



EMULATING THE ACTIONS OF THE PROPHET

A Chapter from: Holding Fast to the Qur'aan and the Sunnah by Imaam al-Bukhaaree

Expounded upon by Shaykh Muhammad Ibn Saalih al-'Uthaymeen (d. 1421H)

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Narrated Ibn 'Umar (*radiyallaahu 'anhu*), “The Prophet (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) wore a gold ring and then the people followed him and wore gold rings too. Then the Prophet said, ‘I had this golden ring made for myself.’ He then threw it away and said, ‘I shall never put it on.’ Thereupon the people also threw their rings away.”

Shaykh Muhammad ibn Saalih al-'Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy upon him) says in his explanation of the aforementioned *hadeeth*¹

THE CHAPTER OF EMULATING THE ACTIONS OF THE PROPHET

“This means, ‘following him in his actions.’ The scholars of *usoolul-fiqh* have divided the actions of the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) into different categories:

1. **His Human Nature** - That which he (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) did as a result of human nature (*muqtada al-jibilah*), for example; eating when hungry, drinking when thirsty and sleeping when tired. As for this type of action there is no *hukm* (ruling) for it in of itself, for these actions are as a result of nature. However, it can have a *hukm* in its *wasf*, (the manner in which it is done) for example; eating and drinking with one's right hand, sleeping on the right side of one's body and so forth.
2. **Customary Actions** - What he (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) did as result of *a'adah* (customs). Regarding this aspect one emulates him in the general sense (*fee jinsihi*)

¹ From Al-Bukhaaree's book, 'Holding Fast to the *kitaab* and the *sunnah*'.

but not in the specific manner (*la fee aynihi*) in which the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) performed that custom. The meaning of our statement, 'following the messenger in the general sense' is that one follows that which one's people are accustomed to, because the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) used to (generally) follow the custom of his people. For example if the people during the time of the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) used to wear the *izaar* and *rida'* (the upper part of the garment like the people on hajj wear) instead of a *qameece* (long shirt), trousers and *ghutar* (the red and white cloth which some Arabs cover their heads with), would it be considered the *sunnah* for us to wear the *izaar* and *rida'*, even if it differs with our customary dress? No, as a matter of fact we say he (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) did this a result of his custom, hence, the *sunnah* is to follow that which one's people customarily wear² and not that particular act of the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*).

3. **The Worship of the Messenger** - What the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) did as a form of *ibaadah*. In such case it is required that we follow him. However, if it had come down to us that he did a particular act and that act is not accompanied by a command, then in such an instance this act would be considered *mustahab* (recommended) and not *waajib* (obligatory) according to the strongest opinion. This is why the scholars of *usoolul-fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) have a principle that says: 'The actions of the Messenger by themselves (i.e. unaccompanied by a command) indicates that those acts are recommended and not *waajib*'.
4. **The Indistinguishable Actions** - Those actions of the messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) that are difficult to distinguish whether he did them as an *a'adah* (custom) or as *ibaadah*. Herein the scholars differ. From amongst them there are those who say it is *mustahab* (recommended) that one imitates the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) in his actions based upon the *ayah*,

“Verily in the Messenger of Allaah you have a good example for whoever hopes for Allaah and the Last Day” [Sooratul-Ahzaab, 33:21]

On the other hand there are those who say that such acts should be considered as *a'adah*, for the premise for *ibadaat* (acts of worship) is prohibited until there is definite evidence that such an act is one of *ibaadah*, in which case we follow the actions of the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*). An example of this is letting ones hair grow long, is it a *sunnah* or *a'adah*?³ There are some scholars who say it is a *sunnah*, and from such scholars is Imaam Ahmad whereby he said, “It is a *sunnah*,

² Providing that the clothing is in conformity to the *sunnah* (covering the *awrah*) and not imitating the *kuffar*.

