The Lifestyle of the Imams: Why They Were the Wealthiest People of Their Time

Contents

The Lifestyle of the Imams: Beyond the Myth That Piety Means Poverty 2

***Zuhd* Means Detachment from Wealth, Not from Work or Production** 2

Outward Elegance and Social Standing: Marks of a Believer's Dignity 3

Trade: The Driving Force Behind Prosperity and Independence 3

Spacious Homes and Boundless Generosity 4

References 5

The Lifestyle of the Imams: Beyond the Myth That Piety Means Poverty

Imagine an architect who wants to build a solid and impressive structure. If he refuses to lay a strong foundation to prove that he is not attached to the ground, the entire structure will collapse at the first strong wind or storm.

The same principle applies to human life. We have often assumed that being religious and spiritual means having little, living in hardship, and keeping one's distance from worldly affairs. Somewhere along the way, we seem to have drawn an invisible line between piety and poverty, assuming that a good person must always be poor. But the lifestyle of the Imams tells a very different story. Our religious leaders were not poor or withdrawn from society; in fact, they were among the wealthiest people of their time. So how can a person of faith also enjoy great wealth? Is there really a conflict between wealth and spirituality?

Zuhd Means Detachment from Wealth, Not from Work or Production

The lifestyle of the Imams challenges the mistaken idea that *zuhd* means being poor or unable to build wealth. Morteza Motahhari has explained this distinction. He describes *zuhd* as an inner state in which a person remains unattached to worldly wealth and status rather than allowing money to dominate their life [1]. *Zuhd* does not mean giving up work or choosing a life of poverty and hardship.

Imam Ali (Peace be upon him) engaged in productive economic activities and developed agricultural land. With his own hands, he turned barren land into productive farmland, dug underground irrigation channels, developed date palm groves, and generated wealth [2]. Yet in his personal life, he ate the simplest food and wore the simplest clothes. Why? Because he controlled

his wealth and worldly possessions instead of letting them control him. For him, wealth was a means of serving others and helping those in need, not a chain that bound his heart.

Outward Elegance and Social Standing: Marks of a Believer's Dignity

According to the teachings of religious leaders, dressing well, owning spacious homes, and living comfortably were not only acceptable but also signs of a believer's self-respect and dignity.

The Imams (Peace be upon them) were known in their communities for their dignity, elegant appearance, wealth, and influence. They believed that believers must never live in a way that causes others to look down on them or makes them seem weak and powerless. When a person lives comfortably and remains inwardly unattached to worldly possessions, they uphold the dignity of religion while allowing society to benefit from their wealth and abilities. Poverty is nothing to be proud of; true honor lies in capability, entrepreneurship, and respect for human dignity.

Trade: The Driving Force Behind Prosperity and Independence

When we look at the work the Imams (Peace be upon them) did, we find that they all engaged in trade and other economic activities. The Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him and his family) said that nine-tenths of blessings come from trade [3].

Why trade? Because it keeps wealth circulating through society. Wealth is like blood in the human body: If it pools in one place and stops circulating, it brings society to a standstill. But when a believer works, farms, trades, or produces goods, they not only keep the economy moving but also become self-reliant. Economic independence allows people to think and act freely without depending on others or yielding to external pressure.

Spacious Homes and Boundless Generosity

To understand how real and substantial the Imams' wealth was, we need only look at two historical examples.

The first example concerns their homes. None of the Imams lived in rented homes. They all owned spacious and comfortable homes where their families could live in comfort and they could welcome guests, travelers, and those in need. According to one historical account, Imam Hussain (Peace be upon him) told Umar ibn Sa'd—who was concerned about losing his house—that he would rebuild it and compensate him with an even better property from his own holdings in the Hijaz [4]. This clearly shows how much wealth and property the Imam had at his disposal.

The second example concerns charitable giving. Imam Hasan (Peace be upon him) gave away half of his personal wealth for the sake of God on several occasions throughout his life [5]. He also had a large guesthouse where any traveler in need could find shelter. These acts of generosity were not funded by the public treasury; they came from the Imam's own earnings, businesses, and properties.

This is where the main lesson becomes clear: Creating wealth gives people greater opportunities to support others through financial generosity. When a wealthy and enterprising person gives to others, they do so from a position of strength and generosity, helping goodness flow through society.

The lifestyle of the Imams teaches us that being religious does not mean turning away from wealth. A dignified and balanced life calls for people to:

1. Work hard and excel in production and entrepreneurship.
2. Be economically independent and play an influential role in trade and business.
3. Maintain a dignified appearance and live comfortably.

4. Remain unattached to wealth, avoid excess, and give generously.

In the hands of a believer, wealth is not an end in itself but a means of building an honorable life, serving others, and standing up to those who abuse their power. A true believer lives in the world without letting it rule their heart.

References

[1]. Morteza Motahhari, *A Journey Through Nahj al-Balaghah* (Tehran: WOFIS / Al-Islam.org), Chapter on "Zuhd"; see also Nahj al-Balaghah, Saying 439, where asceticism is defined in light of Surah al-Hadid (57:23).

[2]. Ali ibn Abi Talib, *Nahjul Balagha*, comp. Sharif al-Radi, trans. Sayyid Ali Reza, Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 2003, Letter 24, explanatory note 1 (citing Ibn Abi'l-Hadid, *Sharh Nahj al-Balagha*, vol. 15, p. 146), https://al-islam.org/nahjul-balagha-part-2-letters-and-sayings/letter-24-his-will.

[3]. Muhammad Baqir Majlisi, *Bihar Al-Anwaar*, vol. 61, p. 96, The Book of Animals, chap. 2, hadith 1a, https://hubeali.com/books/English-Books/BiharAlAnwaar/BiharAlAnwaar_V61.pdf (accessed October 19, 2026).

[4]. Sayyid Abd al-Razzaq al-Muqarram, *Maqtal al-Husayn: Martyrdom Epic of Imam al-Husayn*, trans. Yasin T. al-Jibouri, Beirut: Al-Kharsan Foundation for Publications, 2005, "Conceit of Ibn Saʿd," note 1 (citing *Maqtal al-Awalim*, p. 78), https://al-islam.org/maqtal-al-husayn-sayyid-abd-al-razzaq-al-muqarram/conceit-ibn-sad.

[5]. Ibrahim Amini, *Imamate and the Imams*, trans. Hamideh Elahinia, Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 2011, "The Second Imam: Hasan ibn 'Ali," section "Worshipping," https://al-islam.org/imamate-and-imams-ibrahim-amini/second-imam-hasan-ibn-ali.