

Friendship, Brotherhood and Sisterhood

Summary

This topic covers the nature and importance of good friends, signs of toxic or spiritually abusive friendships, and brotherhood/sisterhood in Islam. It also answers the question: can Muslims have non-Muslim friends?

Introduction

Today's study circle is about the topic of friendship and the interrelated topic of brotherhood and sisterhood. To start with we will look at some poetry.

No man is an island,
Entire of itself,
Every man is a piece of a continent,
A part of the main.

(John Donne, *No Man is an Island*)

Discussion Point: What is the message of these lines of poetry?

These lines of poetry link to social capital, which means the networks we have: family, friends, acquaintances, neighbours, fellow students, and colleagues. Research indicates that the quality and frequency of these interactions affects both our mental wellbeing and our physical health. In relation to physical health, they can affect how healthy our behaviour is and can also encourage us to fight disease (Amati et al. 2018). Where would we be without quality networks? Tragically, there are many people who *do* have social networks, yet are lonely because these networks lack quality. You can be lonely even if you are not alone.

What is the difference between friends and acquaintances? An acquaintance is someone we have polite conversation with occasionally, such as a neighbour or somebody who goes to our school, college, university or workplace, or even interacts with us on social media platforms. An acquaintance may be friendly with us, but this does not make them a friend. Friends however are more special as they are those whom we are close with, whom we trust, who make sacrifices for us and for whom we do likewise. Friendships are important for everyone. Along with family, we tend to spend our free time with them, whether in person or through social media.

Making friends

Some of us might find it difficult initiating friendship. Friendship, love and trust must be earned – they are not given straight away. So, first of all, we need to try to be a friend to others by being kind and helpful. Then God-willing, others will want to be our friend.

What if we are lonely? We can overcome loneliness through working on our self-esteem. We can try to develop a new skill, learn something new, become more involved with people, smile at others, have the courage to initiate conversation, and most importantly make God our dearest friend. Overwhelming shyness can be a barrier to developing new friends. It can be an expression of low self-esteem, which may damage relationships, our work/study and even our mental wellbeing. Through working on our self-esteem, we can try to overcome shyness. Remember, shyness can also be a positive expression of modesty and humility.

Another barrier to making friends is worrying about what others think of us. Often these worries are without any foundation. Others perhaps may not share our likes or agree with all our viewpoints but that does not mean they would reject us as friends. Also, it is important to remember that we can't please all people all the time. So, we should try not to worry about what others think of us too much. Instead, think positively.

Remember the most important friendship is with God. If God is happy with us then it does not matter what others think of us. It is better to be alone than to be surrounded by negative friends. To find good friends it is also very important to make du'a to God to send us good friends.

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The importance of choosing good friends

Discussion Point: Why is it important to have good friends?

Our friends influence our thinking, our behaviour and even our wellbeing. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said:

'A person's practise of their religion is only as good as that of his friend, so each of you should be careful with whom he is friends.'

(Tirmidhi)

The Prophet also highlighted this principle with the following beautiful analogy:

'The example of a good or bad friend is like someone who sells musk (perfume) or a blacksmith. In the company of the perfume seller person, you will certainly benefit as you will buy the musk or its sweet smell will please you. On the other hand, the furnace of the blacksmith will burn your house or set your clothes ablaze or the foul fumes emitted by it will give you a headache.'

(Bukhari and Muslim)

This perfume seller represents a good friend who has a positive impact on us either directly or indirectly. Meanwhile, the blacksmith represents a toxic friend who harms you either directly or indirectly. So, it is important that we are careful who we choose for friends as they are one of the main influences upon us. Therefore, we should not choose a friend just based on how popular they are or how fun they seem to be; we need to look at their character and their values.

Discussion points: What impact have your friends had on you lately? What do you think God thinks of your friends?

Toxic Friends

Discussion Point: What do think are the characteristics of toxic friends?

Toxic friends do not make us feel happy. They make us feel emotionally drained and anxious. They can have a negative attitude where they are very critical of others (sometimes this is hidden by a mask of charm); they can be devious and emotionally harm others through regular abuse. They may seek attention from their friends by always wanting to talk about themselves, but not show genuine interest in their friends. Some portray themselves continually as victims who always seem to be in a crisis.

