12797 - Does this hadeeth contradict the principle of equality and justice in Islam?

the question

How sound is the following hadeeth, which was narrated by Abu Dawood and others: “Forgive the people of good character for their mistakes”? I have read that some people are not sure about it because it contradicts the Qur’aan and its verses which call for equality and justice.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

This hadeeth was narrated by Imam Ahmad, Abu Dawood, al-Nasaa’i, al-Bayhaqi and others from ‘Aa’ishah (may Allaah be pleased with her), who said that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “Forgive the people of good character for their mistakes, except in cases of hadd punishments.”

It has other isnaads which are not free of faults, but when taken together render the hadeeth hasan.

What is meant by the hadeeth is that it is recommended not to take people of good character to task if they slip up or make mistakes which are out of character, except in cases where a hadd punishment is required and news of the sin reaches the ruler, in which case the hadd punishment must be carried out.

What is meant by “people of good character” is ordinary people who possess an honourable attitude and other praiseworthy characteristics, those who are always obedient and are known for their good character, but who may slip sometimes and commit sins. This meaning was narrated by Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allaah have mercy on him) who said: The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) did not call the pious who worship a great deal “people of good character” and this phrase is not used in the words of Allaah or His Messenger to describe the obedient and

pious. It seems that it refers to those who are respected among the people for their status and high position. Allaah has singled them out for a kind of honour above others of their kind, meaning that if a person is modest and of good character, but then he slips up and the Shaytaan overpowers him briefly (and makes him do something out of character), we should not hasten to rebuke him and punish him, rather his mistake should be forgiven, provided that it does not involve transgressing one of the sacred limits of Allaah (for which a hadd punishment is required), because the hadd punishment must be carried out regardless of whether the one who deserves it is regarded as honourable or ignoble. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “Those who came before you were destroyed because if a nobleman among them stole they would let him off, but if a weak and insignificant person stole they would carry out the punishment on him. By Allaah, if Faatimah the daughter of Muhammad were to steal, I would cut off her hand.” Saheeh – agreed upon. This highlights one of the wonderful aspects of this perfect sharee’ah.

End quote.

From the above it may be understood that the meaning of this hadeeth does not contradict the principle of equality and justice in Islam, rather it encourages overlooking sins and mistakes that are not subject to hadd punishments if they are committed by people who do not ordinarily do such things, and if not imposing a ta’zeer punishment will not lead to further trouble.