

Ayat al-Birr

Basic Preliminary Points:

1. One of the longest ayaat in the Qur'an (3.5 times longer than surat al-Asr)
2. Relationship between ayat al-Birr and Surat al-Asr is similar to the relationship between ayat al-Kursi and Surat al-Ikhlās.
 - a. 3 of the 4 conditions for salvation in surat al-Asr are discussed in ayat al-Birr (the fourth is also implicitly referred to)
 - b. Imaan - 5 articles of Imaan
 - i. Imaan billah
 - ii. Imaan bil-Akheera
 - iii. Imaan bil-malaaika
 - iv. Imaan in the Book/Revelations
 - v. Imaan in the Messengers
 - c. Good Deeds - gives 3 categories of Good Deeds
 - i. Spend wealth to redress the difficulties/needs of the need - charity
 - ii. Ibadaat (salat, zakat) - huquuq of Allah
 - iii. Social virtue - honesty, keep commitments, etc - human relations
 - d. Tawasau bil-Haq - not explicitly mentioned - though it is implicitly referred to - among the reasons to have sabr, is struggling in the path of Allah.
 - e. Tawasau bis-Sabr - gives 3 occasions which require sabr.
 - i. Sabr in individual hardship (hunger, illness, survival needs)
 - ii. Sabr in face of physical/mental torture
 - iii. Sabr in face of war
3. Begins with a negation of certain superficial (or even perverse) concepts of righteousness, and then affirms what true righteousness is - complete concept of worship.
 - a. Every human being needs a concept of virtue (value system) and adopts it to satisfy his/her conscience.
 - i. Just as one has a physical need of food, water, and sleep, the inner personality needs a code of virtue regardless of how immoral one is.
 - ii. Among the civilized people, 2 main sections in society (particularly Muslim society). Each group has its own concept of piety/virtue:
 1. Apparently 'religious people' - emphasis on religious rituals, dogma, and external appearance but their individual acts may be highly immoral. (form)
 - a. say prayers, grow beard, have the appearance of strong practicing Muslims.
 - b. But could be miserly, merciless, don't say the truth.
 2. Apparently 'decent people' - prioritize personal integrity
 - a. Generally educated people who value honesty and personal decency.
 - b. Not interested in religious rituals, dogma, and external appearance.
 - iii. Why is it so?
 1. human nature to judge an act
 2. But real virtue is in the intention. However, since one cannot see the intention, people pass judgment on the external manifestation.
 3. Can be extreme conflict between internal intention and external manifestation. Hadeeth: whoever prays to show-off, whoever gives to charity to show off, whoever fasts to show-off commits shirk.

- b. Allah explains that both the form and the spirit are important. Must have balance between them. If you put too much emphasis on form, you lose sight of the underlying purpose. If you focus too much on the spirit, you lose track of the discipline and obedience.
 - i. It is a perverted sense of righteousness to concentrate excessively on external manifestations. Note: don't prostrate to the Ka'ba, you prostrate before Allah. Ka'ba is only a pointer, reminder.
 - ii. True virtue encompasses the whole personality and transforms one into a balanced character. One is either virtuous or sinful - cannot be both.
- 4. Cause for revelation/incidental context: change of the direction of the Qibla
 - a. Prophet used to pray in Mecca facing the Ka'ba and Masjid al-Aqsa. In Medina, the Muslims faced Masjid al-Aqsa. Why?
 - i. Either Allah revealed it to Muhammad (SAWS)
 - ii. Or, through ijtehad of the Prophet (SAWS).
 - b. This was a test from Allah - must follow the commands whether they like it or not. As the progeny of Ibraheem and Ismaeel, Arabs have strong cultural and emotional ties to the Ka'ba. They, therefore, preferred to pray facing al-Ka'ba.
 - c. After the changing of the Qibla, the Jews orchestrated a propaganda campaign to discredit the Prophet (SAWS).
 - i. While the Muslims faced al-Aqsa, the Jews were satisfied b/c they could content themselves that the Muslims were following the Jews.
 - ii. After the change of the Qibla, it became clear that the new umma of tawheed was being created, with its center at Mecca.
 - d. Also, after the change of the Qibla, some Muslims were concerned that for 16 months they had been praying to the wrong Qibla - many sahaba were very sensitive to this.
 - e. Significant portions of the Qur'an were revealed to address this issue:
 - i. Baqara: 142-152; 115; 177
 - ii. Allah is telling the Muslims that their concerns are due to a narrow concept of worship.