Toxic friends may mock our beliefs and values. Do we really want to have such people as our friends even if they are very popular? People who ridicule or mock us could be motivated by jealousy and trying to hide their insecurities. People who ridicule others eventually end up being bitter and lonely as they drive others away from them. We need to differentiate between ridicule and friendly banter. People who ridicule may 'joke' about others because they enjoy seeing others embarrassed and hurt. However, they do not like people joking about them. In contrast, friendly banter goes two ways and there is no malice involved.

Negative friends could lead us to initiating actions against our faith and therefore be a means of weakening our iman. It can be very difficult to stand up to pressure from friends. There have been many examples of Muslims from practising morally upright families who have chosen the wrong friends and have ended up drinking alcohol, taking drugs, gambling, becoming involved in violent crime in gangs etc.

'On the day when the wrongdoer will bite upon his hands, he will say, 'O would that I had taken a path along with the Messenger, would that I had not taken so-and-so as an intimate friend; he certainly led me astray from the remembrance after it had come to me.'

(Quran, 25:27-30)

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However, we should not give up on Muslims who have gone astray. There have also been examples of Muslims who have gone astray, but afterwards, their Muslim friends who are stronger in their deen have helped them to come away from these un-Islamic practices and become stronger in their deen once more.

Spiritual Abuse and Friendship

Sometimes some negative friends may knowingly or unknowingly misuse religious teachings to justify their abuse. A well-known hadith which is misunderstood is: *'Every believer is a mirror to their brother'* (Abu Daud). This is only part of the hadith - the other part we will come back to later. This hadith is sometimes confused with a saying of Abu Hurairah: *'A believer is a mirror to his brother. When he sees a fault in it, they should correct it.'* Some use this as an excuse to constantly criticise their friends about their shortcomings and mistakes, which can have a negative impact on their self-esteem.

A true friend will correct their friend with gentleness and diplomacy; they will overlook minor shortcomings. Otherwise, the attitude of constantly correcting others could be a sign of self-righteousness and is bullying behaviour. Being like a mirror could be seen to link to the hadith about not being a sycophant. A mirror does not distort your appearance in either a positive or negative way but reflects the true reality. Looking in a mirror should not make you vain or despise yourself.

Now let's go back to the actual hadith. Abu Hurairah narrated that the Prophet (pbuh) said:

'Every believer is the mirror of his brother. He protects him against loss and defends him behind his back.'

(Bukhari)

This means that when you are with your friend, they help you avoid any harm and defend your honour behind your back. So, why is there a reference to a mirror here? Shaykh Haytham Tamim explains that we are reflections of those we are close to. That is, we tend to be similar to them in attitudes and behaviour. Therefore, it is important that we should be careful in choosing our friends, as mentioned earlier.

Qualities of a Good Friend

Discussion Point: What would you say are the qualities of a good friend?

Friends are those that motivate us to be the best version of ourselves and help us to become close to God. For example, a friend who encourages us to perform better at school, university or in the workplace, but doesn't put us down when we don't do so well. Moreover, they are those who do not put negative thoughts into our heads about other people, such as family and other friends.

Characteristics of a good friend that we should look for in others and develop in ourselves include:

- **Honesty:** Friendship needs to be based on honesty: true friends are those who praise rather than flatter their friends, and correct them because they care.
- **Good character and manners:** A good friend should have good character: they do not harm others; they will help you to improve your own character and they will be careful about what they say in front of you.
- **Trust:** We should be able to confide in a friend, knowing that they will not tell anyone else what we have told them. A good friend will also not spread gossip about our family.
- **Loyalty:** A true friend defends your honour when others criticise you behind your back and sticks with you when you have problems, helping you through them.

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- **Kindness:** Friendship should be based on kindness, listening to the other's problems and offering support, doing activities with their friend that the other likes (not just doing ones they like), buying presents for their friend or treating them to meals, and lending them money when they need it.
- **Respect:** A true friend will respect your priorities e.g. faith, education, etc. and support you with them. They may have a different faith to you but they will respect your faith and not encourage you to do anything against it. For example, they will respect that there are times when you need to pray and will not pressurise you to drink alcohol or have a boyfriend/girlfriend.
- **Fun:** Friends should ideally share some common interests and be fun to be with. They may share a similar sense of humour with you and be someone you can feel relaxed around.

Best Friends

What should our best friend be like? The Prophet (pbuh) said:

'Your best friend is the one who seeing him reminds you of God, speaking to him increases your knowledge, and his actions remind you of the hereafter.'

