264334 - The importance of mixing with people of knowledge to learn sublime manners, good attitudes and proper etiquette

the question

Some people say that mixing with knowledgeable people in order to acquire Islamic knowledge is important in order to learn good manners and attitudes. My question is: aren't good manners explained in the Quran and Sunnah? Why do I need a scholar in order to learn how to be truthful or be honest or be generous, which are the most important manners and are easy to learn, so how can we learn them from scholars with due respect to them?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

What you say in your question is undoubtedly true, that the Quran and Sunnah explain what the Muslim needs to know of etiquette, manners and attitude, so whoever acts in accordance with the Quran and Sunnah will have acquired good manners and attitude that will refine his character. Hence when the Mother of the Believers `A'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her) described the character of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), she said that his character was the Quran.

It was narrated from Sa`d ibn Hisham ibn `Amir that he asked `A'ishah: O Mother of the Believers, tell me about the character of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

She said: Do you not read the Quran? I said: Of course. She said: The character of the Prophet of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was the Quran. Narrated by Muslim, 746.

It was narrated from Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "I was only sent to perfect good manners and attitude." Narrated by al-Bukhari in *Al-Adab al-Mufrad*, 273; and Imam Ahmad in *Al-Musnad*,

14/512-513; classed as authentic (sahih) by al-Albani in *Sahih al-Jami`*, 2349.

Ibn `Abd al-Barr (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

This hadith has a sound isnad, narrated from Abu Hurayrah from the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

End quote from *At-Tamhid*, 24/333.

Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi narrated from Sufyan ibn `Uyaynah that he used to say: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) is the greatest standard, so things should be measured against his character, his conduct and his practice, then whatever is in harmony with them is valid and good, and whatever is contrary to them is invalid and wrong.

End quote from *Al-Jami` li Akhlaq ar-Rawi wa Adab as-Sami`*, 1/79.

But the fact that good manners and attitudes are to be based on the Quran and Sunnah does not mean that the scholar does not have an important role to play in refining his students' character and teaching them manners. It is not the shaykh's role to teach good manners and attitudes, but he is an effective means of learning and acquiring them. Hence the scholars advise the seeker of knowledge to choose, when wanting to acquire knowledge, a shaykh who acts in accordance with his knowledge, one who reflects the manners and attitudes that are explained in the Quran and Sunnah.

Ibn Muflih (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

It was narrated that Ibrahim an-Nakha`i said: When they (the early generations) wanted to learn from a man, they would examine his conduct, how he prayed and his condition in general, then they would learn from him. This was narrated from a number of scholars.

End quote from *Al-Adab ash-Shar`iyyah*, 1/418.

Ibn Jama`ah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The seeker of knowledge should be careful and pray istikharah, asking Allah to help him to make the right choice when deciding from whom he wants to acquire knowledge and learn good manners and attitudes. If possible, he should choose one who is fully qualified, compassionate, dignified, known to be restrained and renowned for being of good character…

The seeker of knowledge cannot have as his main focus increasing in knowledge when he is lacking in piety and religious commitment, or is ill-mannered. It was narrated from one of the early generations [that he said]: This religious knowledge is a matter of faith, so be careful about the one from whom you learn your religion.

End quote from *Tadhkirat as-Saami` wal-Mutakallim fi Adab al-`Alim wal-Muta`allim*, p. 96.

The main issue is that knowledge is not merely a matter of accumulating information about virtuous deeds and bad deeds, as the questioner thinks, because most people know that telling the truth is good and telling lies is bad, but how many people tell lies, how many people betray trusts, and so on and so forth…?

The real issue indeed is knowing the difference between true sincerity and mere claims. What matters is putting into practice all the knowledge you acquire, being patient in doing that, and striving against your whims and desires and what your nafs (self) is inclined towards.

This is the job of the devoted scholar: to teach people knowledge, to set an example of putting knowledge into practice, and to teach them how to shape their manners and attitude in accordance with that knowledge.

Allah, may He be Exalted, says:

{It is not for a human [prophet]1 that Allah should give him the Scripture and authority and prophethood and then he would say to the people, “Be servants to me rather than Allah,” but [instead, he would say], “Be pious scholars of the Lord [*rabbaniyyun*] because of what you have taught of the Scripture and because of what you have studied.”} [Al `Imraan 3:79].