Tafseer:

- 1. Allah negates the false understanding of piety..
 - a. Leisa al-Birr: translated as "It is not righteousness". Should be translated as "It is not full righteousness'. Form is important, but cannot have form without the spirit.
 - i. Mohammad Asad translation: "Real piety/virtue is not turning east and west, but it is a part of piety."
 - ii. Note tashkeel: uses fatha not damma.
 - 1. leisa al-Birru: used in another ayat where Allah tells us that it is not at all part of the shari'a that you enter homes from the back. In this form, the language is exclusive - it is not at all included.
 - 2. Leisa al-Birra: here, not complete piety, but it is still required. In this form, the language is inclusive - it is a part, but there is more.
 - b. Meaning of Birr:
 - i. Root: ba, ra, ra.
 - ii. Barr: land - stand firmly. Solace & calm to the inner consciousness of man.
 - iii. Bahr: ocean - man does not have firm standing on water - sense of unease, uprooted.

- c. When you perform charity, righteous deeds, and are pious, your soul is contented and happy - you have done good to fellow man, etc. You receive spiritual pleasure and satisfaction. The mere performance of rituals does not give inner peace (barr), but if the spirit is present in the act, then you get the true reward - inner contentment and spiritual satisfaction.
 - d. Anything we do comes from 1 of 2 categories:
 - i. Animal instincts - food, procreation, sleep, etc.
 - ii. Soul - actions done for inner gratification of the soul.
 - e. Note: the opportunity to do charitable deeds is available to everybody - regardless of wealth.
 - i. Allah measures charity through quality of effort rather than quantity.
 - ii. Poor man who gives 1/2 loaf of bread may get more reward than a billionaire who donates a few hundred thousand dollars.
 - iii. Also, Prophet (SAWS) said smiling is charity.
2. Affirmation of true Piety - Relationship between Imaan and Piety
- a. Piety begins with Imaan:
 - i. Imaan in Allah - tawheed
 - ii. Imaan in last day - resurrection, mankind will be collected in one place, accountability, reward & punishment (Heaven & Hell)
 - iii. Imaan in the Angels
 - iv. Imaan in the Books
 - v. Imaan in the Prophets & Messengers /
- \ } Imaan bir-Risalah
- b. Purity of Intention:
 - i. Every Action has external manifestation and internal motivation (niyyah). Unless the intentions are pure and motivation is correct, then the action is evil.
 - 1. Recall Hadeeth: whoever prays, gives charity, fasts to show-off to others, he has committed shirk (absolutely)
 - 2. Hadeeth: everybody gets from his act according to his intention. I.e. Hijra: if you migrate only for the pleasure of Allah and to obey the command of the Prophet (SAWS) then your reward is with Allah. But whoever migrated for worldly gain will get the reward in this life, but will have no reward in the Akheera. – make Hijra to marry a woman – you may end up marrying the women, but you will not get the reward in the Akheera.
 - 3. Hadeeth: 3 people brought before Allah for accountability – shaheed, ‘alim, philanthropist. Did their actions to gain in reputation in society. Got their reward in the dunya, but humiliation in the Akheera.
 - ii. Niyyat can only be purified through Imaan.
 - 1. True knowledge is Imaan – belief in the metaphysical realities. Only evil can come from ignorance – jahiliyyah.
 - 2. Also recognized by Socrates: Knowledge is virtue, Ignorance is evil.
 - iii. Two types of pure intention:
 - 1. Positive: out of love for Allah and desire for Jennah
 - 2. Negative: out of fear of Allah and desire to avoid Hell
 - iv. Correct Motivation/Intention is given by Imaan billah and Imaan bil-Akheera. Birr/Piety cannot exist without Imaan billah and Imaan bil-Akheera.
 - 1. Whatever consequences you face in this life for showing virtue, know well that the punishment in the Akheera is much more severe. Therefore, it is better to face the consequences in this life.

