87779 - They are denouncing him for applying the Sunnah and saying that it divides the Muslims

the question

The imam of our mosque said in a Friday khutbah that we should not be strict in following the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) because the Sunnah divides Muslims and we must be united. He quoted as evidence the fact that a Bedouin came to the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) and said: O Messenger of Allaah, tell me of an action which, if I do it, I will enter Paradise. He said: Worship Allaah and do not associate anything with Him, establish the prescribed prayers, pay the obligatory zakaah and fast Ramadaan." He said: By the One in Whose hand is my soul, I shall never do anything more or less than that. When he turned to leave, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: "Whoever would like to look upon a man who is one of the people of Paradise, let him look upon this man."
Is this correct? Please note that we are followers of the Sunnah, and he calls the one who follows the Sunnah an extremist.
Please advise us, may Allaah bless you.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly:

Your imam has said something that is wrong and false. What he should have done was fear Allaah his Lord and refrain from speaking words that involved sin.

The Prophetic Sunnah is the guidance of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him)

and his words and deeds. How can the Sunnah be dividing the Muslims?! What can unite them if the Sunnah divides them?

If this imam was sincere he would have said that the Sunnah is what unites people, and brings them together.

Imam Abu’l-Muzaffar al-Sam’aani (may Allaah have mercy on him) said: The reason why ahl al-hadeeth were united is that they learned their religion from the Qur'aan and Sunnah and sound reports, which united them and brought them together, whereas the followers of innovation learned their religion by means of reasoning, which divided them and made them differ. Al-Intisaar li Ahl al-Hadeeth (p. 47),

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allaah have mercy on him) said:

The cause of unity and harmony is accepting the religion as a whole and following all of it, which is worshipping Allaah alone with no partner or associate, as He enjoined, both inwardly and outwardly. The cause of division is failing to do some of that which is enjoined upon a person, and transgression among different groups.

The result of unity is mercy from Allaah, His pleasure and blessings, happiness in this world and in the Hereafter and brightness of the face, whereas the result of division is the punishment and curse of Allaah, darkness of the face and the disavowal of the Messenger.

Majmoo’ al-Fataawa (1/17).

He (may Allaah have mercy on him) also said:

Accepting sound reports from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) brings harmony, as was narrated from Maalik (may Allaah have mercy on him) who said: When knowledge decreases harshness will prevail and when there is little knowledge of hadeeth then whims and desires will prevail.

Dar’ al-Ta’aarud (1/149)

How can the follower of the Sunnah be called an extremist when the Muslim is enjoined to follow it and take the guidance of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) as his example? What would this imam say about the deeds of the Sahaabah (may Allaah be pleased with them) when they followed the Sunnah of their Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) so closely? What would he say about this event?

It was narrated that Abu Sa'eed al-Khudri (may Allaah be pleased with him) said: Whilst the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) was leading his companions in prayer, he took off his sandals and placed them to his left. When the people saw that, they took off their sandals too. When the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) finished the prayer he said: What made you take off your sandals? They said: We saw you take off your sandals so we took ours off too. The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: Jibreel (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) came to me and told me that there was some dirt on them. and he said: When one of you comes to the mosque, let him look and if he sees any dirt (impurity) on his shoes, let him wipe it off and pray in them."

Narrated by Abu Dawood (650); classed as saheeh by al-Albaani.

These companions of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) took off their shoes whilst praying simply because they saw their Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) take off his shoes. So what if it was a Sunnah narrated from him or it was something that he taught?

Secondly:

Criticizing the followers of the Sunnah of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) and accusing them of being extremists or fanatics is offensive and is slander. Allaah has issued a warning to the one who does that, let alone the fact that it is an imitation of the mushrikeen who did this before him.

Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And those who annoy believing men and women undeservedly, they bear (on themselves) the crime of slander and plain sin”

[al-Ahzaab 33:58]

“Verily, (during the worldly life) those who committed crimes used to laugh at those who believed.

30. And, whenever they passed by them, used to wink one to another (in mockery).

31. And when they returned to their own people, they would return jesting;

32. And when they saw them, they said: ‘Verily, these have indeed gone astray’”

[al-Mutaffifeen 83:29-32]

Shaykh al-‘Uthaymeen (may Allaah have mercy on him) said:

“And when they saw them” means, when the sinners saw the believers, they said:

“Verily, these have indeed gone astray” i.e., gone astray from the right path, and they are backward and narrow-minded and extreme, and other such labels. Those people have their successors in our own times. Some people say of good people that they are regressive and backward, and they say of the one who is religiously committed that he is extremist and narrow-minded. Even worse than all of that, they said of the Messengers that they were sorcerers or madmen. Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning): “Likewise, no Messenger came to those before them but they said: ‘A sorcerer or a madman!’” [al-Dhaariyaat 51:52]. The heirs of the Messengers, who are the scholars and those who are religiously committed encounter the same from the enemies of the Messengers as the Messengers encountered, of offensive labels and mockery, and so on. Among these accusations that the followers of innovation and those who deny the attributes of Allaah gave to those of the early generation who affirmed His attributes was that they thought of Allaah as a physical being, and other such negative accusations which put people off from the right way.

