



The Islamic Concept of Charity

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When contemplating on the system of life that Islam teaches us, we must recognize the central role of charity. The act of charity is an instant affirmation by the servant of Allah of His Magnificence and Glory. It is an act whereby the servant acknowledges that the source of all good that he has is the Provider of Sustenance who is Rich beyond the needs of His servants, but commands them to spend in His way out of love and mercy towards them. All of us have at least a fundamental understanding of the importance of charity in Islam. We need to move from this cognitive understanding to an action-based understanding that materializes what we know. In doing so, we will understand the power of charity and glimpse the infinite wisdom of the Creator, not merely mentally, but through real life experiences that touch our hearts and souls. Therefore, in this article I intend to remind us of the importance of charity, then discuss different types of charity under the broad definition of the Prophet (PBUH), and finally address some of the benefits of charity upon the individual and the society.

The word for charity in Arabic is sadaqa. The root of this word indicates strength in something. That is why the word for truthfulness (as-sidq) also comes from the same root; the truthful person is someone who has an internal strength that helps him or her stand up for what is right.

In the context of charity, the meaning of strength and truthfulness is implied because the act of being charitable indicates one's truthfulness in one's servitude of Allah. The charitable are praised

in many different places in the Quran and the Sunnah. Allah says in chapter 33, verse 35: "For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in Allah's praise; for them has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward." He also says in chapter 63, verse 10: "and spend something (in charity) out of the substance which We have bestowed on you, before Death should come to any of you and he should say, 'O my Lord! why did You not give me respite for a little while? I should then have given (largely) in charity, and I should have been one of the doers of good.'" It is also narrated in an authentic tradition that the Prophet (PBUH) was the most generous of people and that his generosity showed the most during Ramadan.[1] These are examples from the Quran and the Sunnah that show us the importance of charity. Let us also look at some stories from the companions of the Prophet (PBUH) that show how they understood this importance and put it into practice.

One of the companions of the Prophet (PBUH) who was very famous for his generosity was Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him). Abu Bakr and Umar would always compete in good deeds, and it is narrated that one time the Prophet came to the people and asked them to give charity. On this occasion, Umar had recently acquired a large sum of money, so he thought he would be able to out-due Abu Bakr, and he gave half of his money in charity. Then, Abu Bakr came and donated all of his money in charity and when asked what he left for his family, he said, "I have left them Allah and His Messenger." SubhanAllah, the generosity of Abu Bakr and the strength of his belief! At this

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point, Umar gave in and acknowledged that he cannot keep up with Abu Bakr in good deeds.[2]

Another moving story of the companions is the story of Abū ad-Dahdah. Consider the following verse: “Who is he that will loan to Allah a beautiful loan, which Allah will double unto his credit and multiply many times?” (Quran, 2:245). When this verse was revealed, he asked the Prophet (PBUH), “O Messenger of Allah. Does Allah too ask His servants to give Him a loan?” The Prophet replied, “Yes.” On this, the companion asked the Prophet to extend his hand and to bear witness that he had given away his garden that no one else owned, a garden in which there were seven hundred palm trees. The companion returned to his garden where his wife and children were. He informed his wife of what he had done. The family vacated the garden, and she said to him, “What a profitable transaction, O Abū ad-Dahdah!” Allahu Akbar! This companion gave something very valuable to him in the way of Allah, and his wife supported him in his effort. What a beautiful example of a righteous household where the members aide one another in their striving towards the Hereafter.[3]

There is also the story of Abu Talha al-Ansari who truly enacted the verse, “By no means shall you attain righteousness unless you give of that which you love” (Quran, 3:92). When he heard this verse, he went to the Prophet (PBUH) and told him, “O Messenger of Allah! The most beloved of my wealth is Bayruha [a garden full of fruit-bearing trees] and it is a sadaqa for Allah. I hope for its righteousness and reward from Allah the Exalted. So take it, O Messenger of Allah, until Allah shows you [what to do with it].” The Prophet said, “Excellent! That is profit. Keep it under your charge and give away the fruit.”[4]

Through these stories and many others from the lives of the companions of the Prophet (PBUH), we can see the real life application of the verses and sayings of the Prophet that encourage charity. It even reached the point where it is said that there was not a single companion who had not given away something from his wealth as a trust/endowment for the sake of Allah.

Another thing we learn from the Prophet is that charity is not only limited to financial donations, but that the doors of goodness are wide open for all. Some of the poorer companions once came to the Prophet and com-

plained to him that the rich had surpassed them in doing good because they were able to donate their wealth. However, the poor didn’t have anything to donate. The Messenger made it clear to them that giving wealth was not the only form of goodness. Rather, every benefit to the people is considered a good action and a form of charity. He (PBUH) said, “For every glorification of Allah is charity, enjoining good is charity, forbidding evil is charity, removing obstacles from the path is charity, to reconcile between two people is charity, and to help a man onto his mount is also charity.”[5] We should keep this hadith in mind and, especially during this month of Ramadan, seek to serve our communities in any way we can. Small things count too. We should hold doors open for people, pick things up from the street, clean up our neighborhoods, visit the sick and the elderly, be generous to our neighbors, smile at people in the grocery store and deal with them kindly, and do any other good deed that we can think of that will bring benefit to ourselves and our communities. Allah has opened the doors of goodness to us and said that, “whatever you put forth from good deeds for yourself, you will find its reward with Allah.”[6]

