

Prophetic Wisdom Series: LESSONS IN PUBLIC SAFETY

بَيْنَمَا رَجُلٌ يَمْشِي بِطَرِيقٍ وَجَدَ غُصْنَ شَوْكٍ عَلَى الطَّرِيقِ فَأَخْرَجَهُ فَشَكَرَ اللَّهُ لَهُ ، فَغَفَرَ لَهُ

If a man who is walking along on a road finds a thorny branch in the road and removes it, Allah thanks him for doing it and forgives him .

[Bukhārī 2305, Muslim 4750, Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn 127]

Streets and public places. An unlikely concern for a Prophet of God. But it was all part of a comprehensive plan on the part of the Prophet Muhammad to establish a sound and prosperous Islamic society. And ensuring the public welfare and securing the safety of public places were an inevitable part of that plan.

And so, the Prophet spent a considerable amount of time ensuring the safety of the public road.

To begin with, it was made an inseparable part of faith itself. In the celebrated tradition on the branches of faith, he declared that, *Faith has over sixty branches; the best of them is the testimony that there is none worthy of worship but God, while the least of them is to remove an obstacle from the road.*ⁱ On another occasion, he likened it to an act of charity: *Removing harmful things from the road is charity.*ⁱⁱ And on yet another, he declared this simple act to be a means of eternal salvation: *God created three hundred and sixty joints in every one of the children of Adam. Whoever declares the Glory of God, praises God, declares God to be One, glorifies Him, seeks His forgiveness, and removes a stone or thorn or bone from the people's path, or commands something right or forbids something wrong, has accounted for the whole three hundred and sixty. In the evening of that day, he has rescued himself from the Fire.*ⁱⁱⁱ In a survey of all the good deeds performed by his nation, the Prophet chose to highlight this one: *The actions of my community, both good and bad, were displayed before me and I found among their good actions removing obstacles from the road and among their bad actions spittle in the mosque which is not buried.*^{iv} And he described that such people were already in Paradise: *I saw a man going about in Paradise because of cutting down a tree in the middle of the road which had been a nuisance to the Muslims.*^v

This attention to the safety of public paths is not surprising, given the history of the Prophet's early days in Makkah. Bitter opposition to the message of monotheism prevailed, and more than one neighbor took it upon himself to throw thorns, trash and other items outside the Prophet's home, and in the paths that he walked. Even the Qur'ān in chapter 111 referenced his aunt, described as "the bearer of firewood," who participated in this un-neighborly behavior.^{vi} When he preached, his opponents would often cast debris and stones wherever he walked, causing his feet to bleed quite frequently. One notable example took place in the city of Ṭā'if, where the Prophet suffered considerable physical injuries, mostly involving his feet.

In those early days as the head of a persecuted minority, the Prophet quietly cleared this debris from the roads. Later, as the head of an international community, this mission did not stop. The Prophet ensured the safety of roads and public places, instructed his followers not to hinder walkways, or relieve themselves in public places or stagnant bodies of water, and forbade the poisoning of wells and public property even in wartime situations.

Contemporary applications of this Prophetic teaching include observing speed limits on highways, removing fallen trees and other debris after storms, sponsoring highway cleanup programs, properly securing vehicle loads and participating in campaigns against drinking or texting while driving.

Statistics show that "driving while intoxicated" causes 1.6 million accidents in the United States each year and 11 teen deaths each day.^{vii} Road debris is recognized as an increasing danger on roads, causing 25,000 crashes per year and nearly a hundred fatalities.^{viii} Addressing these issues is a moral imperative. We could all use safer roads and public places.

ⁱ Narrated from Abū Hurayrah in Bukhārī and Muslim, Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn 125. The Arabic text is as follows:

الإيمان بضع وسبعون أو بضع وستون شعبةً: فأفضلها قول: لا إله إلا الله، وأدناها إماطة الأذى عن الطريق، والحياء شعبة من الإيمان

ⁱⁱ Narrated from Abū Hurayrah in Bukhārī and Muslim, Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn 122. The relevant Arabic text is:

وثميط الأذى عن الطريق صدقة

ⁱⁱⁱ Narrated from Abū Hurayrah in Bukhārī and Muslim, Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn 122. The relevant Arabic text is:

إنه خلق كل إنسان من بني آدم على ستين وثلاثمائة مفصل، فمن كبر الله، وحمد الله، وهلل الله، وسبح الله، واستغفر الله، وعزل حجراً عن طريق الناس، أو شوكة، أو عظماً عن طريق الناس، أو أمر بمعروف، أو نهى عن منكر، عدد الستين والثلاثمائة فإنه يمسي يومئذ وقد زحزح نفسه عن النار

^{iv} Related from Abū Dharr in Muslim 864 and Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn 119. The text is as follows:

عرضت عليّ، أعمال أمتي حسنها وسيئها، فوجدت في محاسن أعمالها، الأذى يماط عن الطريق، ووجدت في مساوي أعمالها، التخاعة، تكون في المسجد، لا تدفن

^v Narrated from Abū Hurayrah in Muslim, Riyāḍ al-Ṣāliḥīn 127. The Arabic text is as follows:

لقد رأيت رجلاً يتقلب في الجنة في شجرة قطعها من ظهر الطريق كانت تؤذي المسلمين

^{vi} The Qurʾān 111:4 وامرأته حاملة الحطب

^{vii} Taken from textinganddrivingsafety.com.

^{viii} AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, see www.aaafoundation.org.