

The Meaning of Piety | Does It Mean Fear of God, or Does It Have Another Meaning?

What Is the Meaning of Piety, and What Should We Avoid to Be Pious?

No matter our age, we have surely heard the words taqwa, piety, and righteousness many times. Various meanings are attributed to these terms, with the most common being "fear of God." But what does "fear of God" mean? Is God someone to fear? If fear is an appropriate interpretation for these terms, we need to understand what kind of fear is meant. After all, sometimes we fear someone's majesty or harshness, while other times our fear stems from caution and care to do what is right or to preserve a particular relationship.

Examining the terms piety, *taqwa*, and their examples in verses, narratives, and various interpretations reveals that these concepts are not merely spiritual or confined to one aspect of our existence. Instead, we encounter this practice in all aspects of our being, and we must practice *taqwa* in all our decisions, relationships, behaviors, and thoughts.

Maintaining *taqwa* is a broad concept, and to implement it in our lives, we need to understand its specific instances and details. For instance, what does maintain *taqwa* in eating mean? Is it enough to focus only on the type of food we eat, or does the amount of food we consume matter as well?

Some people mistakenly believe that when it comes to *taqwa*, they must abandon all pleasures and subject themselves to austere practices. However, self-knowledge and a proper understanding of God lead us to the certainty that all of God's

commands are designed to enhance our peace and bliss. Maintaining *taqwa* is also about ensuring we do not stray from the right path, allowing us to reach the purpose of our creation without any problem, and be born into the hereafter in a sound state. On the journey toward the purpose of our creation, it's not just about reaching that purpose; it's also about the quality and manner in which we pursue it.

Given the literal meaning of piety, there must be certain things we need to avoid. Using the term "fear of God" as an equivalent for *taqwa* also requires us to examine the concept of fear in this context and understand what kind of fear is intended. In this lesson, we will explore the meaning of piety from several perspectives, analyze the notion of fear in practicing *taqwa*, and conclude by highlighting an important principle.

Exploring Several Concepts Equivalent to the Meaning of Piety

There are many words used to define *taqwa* and piety, each with its own specific interpretation. Based on the definition of religion and the relationship between humans and religion discussed in previous lessons, we know that all religious rulings and recommendations are intended for the growth, development, and happiness of our human aspect. Accordingly, righteousness and *taqwa* are also principles and recommendations led to our perfection as human beings. In this section, we will explore several concepts equivalent to *taqwa* and righteousness and try to uncover their relationship to various aspects of our being, especially the human aspect and its role in our growth and perfection.

The Meaning of Piety: Fear

In dictionaries and many books of translation and interpretation, *taqwa* and piety are equated with fear, and it is said that “*taqul laah*” which means “fear God.” But do the verses of the Quran and narratives truly call for fear of God? If so, what does the attribute “*Arham ar-Rahimin*” (the Most Merciful of the Merciful) mean?

The collective love and kindness of all creatures from eternity to infinity is but a drop or speck compared to the boundless ocean of God’s mercy and compassion. Therefore, fearing God in the conventional sense makes little sense. Clearly, the word “fear” in the context of *taqwa* carries a specific meaning, and we must discern which aspect of fear is being referred to in different contexts.

Sometimes, when cooking, we fear that the dish might not turn out well. This type of fear is not about the act itself but rather a concern for the quality and outcome of the task. It reflects our care to ensure that no flaw compromises the quality of the work. Similarly, with *taqwa*, when God advises us to practice piety, it means we should be concerned and fear that our actions might create a barrier between us and God, distancing us from Him and the purpose of our creation. Such fears are constructive, encouraging us to tread carefully around dangers.

Piety or *taqwa* are not merely spiritual or transcendental concepts confined to books or ethical sermons; we encounter instances of *taqwa* and its absence in all aspects of our daily lives, and we can find examples even in the simplest matters. Consider a nerve-testing device, for instance. Many of us have used or at least seen this device, where one must carefully guide a metal hoop along a winding rod without letting the hoop touch it. This careful navigation is a form of practicing *taqwa*—exercising caution to perform the task correctly and avoid mistakes!