Al-Baghawi said, commenting on the word *rabbaniyyun* [translated here as “pious scholars of the

Lord”]:

The scholars differed concerning [this word]. `Ali, Ibn `Abbas and al-Hasan said: [It means] have deep knowledge of religion. Qatadah said: [It means] be wise and knowledgeable. Sa`id ibn Jubayr said: [It means] the knowledgeable person who acts in accordance with his knowledge. And it was narrated from Sa`id ibn Jubayr, from Ibn `Abbas [that it means]: be people of understanding who teach others.

And it was said that the *rabbani* is the one who teaches people starting with easy issues of knowledge before moving onto more difficult issues.

‘At@â’ said: (It refers to) scholars, wise men and people who are sincere for the sake of Allah towards His creation.

Abu ‘Ubaydah said: I heard a knowledgeable man say: The *rabbani* is the one who has knowledge of halal and haram, commands and prohibitions, the one who knows about the affairs of the Ummah, what has happened and what will happen.

And it was said that the *rabbaniyun* are superior to the *ahbar*, and the *ahbar* are superior to the *‘ulama*; the *rabbaniyun* are those who combine knowledge with deep insight into how to have a positive impact on people.

Al-Mubarrid said: They are people who have mastered knowledge; they are so called because they live for knowledge, and teach seekers of knowledge starting with easy issues of knowledge before moving onto more difficult issues…

End quote from *Tafsir al-Baghawi*, 1/463. See also *Tafsir at-Tabari*, 6/544.

To sum up:

This is the role of the rabbani scholar: to devote his life to spreading what he has of knowledge that Allah has enabled him to acquire, and teach what he knows to the people, take care of them, educate them and reform their attitude on the basis of that.

In addition to that, and perhaps more importantly than that, his role is to set an example of how to put the knowledge that Allah has enabled him to acquire into practice, to the extent that the people will see in him a real-life embodiment of the knowledge that they are learning.

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It was narrated that al-Ahnaf ibn Qays said: We often used to visit Qays ibn `Asim to learn patience and forbearance from him as we learned Islamic knowledge from him.

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The companions of `Abdullah ibn Mas`ud (may Allah be pleased with him) would go and visit him to observe his bearing, conduct and good manners, so that they could imitate him.

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Ibn Sirin said: They used to learn good manners and attitudes as they would learn knowledge.

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Al-Qadi Abu Ya`la (may Allah have mercy on him) said: Abul-Husayn ibn al-Munadi said, with his isnad going back to al-Husayn ibn Isma`il, who said: I heard my father say: We used to meet in the majlis (gathering) of Imam Ahmad, five thousand people or more; fewer than five hundred would write down what he said, and the rest would watch him to learn good etiquette and bearing.

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Ibrahim ibn Habib ibn ash-Shahid said to his son: O my son, go and meet knowledgeable people and scholars and learn from them, and adopt their etiquette, attitude and manners, for I like that more for you than learning a large number of hadiths.

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Al-A`mash said: They used to come to Humam ibn al-Harith and learn from his manners, attitude

and bearing…

See: *Mawsu`at al-Akhlaq* by Khalid al-Khazzaz, p. 81 ff.

Secondly:

Friends influence one another with regard to attitude and manners, and the one with the stronger character will have a greater impact on the one with the weaker character. Therefore Islam urges us to keep company with righteous people, and warns against keeping company with evil people.

It was narrated from Abu Musa al-Ash`ari (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “The likeness of a good companion and a bad companion is that of one who carries musk and one who works the bellows. With the carrier of musk, either he will give you some or you will buy some from him, or you will notice a good smell from him; as for the one who works the bellows, either he will burn your clothes or you will notice a bad smell from him.” Narrated by al-Bukhari, 5534; Muslim, 2628.

Al-Qadi `Iyyad (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

This indicates that one should avoid mixing with bad people and avoid sitting with evil people, innovators and backbiters, because all of these people will have an influence on the one who mixes with them. And Islam urges us to mix with righteous people and acquire knowledge, good manners, good attitudes and praiseworthy characteristics from them.