2. Surat al-Falaq: after first 5 ayaat revealed to Prophet (SAWS), the surat continues:
 - a. Man is inclined to do injustice
 - b. Because he finds that nothing bad comes to him in this life
 - i. i.e. one who eats haram doesn't have pain in his stomach.
 - ii. This world is governed by physical laws - Moral laws are not necessarily enforced in this life - will be enforced on the Day of Judgement.
 - c. But you must return to your Lord - knowledge that you will face punishment for your transgressions will save you.
- v. Kant: - (incorporating modern social sciences)
 1. Book 1: argued that cannot prove the existence of God with pure reason and/or logic
 2. Book 2: presents a critique of practical reason - there can be no morality without belief in God
- c. Proper Balance/Correct Form: is given by Imaan bir-Risalah
 - i. Disproportionate virtue in one aspect can lead to evil. - ie. Monks wanted to benefit from Allah's good pleasure and sacrificed their homes and families to live life of worship. However, they went to extremes that transgressed the limits of human nature. This became evil and now, they suffer from many social and physical diseases - fought against their nature and in doing so, perverted their own nature (homosexuality) (made haram what is halaal).
 1. Hadeeth: Prophet (SAWS) said that your body has rights on you, your wife has rights upon you, your family has rights upon you also. Must fulfill these needs/rights - but must do so through halaal means.
 - ii. Only Prophets can give the correct balance.
 1. Hadeeth: Sahaba inquired about how the Prophet (SAWS) worshipped. They were told that the Prophet prays tahajjud some of the night, and sleeps the rest. Spends time with his wives. Sometimes gives voluntary fast, sometimes doesn't. Sahaba thought that this would not be sufficient for them because - unlike Prophet (SAWS) - they sin and therefore they needed to perform extra good deeds. Swore that they would bind themselves to certain activities - (life of celibacy, life of confinement to one's home, life of fasting). Prophet heard of this and got very angry and said: 'I have the most taqwa among you, follow my sunnah' and then warns the sahaba against leaving the his sunnah.
 2. Qur'anic ayat: Laqad Kaana fi rasul Allah oswatal hasana. (surat Al Ahzab???)
 - iii. Note: Al-Kitaab - this is a general term - includes all books of former revelation (Taurah, Injeel, Zuboor) as well as Qur'an. All these are incomplete versions of Al-Kitaab Al-Qur'an.
3. Practical Manifestations of the spirit of Imaan:
 - a. Good Deeds:
 - i. First manifestation of Imaan is charity - taking care of the needy.
 1. Very significant that human sympathy and public service are the first manifestations of Birr/Virtue. Notice that salah and zakah are not listed first. The sequence changes according to the topic discussed.
 - a. In the context of Birr/Virtue, the first thing is that you have sympathy for fellow humans.