(Al-Muhasibi)

They will remind us when it is time to pray. They will help us to increase our knowledge of Islam. They will remind us of God when we face tests. They will remind us that this life is a preparation for the hereafter. They do all this because they care. Our best friend should be our companion on our spiritual journey to God, wanting to improve themselves and help us to improve ourselves.

The Prophet taught us:

'God will ask on the Day of Judgment: "Where are those who loved each other for the sake of My glory? Today, on a day when there is no shade but Mine, I shall shade them with My shade.'

(Muslim)

Having non-Muslim friends

Discussion point: Do you think Muslims and non-Muslims can be friends?

Although it is advisable to have Muslim friends who can support us in our deen, we should not be insular. We should aim to have a positive impact on others and society. One way to do this is by having friends from other ethnic backgrounds, religious backgrounds, or people with no religious faith etc. We need to evaluate potential friends by the criteria of what makes a good friend. With other Muslims, we share the same beliefs but not always the same values. A fellow Muslim can sometimes be a toxic friend who leads us astray. However, a friend who is not a Muslim may not have many of the same beliefs we have, but as long as they respect our beliefs and have similar values, then they can be a good friend.

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Brotherhood/Sisterhood

Discussion point: What does brotherhood/sisterhood mean to you? How would you define it as opposed to friendship generally?

The Prophet (pbuh) said:

‘None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.’

(Bukhari & Muslim).

What does this mean? Ibn Daqiq al-Id, explained that ‘truly believes’ means that this is a higher level of faith, and without this, one’s faith is on a basic level. Imam Nawawi explained that the ‘brother’ here does not refer to your biological brother, but to brothers (or sisters) in Islam and brothers (or sisters) in humanity. Imam Nawawi also explained that there are two levels of brotherhood (sisterhood). Firstly, to see your brother’s (sister’s) needs as equal to your own. Secondly, the higher level is to put your brother’s (sister’s) needs before your own. If you put your own needs before others, then this isn’t brotherhood (sisterhood).

A simple example of this is to share your food if you are with others. The higher level would be to make sure that others eat before you, even if this means you may go without. Another example would be if you come across charity collectors: the first level of brotherhood (sisterhood) would be to split whatever cash you have in half, giving half to charity and keeping the other half. The second level would be to give all the cash you have on you to charity.

Ibn Daqiq al-Id added that this hadith refers to justice, so if one sees others oppressed then he should endeavour to seek justice for them. Maulana Aashiq Elahi Buland Sherari has given another pertinent example in relation to debt. If one owes someone some money one should think, how would I feel if someone owed me money (one would want the amount to be paid as soon as possible), so this should encourage us to hasten to pay off the debt. On the other hand, if someone owes us money, we should think about how we would feel in such a situation; we would want the lender to be lenient with us, so we should be lenient with them by not pressurising them to repay us.

Avoiding envy is another aspect of this hadith according to Ibn Rajab. As we enjoy the blessings given to us by God, then we should not envy the blessings that others have. Envy results in resentment, which shows ingratitude to God for the blessings given to us. Envy damages both social relations and our spirituality.

‘Beware of envy, for surely it destroys good deeds the way fire destroys wood.’ (Abu Daud).

The importance of avoiding envy is emphasised in surah Al Falaq where we are encouraged to ask God to protect us from *‘the evil of the envious’*. Someone who envies someone else may seek to harm them by trying to remove their blessing, for example by physically harming them or seeking to damage their reputation. As we would not want to be harmed by another’s envy, we should not also be envious of others.

This hadith is a general guidance on how we should treat everyone - not just our friends.

Conclusion

Being a good friend and having good friends are two significant means to attain happiness in this life and in the hereafter. Being a good friend is a means of acquiring good deeds and having good friends can encourage us to do more good deeds. However, toxic friends can cause us pain in this life and can lead us astray, resulting in suffering in the hereafter. Finally, we should endeavour to seek the pleasure of God by practising the higher level of iman where we *‘love for our brother (sister) what we love for ourselves.’*

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Handout

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Shyness can be a barrier to developing new friends; it can be an expression of low self-esteem which damages relationships, our work or study and even our mental wellbeing. Through working on our self-esteem, we can overcome shyness. However, shyness can also be a positive expression of modesty and humility.

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Qualities of a Good Friend

- Honesty
- Good character and manners
- Trust and Loyalty
- Kindness and Respect
- Fun

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