There are many benefits that return to the individual and the community due to charity. Some of the benefits for the individual are:

1. Proving the Degree of One’s Love for Allah – To pronounce the two professions of faith is the core of any Muslim’s belief. However, these pronouncements by themselves are not enough and must be coupled with action. This is clear in the various hadiths where the Prophet mentions the five pillars of Islam as being: The pronouncement of faith, prayer, fasting, zakat, and hajj. We must all struggle against ourselves in pushing to give as much as we can in charity, knowing that Allah will give us more than what we spend and confirming that He is the Provider of Sustenance. Allah says in the Quran, “God has bought from the believers their persons and their wealth in exchange for Paradise” (9:11). It is also mentioned in various parts of the Quran that one of the characteristics of people who are God-conscious is that “they spend from that which We have provided them with” (2:3).

2. Elimination of Miserliness – Another benefit of

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spending in charity is fighting the deadly sin of miserliness. The Prophet (PBUH) said, “Three are deadly: avarice indulged, passion pursued and self-conceit.”[7] Allah also says in the Quran, “Those who are shielded from their own greed, they are the ones who will prosper” (59:9). The only way to break an attachment is to inculcate in oneself the opposite habit. In this way, giving charity trains the individual to avoid miserliness and selfishness with the sustenance that Allah has provided him.

3. Expression of Gratitude – One of the obligations upon a Muslim is for him or her to have gratitude for Allah’s blessings. Allah says in the Quran, “Be grateful to Me, and do not reject Me” (2:152). Gratitude is expressed in three major ways: verbally expressing one’s blessings, a deep feeling of gratitude that settles in one’s heart, and acting upon those blessings by doing good deeds for the sake of Allah. Charity, therefore, is one of the means of expressing one’s gratitude to the Creator and Sustainer for all that He has given us.

4. Charity is a Purification for One’s Self and Wealth – Allah says in the Quran, “Take Sadaqah (alms) from their wealth in order to purify them and sanctify them with it, and invoke Allâh for them” (9:103). The word for zakah in Arabic is the same word that is used when referring to the act of purification of the soul. Through this we can see the inherent relationship between giving charity and purifying and developing one’s self and wealth.

5. Charity is a Means for Increasing One’s Wealth – Allah says in the Quran, “Allâh will destroy Ribâ (usury) and will give increase for Sadaqât (deeds of charity, alms, etc.)” (2:276). Allah also says in the Quran, “that which you give in Zakât seeking Allâh’s Countenance then those, they shall have manifold increase” (30:39). In this regard, we also have the statement of the Prophet (PBUH) where he said, “No wealth decreases by charity.”[8] All of these texts show us that, of the many benefits charity brings to the individual, one of them is that it increases one’s wealth.

There are also benefits from charity that are returned to the whole community. Charity:

1. Promotes sacrifice and selflessness in the community.



2. Encourages the circulation of wealth.

3. Promotes true brotherhood and sisterhood between people – This can even occur through simple acts of charity. These simple acts can be powerful in building a culture of giving and support. An example of this is when I went to lunch the other day. There was a group of about eight brothers with me. When we got up to leave we found that one of the other brothers had already paid and wouldn’t accept money from any of us. Another simple, but powerful, act I saw recently was one brother who came to a gathering in the morning. He brought along all types of cheeses and breads for the brothers. Later on in the morning one of the organizers told me that this same brother brings food and snacks every time people meet up. These are small acts of charity, but they are instrumental in building a community that is based on brotherhood and sacrifice for one another. This implements the hadith of the Prophet, “No one will attain true faith until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.”[9]

4. Any successful social reform is dependent on a cul-

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ture of charity.

5. Forces the rich to acknowledge the needs of the poor and builds relationships and interactions between them.

6. Creates a society that focuses on the establishment of social welfare institutions.

These are just some of the ways that charity can positively effect the individual and society. If we were to brainstorm amongst ourselves, there is no doubt that we would be able to come up with even more benefits.

In the course of these few pages we have overviewed the importance of charity, understood the breadth of its definition and application in our lives, and mentioned some of the benefits of charity to the individual and the community. We ask Allah to make us of those who follow the truth when we see or hear it and implement the beautiful teachings of Islam in our daily lives.

[1] This is mentioned in a hadith that is narrated by al-Bukhari in the Chapter on The Beginning of the Revelation.

[2] This incident was narrated by at-Tirmithi and Abu Dawud and is authentic according to al-Hakim and ath-Thahabi.

[3] This story is narrated by at-Tabaraani and Abu Ya'laa and its chain of narration is authentic.

[4] This story is narrated by al-Bukhari and Muslim.

[5] Bukhari and Muslim

[6] Quran 2:110.

[7] This hadith is good (hasan) according to Sheikh al-Albani (r).

[8] This hadith is narrated by Muslim.

[9] This hadith is narrated by Muslim.