

## Choices

Life is the name for a series of choices. Every choice leads to another. Not choosing is also a choice. There are no abstainers in the theatre of life. Everyone must choose. Some choices are made for us. But even there, when it comes to our personal involvement; if the event touches us in any way, we must choose. People ask, 'What about political events? