99554 - Expiation for Gossip

the question

With regard to expiation for gossip, is saying “Lord, forgive me and the believing men and women and the Muslim men and women” sufficient to ask for forgiveness for the one I gossiped about, or must I pray for him by name?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Gossip is a major sin, and undoubtedly all Muslims know this, and they know the punishment that Allah will inflict on the one who gossips. The seriousness of this sin is due to two reasons:

1- It has to do with people’s rights, so it is more serious because it involves wrongdoing against people.

2- It is an easy sin that most people commit, except those on whom Allah has mercy. People usually regard easy things as insignificant although they are serious before Allah.

With regard to expiation for gossiping, it is essential to note a few important points:

Firstly: In a number of fatwas (rulings/answers) on our site we have pointed out that expiation for gossip includes praying for forgiveness for the one you gossiped about, and making du’a (supplicating) for him, and praising him in his absence. We hope that the reader will look at these fatwas and read the words of the scholars. See the answers to questions no. 6308, 23328, 52807 and 65649.

Secondly: Stating that praying for forgiveness is the expiation for gossip does not mean that it is sufficient. The basic principle is that sins cannot be erased except by sincere repentance which is accompanied by giving up the sin, regretting it, resolving not to go back to it and being sincere at heart in one’s dealings with the Creator, may He be glorified. Then there is the hope if one repents

in this manner, that Allah will forgive him his sins and pardon his errors.

With regard to people's rights and transgressions against people, they can only be expiated if the people affected pardon him and forgive him. The evidence for this is in the sunnah (teachings) of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), who said: "Whoever has wronged his brother with regard to his honour or something, let him ask him for forgiveness before the time when there will be neither dinar nor dirham, and if he has any good deeds it will be taken from him in proportion to the wrong he did, and if he does not have any hasanat (good deeds), some of the other person's sayyiat (evil deeds) will be taken and given to him to bear." [al-Bukhari]

The command is to seek forgiveness for wrongdoing before scores are settled among people on the Day of Reckoning, when scores will be settled with hasanat and sayyiat and true losses will be borne by those who wronged people with regard to their wealth, honour and blood.

Thirdly: What the one who wants to free himself of the sin of gossip must do is strive hard to seek forgiveness from the one whom he gossiped about, and ask him to pardon him, and apologize to him with kind and good words, and he should be as humble as he can in this, even if he has to buy an extremely valuable gift or offer financial help. The scholars have stated that all of this is permissible when it comes to restoring people's rights.

Because the scholars among the righteous salaf (predecessors) and fuqaha (jurists) thought that seeking people's forgiveness for gossip might lead – in some cases – to greater evils such as grudges or breaking of ties, and people might feel resentment and grudges to an extent that is known only to Allah, most of the scholars granted concessions allowing one not to seek forgiveness (from the victim), and they hoped that it would be sufficient to pray for forgiveness for the victim of gossip and make du'a (supplication) for him and praise him in his absence.

Other scholars were of the view that nothing could expiate for gossip but the forgiveness of the one who was wronged. But the correct view is that if the one who gossiped repents sincerely, he does not have to tell the one about whom he gossiped about it, especially if he fears that this would cause more trouble, as is usually the case.

Praying for forgiveness for the one he gossiped about is an exceptional case and is a case of necessity dictated by sharee'ah (Islamic law), where warding off harm takes precedence over bringing benefits.

From the above it may be understood that the one who regards the sin of gossip as insignificant on the basis that praying for forgiveness is sufficient to expiate this sin is incorrect. His thinking is wrong for three reasons:

1- He forgets that the basic condition for repentance is regret, giving up the sin and sincerely repenting to Allah. This condition may not be truly met in the case of most people.

2- The basic principle in expiation with regard to people's rights is striving to seek their pardon. If he thinks that telling the person about the gossip will lead to a greater evil, then he may resort to praying for forgiveness for him in this case, otherwise the basic principle is that he should seek pardon from the one whom he wronged.

3- This shows you that if the person who was gossiped about has heard about what another man has said about him, then – in this case – it is essential to seek forgiveness from him directly, so that the harm suffered by the victim will be undone and his resentment may be dispelled. If he does not pardon or forgive, then there is no option after that but to pray for forgiveness for him and make du'a (supplication) for him.