Liqaa’aat al-Baab il-Maftooh (no. 30).

Thirdly:

The kind of strictness in religious adherence which is to be criticized is that which regards mustahabb things as obligatory and makrooh things as haraam. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) warned against going to extremes in religion, and he also warned against undue strictness. Extremism and strictness does not mean applying the Sunnah, rather it means changing its rulings and being too strict with regard to commands and prohibitions when that is not the case.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah said – commenting on the hadeeth, “Do not be too strict with yourselves, for some people were strict on themselves and Allaah was strict on them, and we see the remnants of that in their hermitages and monasteries.” - :

Here the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) forbade being strict in religion by going beyond what is prescribed. Strictness may sometimes means taking what is not obligatory or mustahabb and making it obligatory or mustahabb with regard to acts of worship, and sometimes it may mean taking something that is not haraam or makrooh and making it haraam or makrooh with regard to things that are good. The reason for that is that Allaah was very strict on those among the Christians who were too strict on themselves, until it ended up in the innovation of monasticism.

Thus it may be noted that the Prophet disliked such things that the Christians did, such as innovation of monasticism, even though many devoted Muslims have fallen into the same trap on the basis of their interpretation for which they may be excused, or they fell into this trap with no justification.

It may also be noted that being too strict with oneself in the beginning may lead to further strictness imposed by Allaah, either through laws or through His decree. As for laws, this is what the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) feared during his own time, of an increase in obligations or prohibitions such as that which he feared when they gathered to pay Taraweeh with him, and when they asked about things that had not been forbidden, and such as

the fact that when a person vows to do an act of worship it becomes obligatory for him to do it even though he is forbidden to make vows, and similarly expiations which become obligatory for specific reasons.

As for the divine decree, we have often seen and heard that those who go to extremes in some issues, will be caused to suffer in ways that lead to things becoming more strict on him with regard to what is obligatory and what is haraam, such as many of those who are affected with waswaas about purification. When they do more than is prescribed, they will end up suffering from things that lead to something that may cause more hardship and harm to them.

Iqtida' al-Siraat al-Mustaqeem (103, 104).

Shaykh Ibn 'Uthaymeen (may Allaah have mercy on him) said, commenting on the hadeeth of the Messenger (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him): "O people, beware of going to extremes in religious matters for those who came before you were doomed because of going to extremes in religious matters." Narrated by al-Nasaa'i (3059) and Ibn Maajah (3029); classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh al-Nasaa'i:

In this hadeeth the Messenger (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) warned his ummah against going to extremes and proved that going to extremes is a cause of doom, because it is contrary to sharee'ah, and because it led to the downfall of previous nations. So it may be understood from this that going to extremes is haraam for two reasons:

1 –He (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) warned against it, and a warning is a prohibition and more.

2 –It is the cause of nations' downfall as those who came before us were destroyed, and whatever is the cause of doom is haraam.

With regard to worship, people may go to one of two extremes or be moderate. Some are negligent, some exaggerate and some are moderate.

The proper way (as prescribed by Islam) is the middle way between going to extremes and being

negligent. Being moderate and not inclining towards either extreme is what is required. It is not permissible to exaggerate and go to extremes in religious matters, or to be careless and not pay any heed. Rather we should tread a middle path between both.

Majmoo' Fataawa al-Shaykh Ibn 'Uthaymeen (9/367, 368).

Fourthly:

The hadeeth which your imam quoted as evidence was narrated by al-Bukhaari (1333) and Muslim (14), and there is no dispute as to its soundness, but he has misunderstood it. If he had studied its narrations and what the scholars said, he would not have quoted it as evidence in this manner. According to a report narrated by al-Bukhaari, it says, "and taught him the laws of Islam." This wording includes all other obligatory duties, and things that are recommended.

Al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar (may Allaah have mercy on him) said:

The words "he was asking about Islam" mean, about the laws of Islam. It may be understood that he asked about the realties of Islam. He did not mention the Shahaadah to him because he knew that he already knew it, or he knew that he was asking about practical laws, or he mentioned it but the narrator did not transmit it because it is so well known. And he did not mention Hajj either because it had not been enjoined yet or because the narrator had shortened the report. This second view is supported by the report narrated by the compiler – i.e., al-Bukhaari – concerning fasting via Ismaa'eel ibn Ja'far from Abu Suhayl in this hadeeth. He said: The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) told him of the laws of Islam, and he included all obligatory and recommended deeds in that.

"And the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) mentioned zakaah" – in the report of Ismaa'eel ibn Ja'far it says: He told me of what Allaah had enjoined upon me of zakaah. He said: The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) told him of the laws of Islam. This report shows that there were things in the story that were told in brief form, such as explaining the minimum thresholds for paying zakaah, which are not explained in these two reports, and neither are the names of the prayers. It seems that the reason for that is that

these things were well known among them, or that the purpose of the story was to show that the one who adheres to the obligatory duties will be saved even if he does not do naafil actions.