Another meaning of piety or *taqwa* is fear in the sense of caution and self-protect to prevent harm. For example, wearing warm clothing or using snow chains in winter, holding a child's hand while crossing the street or heights, or being mindful of our words and actions to preserve a relationship are all examples of this type of fear—actions rooted in *taqwa* to prevent harm.

Moreover, *taqwa* can be understood as the fear and avoidance of anything that hinders us from resembling Allah or acquiring divine attributes and names. In more technical terms, *taqwa* means fearing and steering clear of anything that obstructs our journey toward becoming infinite and attaining absolute beauty, power, joy, wealth, immortality, and happiness.

Examining various aspects of fear in examining the meaning of piety and *taqwa* shows that this fear is not of the undesirable kind; rather, it is a fear that enables us to consciously navigate obstacles and dangers, accelerate our progress, and ultimately reach our purpose of creation purpose in a sound state.

The Meaning of Piety: Avoiding Divine Prohibitions

Piety can be seen as a stop or brake against divine prohibitions, and the person who has more stops in front of such matters is the one with greater piety. In moving toward the goal of creation, what matters more than speed is traversing the path with soundness and piety. To illustrate, consider two cars traveling to a specific destination, passing through several checkpoints. One car moves at high speed, ignoring obstacles and dangerous points, recklessly driving over potholes. The other car moves more slowly, heeding all signs and dangers, passing them with caution.

Which car is better? Someone focused solely on reaching the destination might choose the faster car, but we all know that achieving the ultimate purpose of our creation in a state of soundness matters most. One of the tasks in this regard is to know obstacles, including various forbidden (*haram*) acts and the temptations of Satan, so we can pause and brake against them, saving ourselves from the traps of danger.

The Meaning of Piety: Overcoming Obstacles

One interpretation of *taqwa* is the ability to overcome more obstacles on the path to infinity. In horse racing or hurdle races, the champion is the one who clears the most obstacles with greater speed and precision. Similarly, in academic pursuits within a specific field, among three individuals with bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees, people generally hold the person with the doctorate in higher esteem because they have overcome more academic obstacles in that field.

The path to the purpose of our creation is not smooth but it is filled with obstacles and bumps. As in all other endeavors, the one who overcomes more obstacles attains a higher rank. Accordingly, Allah in the Quran identifies the most honorable individuals as those who are the most righteous and pious [1].

The Meaning of Piety: Avoiding Limitations

Righteousness and *taqwa* involve a form of self-protect against limitations and the diminishment of our human aspect. We must preserve ourselves in such a way that our sense perception, imaginal, estimative, and intellective faculties of our being do not distract us with their demands and separate us from our True Beloved.

Becoming preoccupied with lower faculties of the soul can keep us limited and small, preventing us from reaching the infinite position that God has prepared for us. Therefore, if engaging with the inanimate, vegetative, animal, or even intellectual matters does not contribute to the growth of our human dimension, the principle of piety and self-restraint dictates that we limit or, in some cases, abandon these pursuits. Failing to do so allows these lower, unreal to grow stronger, overpowering our true self and restricting it.

Several Concepts Related to the Meaning of Piety

In the previous sections, we explored several meanings and concepts related to piety. *Taqwa* and righteousness can also be interpreted from other perspectives. For example, *taqwa* means being careful not to squander the talents and blessings that God has bestowed upon us, and instead utilizing them to their fullest and best potential in pursuit of the purpose of our creation. If someone possesses a scientific, artistic, technical, or any other type of God-given talent but fails to use it correctly, they have not practiced piety.

In another definition, *taqwa* can be equated with obedience, meaning we must obey every command that God gives us. Imam Sadiq (Peace be upon him) explains *taqwa* as follows: "*Taqwa* is that God does not find you absent where He has commanded you and does not find you present where He has forbidden you [2]."