Fourthly:

Then after all this, does the questioner think that praying for forgiveness in general terms – "O Allah, forgive the believing men and women" – is sufficient to expiate for the sin of gossiping?

We say that when we hope that Allah will accept our du'a and prayers for forgiveness as an expiation for bad deeds, it is essential to be sincere towards Allah in this du'a, to seek out means of drawing close to Allah, and to repeat it in times and places where du'as are answered, and pray for all goodness and blessings in this world and in the Hereafter. Undoubtedly such a du'a requires us to specify the person for whom we are praying, either mentioning him by name or describing

him, by saying: O Allah, forgive me and the one whom I have gossiped about and wronged; O Allah, pardon us and him, and whatever else you can say in your du'a.

As for praying in general terms, it does not seem to be sufficient to achieve what you are hoping for from Allah. Just as you gossiped about him by mentioning his name or describing him, and you singled him out for harm, so too you should pray specifically for him and ask for forgiveness for him, so that the bad deeds will be replaced by good.

Fifthly:

It should be noted that the purpose behind praying for forgiveness and making du'a is to ward off bad deeds with good, and to compensate for misdeeds. Hence it is not limited to prayers for forgiveness in exclusion to other good deeds. Rather you can do a good deed and dedicate its reward to the one about whom you gossiped, such as giving charity on his behalf or offering him some help, or supporting him at times of hardship, and trying to compensate him for the wrong you did as much as you can.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said in Majmoo' al-Fatawa:

As for the rights of the one who was wronged, they are not waived just because one repents. This is a right and there is no difference between a killer and other wrongdoers. If a person repents from wrongdoing, the rights of the one whom he wronged are not waived because of his repentance, rather it is part of his repentance to compensate him to a level commensurate with his wrongdoing. If he does not compensate him in this world then he will inevitably compensate him in the Hereafter. So the wrongdoer who has repented should do a lot of good deeds, so that when those who have been wronged claim their rights, he will not end up bankrupt. And if Allah wants to compensate the one who was wronged then no one can prevent His bounty, such as if He wants to forgive sins less than shirk for whomever He wills.

Hence in the hadeeth (narration) about qasas (prescribed punishments), for which Jabir ibn 'Abd-Allah rode for a month to 'Abd-Allah ibn Unays to hear it from his lips – which was narrated by Imam Ahmad and others, and which al-Bukhari quoted as evidence in his Saheeh (authentic

compilation) – it says: “When the Day of Resurrection comes, Allah will gather all creatures in a single plain so that the announcer will be able to make them all hear his voice and the watcher will be able to see all of them, then He will call them in a voice that will be heard from afar just as it is heard from nearby: ‘I am the Sovereign, I am the Judge. None of the people of Hell shall enter Hell if they have any right due from any of the people of Paradise, until the score is settled, and none of the people of Paradise shall enter Paradise if they have any right due from any of the people of Hell, until the score is settled.’”

And in Saheeh Muslim it is narrated from Abu Sa’eed: “When the people of Paradise cross al-sirat (a bridge) and stand on a bridge between Paradise and Hell, they will settle their scores with one another, and when they are cleansed and purified, permission will be given to them to enter Paradise.”

When Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, said (interpretation of the meaning): “neither backbite one another” – as gossip is a transgression against people’s honour – He then said: “Would one of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? You would hate it (so hate backbiting). And fear Allah. Verily, Allah is the One Who forgives and accepts repentance, Most Merciful.”

[49:12]

So He told them to repent from gossip, because it is a kind of wrongdoing. This applies if the one who was wronged found out about the gossip. But if he gossiped about him or slandered him and he did not know about it, it was said that one of the conditions of repentance is telling him, and it was said that this is not essential, which is the view of the majority. Both views were narrated from Ahmad. But he should still do good things for the one who was wronged, such as making du’a for him, praying for forgiveness for him, and doing good deeds and giving him the reward for that, so as to make up for gossiping about him and slandering him. Al-Hasan al-Basri said: The expiation for gossip is praying for forgiveness for the one about whom you gossiped. End quote.

And Allah knows best.