See Mafaaheem yanbaghi an tusahhah by Shaykh Muhammad Qutub, 20-23, 174-182; al-‘Uboodiyyah by Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah.

(The latter book is available in English translation under the title ‘Uboodiyyah – Being A True Slave of Allah, published by Ta-Ha, London, UK).