³ Based on the *hadeeth* related by Bukhaaree, “The hair of the Prophet used to hang down to his shoulders” and in another narration, “his ear lobes”.

and if we had the ability we would have always done it but it is difficult (to maintain) and requires care.” On the other hand, there are those scholars who say it is not a *sunnah* because the Messenger (*sallallaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) did this because it was the custom of his people. Hence, when the Prophet (*sallallaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) saw a boy with part of his head shaved and part left unshaven, he forbade him from it saying, “Shave it all or leave it all.”⁴ And if it was of the *sunnah* to grow one’s hair long, the Messenger (*sallallaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) would have told the boy to leave all his hair until it grows. And this opinion, *insha’allah*, is closer to the correct one [i.e. those actions of the Messenger (*sallallaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) which border between *a’adah* and *ibaadah*, the premise being that his (*sallallaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) performance of those particular acts was that of *a’adah*, for acts of *ibadaah* are only confirmed by sound proof, thus the view that such acts were *a’adah* will be of more weight].

5. **Clarifying the Meaning of Allaah’s Statement** - What he (*sallallaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) did to fulfil the commandment of Allaah, however, he did it to clarify and explain what Allaah meant. Some scholars say if it is ‘*mujmal*’ (unspecified) and it is not *waajib*, then such acts are not *waajib*. However, it appears that this principle should not be taken as is. The proof of this is the statement of Allaah,

“...If you are in a state of *Janaaba* (i.e. had a sexual discharge), **purify yourself**”
[Sooratul-Ma’idah, 5:6]

Herein this *ayah* is ‘*mujmal*’ [i.e. Allaah did not explain how to purify oneself in the *ayah*, but the Messenger (*sallallaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) demonstrated what is meant by this *ayah* as is mentioned in the description of the Prophet's *ghusl* (bath)]. The question then arises, ‘do we say that performing *ghusl* the specific way the Messenger (*sallallaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) performed it is *waajib* because it is a clarification of a ‘*mujmal*’ unspecified obligatory action? Or do we say that *ghusl* (taking a bath) is *waajib* in of itself and this particular manner in *sunnah* (recommended)? The *sunnah* gives precedence to the last opinion [i.e. *ghusl* (taking a bath) is *waajib* in of itself and this particular manner in *sunnah*].

The proof of this is the long *hadeeth* of Imran ibn Husayn narrated by Bukhaaree wherein it states the Messenger (*sallallaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) saw a man sitting aloof who had not prayed. So he asked, “O so and so! What has prevented you from praying with us?” He replied, “I am *junub* (impure) and there is no water.” The Prophet (*sallallaahu ‘alayhi wa sallam*) said, “Perform *tayammum*⁵ with (clean) earth and that is sufficient for you.” Then water finally came so the Messenger (*sallallaahu*

⁴ Saheeh Abee Daawood, Imaam al-Albaanee.

⁵ Dry ablution using earth.

'alayhi wa sallam) told the man, "Take this and pour it over your body" yet he did not explain exactly how to make *ghusl*. Thus, if it was obligatory to make *ghusl* the way the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) performed it, he would have informed the man to do as such due to him (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) having the obligation to convey the message. Hence, based upon what we have just mentioned this fifth category is one that needs to be further investigated before one can come to a precise conclusion [i.e. every issue that falls into this fifth category must be judged by itself and we cannot apply a broad based, general ruling to all such situations].

6. **The Inadvertent Actions** - The sixth and final category of the actions of the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) is what he did inadvertently, '*itifaaqan*'. As for this type of action, one does not emulate the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) by doing it and nor is it an act that is supposed to be followed. Nevertheless, Ibn 'Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) used to imitate and follow the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) regarding such acts. For example, if the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) passed by a place randomly and prayed there, do we now say that if a person passed by that particular place that he should also pray in the same place the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) prayed? As for Ibn 'Umar, this was his practice. Moreover, he used to seek out the places the Messenger (*sallallaahu 'alayhi wa sallam*) urinated to urinate in the same place. However, the majority of the *sahaabah* differed with him about this. Another example of this is a person who wants to make *hajj* by arriving at Makkah on the 4th of Dhul-Hijjah, do we say this is the *sunnah* for the one who intends to make *hajj* or do we say that this took place coincidentally thus it has no ruling? The second opinion is the correct one.

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