With regard to him succeeding when he does not fall short in that, this is clear, but how can he succeed if he does not add anything to it? Al-Nawawi answered by saying that the hadeeth confirms that he will succeed because he has done what he is required to do, and there is nothing to suggest that if he does more than that he will not be successful, because if he succeeds by doing what is obligatory, he is more likely to succeed if he does recommended actions as well as obligatory deeds.

Fath al-Baari (1/108)

We hope that the imam will think about the phrase “and he taught him the laws of Islam”, and we hope that he will think about the last words that we have quoted from al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar, in which he approved of the words of Imam al-Nawawi, that success is more likely for the one who does the obligatory duties and adds to them the recommended deeds.

Fifthly:

We advise you to adhere to the commands of Allaah, may He be exalted, and His Messenger (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him), and we also advise you to adhere to the Sunnah and kept doing mustahabb deeds, without going to extremes or exaggerating, and teach that to people with wisdom and good methods. It is not permissible for you to put people off by being too strict in matters that are broad in scope, or by making mustahabb things obligatory, or by going to extremes in denouncing people, especially the elite such as the imam of the mosque or the mufti or one who holds a similar status in people’s eyes. Listen to this comprehensive advice from a great scholar:

Shaykh Saalih al-Fawzaan (may Allaah preserve him) said:

You must adhere to the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) and stick to it, and not pay any attention to the criticism of those who criticize you or blame

you for that. If your parents criticize you for adhering to the Sunnah and they want you to be heedless about that, then do not obey them with regard to that, especially if these sunnahs are obligatory duties that must be adhered to, and they are not just mustahabb, so long as it does not reach the level of being exaggeration. But if it means that you are exaggerating, then that is not appropriate, rather you should be balanced and moderate in applying the Sunnah and acting upon it, without going to extremes or exaggerating, and without being careless or heedless. This is what you should do. Whatever the case, you will be rewarded – in sha Allaah – and you must adhere to the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) and try to convince those who are criticizing you about that, especially your parents. You should encourage them to follow the Sunnah and explain to them the reward and goodness that there is in that. Perhaps they will drop these objections, and maybe this deed will cause them to also adhere to the Sunnah, and you will be the one who called them to Allaah, may He be glorified and exalted. Undoubtedly the one who wants to call people to Allaah is obliged to begin with his relatives and the closest of people to him, and one's parents are among the closest of people to a person.

Whatever the case, if your adherence to the Sunnah does not go to extremes of exaggeration, then it is something praiseworthy, and you must continue in it, and call your parents and others to it. And Allaah knows best.

Al-Muntaqa min Fataawa al-Shaykh al-Fawzaan (2/301, 302)

Finally: Just as it is blameworthy exaggeration to make mustahabb things like obligatory deeds or makrooh things like haraam deeds, or to oblige ourselves to do things that Allaah has not made obligatory upon us, it is also ignorance of the basic principles of sharee'ah to ignore the important general principle which is that harmony and love among Muslims are essential, and we must be united in adhering to Islam and protect the honour of the Muslim from criticism and shame, let alone aggression and harm. It is ignorance to neglect all of that just because someone adheres to something that is mustahabb but others do not see it as such, or to something that he does not adhere to, and respond by transgressing against the Muslim's honour or rights because he neglects something that others adhere to. It is by such means that the accursed enemy attains his

goal among the believers, and it is even worse when it happens in a foreign land where others see us as representatives of Islam.

Imam Muslim narrated in his Saheeh (2812) that Jaabir ibn ‘Abd-Allaah (may Allaah be pleased with him) said: I heard the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) say: “The Shaytaan has despaired of being worshipped in the Arabian Peninsula, but he will sow seeds of discord among them.”

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allaah have mercy on him) said:

As for the description of prayer, one of its issues is the Basmalah (saying Bismillaah…), and the people differ as to whether it is a verse of the Qur'aan or not, and whether it is to be recited or not. Both sides have written books that show a great deal of ignorance and wrongdoing, even though the issues is not that serious. Adhering blindly to one’s view in these and similar matters is one of the signs of division and dissent which is forbidden for us. The reason for discussing these controversial minor issues is to find out which view is more sound, as these issues are among the least serious controversial issues, but the shaytaan may play a role in creating divisions among Muslims because of these minor issues.

Then he said: It is mustahabb for a man to try to reconcile people by refraining from these mustahabb deeds, because the interests served by reconciling people in Islam is greater than the interest served by doing such things. Similarly, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) decided not to change the structure of the Ka’bah, because leaving it as it was would reconcile people, and Ibn Mas’ood criticized ‘Uthmaan for offering prayers in full whilst travelling, but he still prayed behind him when he offered the prayer in full, and said: Dissent is evil.

Majmoo’ al-Fataawa (22/405-407).

And Allaah knows best.