End quote from *Ikmal al-Mu`allim*, 8/108.

So if the seeker of knowledge keeps company with a shaykh who practices what he preaches, he will be influenced by keeping company with him and will acquire the attitude and manners of his teacher. Hence we see in the books of biography that So-and-so was like his shaykh in manners, attitude, conduct and behaviour.

`Abdullah, the son of Imam Ahmad (may Allah have mercy on them both) said:

My father told me: `Uthman ibn `Uthman told us: I heard al-Batti say: It was said: We never saw

any man who resembled `Alqamah more in manners and attitude than an-Nakha`i, and we never saw any man who resembled Ibn Mas`ud more in manners and attitude than `Alqamah, or any man who resembled the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) in his conduct more than Ibn Mas`ud.

End quote from *Al-`Ilal wa Ma`rifat ar-Rijal*, 2/194.

An-Nakha`i was the student of `Alqamah, `Alqamah was the student of Ibn Mas`ud (may Allah be pleased with him), and Ibn Mas`ud was a companion of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

Adh-Dhahabi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

Abu Bakr ibn Is-haq as-Sabghi was asked: What do you think of how wise and mature in thinking Abu `Ali ath-Thaqafi is? He said: That is how the Sahabah and Tabi`in who resided in Madinah were.

It was said: How is that?

He said: Malik ibn Anas was one of the most wise and mature men of his time, and it was said that he was influenced by the wise and mature-thinking people among the Tabi`in with whom he mixed. Yahya ibn Yahya an-Naysaburi became close to him, and was influenced by his wisdom and conduct to the extent that there was no one else like him in Khorasan. So it was said: This man has the wisdom and conduct of Malik. Then Muhammad ibn Nasr became close to Yahya for several years, until he was influenced by his conduct and wisdom, and after Yahya there was no one among the jurists of Khorasan who was more mature in thinking and wise than him. Then Abu `Ali ath-Thaqafi became close to Muhammad ibn Nasr for four years, then after him there was no one who was more mature in thinking and more wise than him.

End quote from *Tarikh al-Islam*, 6/1046-1047.

Thirdly:

There are aspects of etiquette, manners and attitude that require some reflection, knowledge and wisdom in order to behave in the right manner in certain situations, such as knowing when to withdraw and when to mix with people; knowing when it is appropriate to show modesty and forbearance and when it is appropriate to show courage and express anger; understanding the proper limits of forbearance and weakness; understanding the proper limits of miserliness and generosity, and other similar issues in which the scholar, by virtue of his knowledge, wisdom and experience, may help you to avoid confusion and save you the trouble of going through bad experiences and trial and error.

There are some matters of etiquette and conduct that are permissible, but there may be times when refraining from doing those things may reflect dignity and a good attitude. One may learn about such matters of etiquette and attitude and acquire knowledge thereof by mixing with people of dignity and people of knowledge who put their knowledge into practice, for such people are the most deserving to be people of dignity.

Ibn Muflih (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

It was narrated that al-A`mash said: They used to learn everything from the scholar, even what clothes and shoes to wear… `Abd ar-Rahman ibn Mahdi said: We would come to a man, not because we wanted to acquire knowledge from him, but so that we could learn about his conduct, bearing and good manners. `Ali ibn al-Madini and others would attend the classes of Yahya ibn Sa`id al-Qattan, not seeking to learn anything from him, but to observe his manner and bearing.

`Abdullah ibn Ahmad said: I heard the son of `Ali ibn al-Madini say: I saw among my father's books six volumes on the madhhab and manners and attitude of `Abdullah, and I saw Ahmad doing such and such, and I heard such and such about him.

End quote from *Al-Adab ash-Shar`iyyah*, 2/149.

Conclusion:

The matter is not limited to major issues of manners and attitude, and learning them. There are

some details in real-life situations and subtle matters in the field of manners and attitude, piety, and refining character and conduct which require the one who really cares about himself and is aware of his situation to follow a shaykh or righteous friend, seek advice from him, and learn from him what he needs to know.

Even many rulings having to do with major issues, such as telling the truth and telling lies, honesty and betrayal, backbiting and malicious gossip, require the insight, understanding and guidance of a knowledgeable person

And Allah knows best.