- b. In the context of Pillars of Islam, salah and zakah are the first manifestations after shahada.
 - c. In the context of Obedience, to Allah, Messenger, those in authority over you.
 - d. In the context of Shukr, first to Allah, then to parents.
- 2. Hadeeth: Prophet (SAWS) said whoever is deprived of sympathy is deprived of all good.
 - a. Must show compassion to fellow man
 - b. If you have capacity to help, you must help.
- 3. Supporting Qur'anic reference: Surat Ali-I-Imraan, ayat 92: you can never (lan) achieve Birr/Piety unless you spend for the pleasure of Allah whatever is liked by you (spend of the things you love).
 - a. Can infer that the miserly person can be anything (mufti, scholar, etc) but cannot be one with Birr/Virtue.
 - b. Differing translations of wa iyyal-maal 'ala hubihi
 - i. spend wealth out of love for Him (Allah)
 - ii. spend wealth that you love (Asad's translation)
 - iii. note: Arabic word is 'ala: used in the context of 'against'. So the most appropriate translation, according to Israr Ahmad, is “despite the wealth that you love.”
- 4. Those to whom you should share your wealth:
 - a. Close Relatives: if you spend on those far away at the expense of taking care of those who are close relatives, then your nafs is getting in the way. You are not spending for Allah, but to satisfy your own nafs/conscious.
 - i. Hadeeth: when you love someone only because Allah loves someone, give to someone only because Allah likes you to give to that person, then you have completed your Imaan. – you have attached your actions to the will of Allah.
 - b. Orphans: Hadeeth: Prophet (SAWS) said that the one who takes care of an orphan will be close to me on the Day of Judgement.
 - c. Al-Masaakeen: psychological state where a person has lost heart/will to work. Can't stand on his own feet.
 - d. Ibn as-Sabeel: traveler/wayfarer. It may even be the case that a wealthy person is in need of assistance while traveling.
 - e. As-Saa'ileen:
 - i. In Islam, begging is discouraged – not fitting for human to place his/her honor before another human. Beg only to Allah.
 - ii. However, if someone asks for money, stretches his hand out, it is unworthy of you to refuse.
 - iii. If you cannot give, or don't want to give, then at least be kind.
 - iv. This is the balance that Islam teaches us.
 - v. Note: In some places, begging is a profession. Should not encourage this.
 - f. Free a bondsman: today, this may include loaning money to somebody in need.

5. Giving sadaqat is in addition to zakah.
 - a. Zakah is mandatory – the baseline and is mentioned separately.
 - b. In this context of virtue, one is called to spend beyond the bare minimum. Birr is the highest virtue.
- ii. Establish Salah and Zakah: this will be discussed in more detail in the third section
 1. Purpose of Salah: keep mind active – renew our faith and have remembrance of Allah.
 - a. First 3 ayaat of Surat al-Fatiha: renew Imaan in Allah, Akheera, and our obligations to Allah.
 2. Purpose of Zakah: keep the spirit of spending in the cause of Allah alive. Makes it easier to maintain the philanthropic spirit.
- iii. Fulfill contracts/covenants.
 1. Hadeeth: Prophet (SAWS) seldom gave sermon without saying: ‘No Imaan of a person who is not trustworthy. No Deen of a person who does not fulfill his promises.’.
 2. All human relations are based on agreements (either explicit or implied).
 - a. Parents/Children: implied relationship – parents sacrifice to raise and nourish children, who will in turn take care of their parents when they grow old and feeble.
 - b. Marriage: explicit contract
- b. Tawasau bil-Sabr: Be patient/steadfast/persevering in the face of hardship.
 - i. Different types of hardship:
 1. Individual Affliction – mo’min recognizes that everything comes from Allah, and shows no complaint. (see Surat al-Hadeed ??). (i.e. financial emotional, physical, mental, etc.)
 2. Collective Affliction due to natural disasters, disease, oppression, etc.
 3. Opposition encountered when calling people to the path of Allah – oppression, torture, resistance, even war.
 - a. Surat al-Muzzamil: Allah tells Muhammad (SAWS) to have patience.
 - b. Hein al-Baas: confrontation, war, struggle (between right and wrong).
 - c. People of such high virtue will not go to war for their own personal ends (fortune, power, etc.). They can only go to war for justice.
 - d. In Islam, virtue includes establishing justice. In Christianity/Buddhism, virtue takes a very passive form – always peace, don’t step on ants and bugs, etc.
 - i. In Mecca, the Muslims had to take the persecution with patience – they were too weak to confront the Qur’aish.
 - ii. Only 6 months after Hijra, however, the Muslims began to send military expeditions to harass the Qur’aish trade routes.
4. These are the people who are truly truthful and truly conscious of Allah.