472185 - What is the ruling on a person forcing himself to give charity if he omits to do an obligatory or recommended act of worship?

the question

If I made a promise to someone that I would memorise a juz’ of the Quran, and if I did not memorise it, I would give him a certain amount of money, so that I would force myself to memorise that juz’ and not be lazy, is this a kind of shirk, if what motivates me to memorise that juz’ is wanting to avoid paying that money, because I did that good deed – i.e., memorizing Quran – not for the sake of Allah, but for the sake of not paying money?

Summary of answer

A person’s forcing himself to give money in charity if he fails to do a good deed or he commits a sin does not come under the heading of shirk, and he has the choice between fulfilling his vow or offering expiation (kaffarah).

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

I.

The basic principle is that you did not memorise for the purpose of not paying money; rather you wanted to force yourself to memorise by promising to give money, and there is a difference between the two matters. It was soundly narrated from some of the early generations that they would force themselves to do some righteous deeds and give up some infractions of Islamic teachings by deciding to penalise themselves by forcing themselves to give money or do some righteous deed, so as to encourage themselves to persist in doing righteous deeds, because the purpose behind that is to force oneself to do the righteous deed.

Similar to that is one who vows that if he misses prayer in congregation, he will give such and such in charity, or if he commits a certain sin, he will give such and such in charity, or he will spend a certain part of the night in prayer (qiyam al-layl). This is prescribed, as the jurists stated.

Adh-Dhahabi (may Allah have mercy on him) said: Ibn Abi Hatim said: My father told us: Harmalah told us: I heard Ibn Wahb say: I vowed that every time I backbit someone, I would fast for one day, but that exhausted me, because I continued to backbite and fast. Then after that I intended that every time I backbit someone, I would give a dirham in charity, and because of my love for dirhams I gave up backbiting.

End quote from *Siyar A`lam an-Nubala'*, 9/228.

II.

The deal that you made with your friend, if it was a mere agreement with him, such as saying: if I do not memorise Quran, I will give you such and such, is not regarded as a vow or an oath. Rather it is merely an agreement to force yourself to do that, and there is no penalty required if you do not do it.

But if you intended it as a vow, then it is a vow, or if you said a general word indicative of a promise, such as saying: I promise Allah that if I do not memorise Quran, I will give you such and such, in these two cases, it comes under the ruling on vows and oaths made when arguing.

And it is a vow or oath that the one who made it intended as a means to force himself to do something or prevent himself from doing something. You have the choice between going ahead and fulfilling it or offering expiation as for breaking an oath (*kaffarat yamin*).

Zakariya al-Ansari (may Allah have mercy on him) said: As for a vow made when arguing or in anger, it is intended to prevent the one who made it from doing something or to urge himself to do something, by committing him to draw close to Allah, either by doing something or giving up something, such as if he says: if I do such and such – or if I do not do such and such – I owe it to Allah to give such and such.

If he committed himself to draw close to Allah by doing something, such as fasting, or to do several actions to draw close to Allah, such as fasting, prayer and giving charity, he has the choice between going ahead and fulfilling what he vowed to do, or offering expiation as for breaking an oath, because it is akin to a vow if it was a commitment to do something, and it was akin to an oath if it was intended to prevent himself from doing something.

End quote from *Asna al-Matalib fi Sharh Rawd at-Talib*, 1/575.

Ibn Qudamah (may Allah be pleased with him) said: To sum up: if he made a vow that sounded like an oath, to prevent himself or someone else from doing something thereby, or to urge himself to do something thereby – such as if he said: If I speak to Zayd, then I owe it to Allah to do Hajj, or to give money in charity, or to fast for a year – then this is an oath, and the ruling is that he has the choice between fulfilling what he swore to do, in which case there is no penalty, or breaking his oath and offering the expiation for breaking an oath. So he must either do what he vowed to do, or offer expiation for breaking his oath. This is called a vow made when arguing or in anger, and he is not obliged [?} to fulfil it. End quote from *al-Mughni*.

Based on that, what appears to be the case in your situation is that you committed yourself, by means of this promise, to force yourself to memorise Quran, so the ruling on that is the ruling of a vow or oath made when arguing, and you have the choice between fulfilling the vow or oath, or offering expiation as for breaking an oath.

Shaykh Ibn `Uthaymin (may Allah have mercy on him) said: A man said: I vowed to Allah that if I do such and such, I will fast for three days, then he did that thing; Is he obliged to fast for three days or to offer expiration for breaking his oath?

Answer: he has the choice; if he wishes he may fast for three days, or if he wishes he may offer expiration for breaking an oath, because this vow comes under the same ruling as an oath.

If we say that it comes under the same ruling as an oath, is it better to do what he vowed to do, or is it better to offer expiation for his oath?

We noted above that it depends on what he swore to do. If he swore to do a good deed, then the best is to do it, and usually it is a good deed because he made a vow, yet we do not force him to do it, and we say: you have the choice between doing what you vowed to do or offering expiration as for breaking your oath.

End quote from *Ash-Sharh al-Mumti` `ala Zad al-Mustaqni`*, 15/212.

And Allah knows best.