

Tafsīr Sūrat al-Hujurāt

Learning Objectives:

- An introduction to Surat al-Hujurat
- Explanation of verse 1 of Surat al-Hujurat

General Details about the Chapter

This chapter was revealed in Madina. It has 18 verses. It has various names: *Hujurāt* (Chambers)¹, *Ādāb* (Etiquettes) and *Akhlāq* (Morals)²

There is great merit in reciting this chapter. As an example, a narration from Imam al-Ṣadiq (A) states:

“Whoever recites *Sūrat al-Hujurāt* every night or day shall meet the Prophet (S) in his lifetime.”³

The commonest name of the chapter is *Hujurāt* (s. *Hujra*) referring to the private chambers or houses of the wives of the Prophet (S), which were very simple structures. They were constructed of clay and had roofs made of date-palm branches and leaves. The houses were identical; each was only 5m x 4.5 m with a small yard at the back.



A Model showing Masjid al-Nabawi in 2AH and the Houses of the Wives of the Prophet (S)

To the south (bottom) shown clockwise: Houses of 1) Hafsa (married 3AH/d. 45AH) 2) ‘Ā’isha (1AH/58AH), 3) Fāṭima (A), 4) Umm Salama (4AH/65AH) after Zaynab b. Khuzayma (4AH/4AH) and 5) Sawda (3BH/54AH)

Other houses are of 1) Zaynab b. Jaḥsh (6AH/20AH) 2) Umm Habība (7AH/42AH) and 3) Juwayriyya (5AH/56AH)

Three chapters of the Qur’an that talk of social issues all begin with the phrase:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا

(O Believers!).

The other two besides *Sūrat al-Hujurāt* (47) are *Sūrat al-Mā’ida* (5) and *Sūrat al-Mumtaḥina* (60). In this chapter the phrase “O Believers” has come several times, indicating that it contains key guidance for the development of Muslim societies.

The chapter discusses themes that do not appear elsewhere in the Qur’an, such as:

1. It details how to behave in the presence of the Prophet (S); not to dispute with him, or disrespect him in any way. It talks of the consequences of being rude to him.

¹ A reference to the chambers (houses) of the wives of the Prophet (S), which are mentioned in verse 4.

² These latter two names are due to the fact this chapter talks about the moral values of an ideal Muslim community

³ Ṭabarsī, *Tafsīr Majma’ al-Bayān*, exegesis of this chapter | من قرأ سورة الحجرات في كل ليلة أو في كل يوم كان من زوار محمد (صلى الله عليه وآله)

2. It identifies and forbids traits that are destructive to the harmony in a society: making fun of people, name-calling, excessive suspicion, spying on others and backbiting.
3. It emphasizes the importance of brotherhood, the need to make peace between members of the community, the need for concerted action against a rebel, ensuring justice prevails and investigating reports that are received before acting.
4. It declares God-consciousness (*taqwa*) to be the criterion for honour in God's eyes.
5. It advises that an ideal community must be based on justice ('*adl*) in order to have mutual affection.
6. It makes clear that by having faith and following Islam the Muslim is not doing a favour to God or His Prophet (S), rather, he himself is the recipient of Divine favour.
7. It states that the believer must be totally obedient to the dictates of the Prophet (S) and not expect instead that the Prophet (S) should follow what the people desire.

A Study of Verse 1/18

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ . يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَقَدَّمُوا بَيْنَ يَدَيْ اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ
وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعٌ عَلِيمٌ

In the Name of God, the most Kind, the most Merciful. O Believers! Do not be forward in the presence of God and His Messenger, and be God-conscious; indeed God is all-Hearing, all-Knowing.

1. The Basmallāh

Just like every single chapter in the Qur'an (except for *Surat al-Tawba*), this chapter also begins with the *basmallāh*. There are many traditions (*aḥādīth*) about the merits of the *basmallāh*, especially when beginning any work, for example:

The Prophet (S) said that God declared: Every activity that begins without the recitation of *basmallāh* shall be deficient.⁴

The Prophet (S) said: Whoever wants God to protect himself from the 19 guardians of hell, should recite the *basmallāh* (often), because it has 19 letters, and God shall make each letter a shield against one of the guardians.⁵

A Muslim should seek God's limitless mercy and recite the *basmallāh* constantly; it is a sign of one's trust in God, one's love for Him, and one's reliance on Him for every success.

2. O Believers! Do not be forward in the presence of God and His Messenger...

The verse begins with the affectionate term, "O Believers" to remind the reciter that he is special in God's eyes because of his faith (*īmān*), and God wants to guide him to his fullest potential.

This phrase of the verse outlines the root cause of most mistakes and sins that man commits. When man does not wait to know the directive of God as delivered by His Messenger (S), and instead makes a

⁴ *Bihār al-Anwār*, 76/305 | أن الله جلّ و عزّ أنّه قال: كلُّ أمرٍ ذى بالٍ لم يُذكر فيه بسم الله فهو أبتزُّ

⁵ *Bihār al-Anwār*, 89/258 | من أراد أن يُنجيه الله من الرّباتية التسعة عشر فليقرأ بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم فإنها تسعة عشر حرفاً ليُجعل الله كلَّ

حرفٍ منها جنةً من واحدٍ منهم

judgement based on his own thinking, he risks going on a path that will distance him from God. In addition man should not think that he knows better than God and His Prophet (S).

Anyone who is determined to act according to his own thinking and ignores or changes the commandments of God and His Prophet (S) will immediately or ultimately cause discord and injustice in society. This has been the downfall of previous communities. Since this chapter is about the model community, it makes this point clear in the opening verse.

The verse reminds us that the teaching of the Prophet (S) is the same as the command of God (S) and that he (S) speaks on behalf of God. Elsewhere the Qur'an states,

وَمَا يَنْطِقُ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ

And he does not speak out of his own desire,

إِنَّ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ

It is revelation that has come down (to him). [53:3-4]

In order to create happy and just societies, the verse seeks to train man to be absolutely obedient to God like the angels who,

لَا يَسْبِقُونَهُ بِالْقَوْلِ وَهُمْ بِأَمْرِهٖ يَعْمَلُونَ

They do not precede Him in speech and act as they have been commanded. [21:127]

The verse reminds us that everything we do should be based on a verse of Qur'an or a *ḥadīth* of the Prophet (S).

3. ...And be God-conscious; indeed God is all-Hearing, all-Knowing.

The verse teaches that God-consciousness (*taqwa*) is the necessary consequence of *īmān*.

The verse tells us not to do something (precede God and His messenger) and instead instructs us to the correct alternative (have *taqwa*).

The verse informs us that someone who precedes God and His Prophet (S), may have *īmān*, but he does not have *taqwa*.

Because this verse ends with the twin Divine Attributes, *al-Sami'* (all-Hearing) and *al-'Alīm* (all-Knowing) it is probably referring to people who state their opinions or intend to act without bothering to know God's command, rather than those who actually act according to their desire. God hears their opinions and knows their intentions. If it was about their actions as well, God would have used the adjective, *al-Baṣīr* (all-Seeing), as he has done in other places.⁶

Taqwa is the strength to constantly guard oneself from saying or doing something that will displease God. It originates and grows through obedience and worship. For instance, God states:

⁶ Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *al-Mizān*, exegesis of this verse.

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اعْبُدُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

“O Mankind! Worship your Lord Who created you and those before you so that you may gain taqwa” [2:21]

And

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

“O Believers! Fasting has been prescribed for you, just as it was prescribed for those before you so that (perhaps) you may gain taqwa. [2: 183]

4. Taqwa brings with it many blessings:

It allows you access to the Qur’an’s guidance:

ذَلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ يَهْدِي لِلْمُتَّقِينَ

This book, no doubt, is a guide for those who have taqwa. [2:2]

It makes God your teacher:

وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ ۖ وَيَعْلَمَ اللَّهُ ۖ

And have taqwa, and God will teach you [2:282]

In return, God opens up pathways for your progress:

وَمَنْ يَتَّقِ اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ مَخْرَجًا

And whoever has taqwa of God, He will open for him pathways. [65:2]

God constantly aids you:

وَاعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الْمُتَّقِينَ

And know that God is always with those who have taqwa. [9: 36] and [9:123]

And it ensures safety from punishment in the hereafter:

وَالْعَاقِبَةُ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ

And the best end is for those who have taqwa.