Taqwa is something that flows through every aspect of our lives, with various instances of it manifesting in our daily routines. One example is practicing *taqwa* in seeking good things. This means that in everything we pursue—be it food, thoughts, clothing, places, or marriage—we must choose and embrace the one which is good and pure. Since, only that which is pure and wholesome is absorbed,

while anything prohibited becomes an obstacle to resembling God and instead aligns us with the forces of Satan. As Imam Hussain (Peace be upon him) said on the Day of Ashura to those who stood against him: "All of you disobey me and do not listen to my words because your stomachs are filled with the forbidden, and your hearts are sealed with negligence [3]."

Given the importance of the relationship between humans and the heavenly family, particularly the Imam of the Time (May Allah hasten his reappearance), it is essential to understand the meaning of piety in this context as well. The most critical relationship we must protect from harm and strive to strengthen is this very relationship. Therefore, choosing and performing actions that bring us closer to these noble figures and strengthen our bond with them is an instance of maintaining *taqwa* while anything that damages or weakens this relationship shows impiety.

In a letter from the Imam of the Time, Imam Mahdi (May Allah hasten his reappearance) to Shaykh al-Mufid, empathy and loyalty are highlighted as two key conditions for hastening the reappearance. Thus, the greatest form of maintaining *taqwa* in this regard is loyalty to the Imam of the Time (May Allah hasten his reappearance) and empathy with those who await him, working together to prepare the ground for his advent.

Piety and the Principle of Recognizing Individual Differences

Piety is a principle that all of us must observe, but in doing so, we must also consider individual differences. This means each of us should carefully and meticulously examine what limits or diminishes us and avoid those things, while doing the opposite for what benefits us. This is much like the concept of temperament, which

we all need to learn about. Certain things—like the common cold virus, cancer, pollution, or food additives—are harmful to everyone, and we must exercise special caution and care against them. However, some things are not inherently bad; they may be harmful or limiting for some individuals while beneficial for others. For example, a particular food might be beneficial for one person but irritating for someone with a sore throat, worsening their condition. In such cases, that person should avoid it.

This act of avoidance or restraint is precisely what constitutes practicing *taqwa*. The same applies to certain situations or ethical, academic, or mystical classes. These may be harmful to one person while beneficial to another. Therefore, at times, we may need to refrain from certain academic or mystical activities simply because they are unsuitable for us and restrict our growth.

As another example, engaging in worship or focusing on sacred figures is not always beneficial. For some of us, it may even be detrimental, slowing our progress or causing us to regress rather than fostering growth.

Many pilgrimages and acts of worship can make us arrogant, pretentious, ruthless, or hard-hearted. For instance, if weekly visits to a holy place lead us to become prideful, it means those visits are not suitable for us. In such cases, we should reduce their frequency—perhaps visiting only once a month. Here, practicing *taqwa* means cutting back on these visits. Conversely, some of us may genuinely need weekly pilgrimages, daily *dhikrs* (remembrance of Allah) or recitations of the Quran. In such cases, neglecting these practices would constitute impiety. Thus, we must understand that individuals' situations differ, and what may limit some might foster growth and progress in others. One of the essentials of piety and observing *taqwa* is understanding individual characteristics and differences.

In this article, we explored the meaning of piety from various perspectives. Given the common interpretation of *taqwa* as “fear of God,” we specifically addressed the notion of fear and its different types in this context. In conclusion, we emphasized that while practicing *taqwa* is necessary for everyone, individual differences must also be considered. If you have another definition or example of piety, please feel free to share them with us.

References

- [1]. Quran, 49:13
- [2]. Ibn Fahd Heli, Ahmad Ibn Muhammad. *Kait al-Da'i and Najah al-Sa'i*. Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Islami.
- [3]. Al Majlisi, Sheikh Muhammad Baqir. *Bihar Al Anwaar*.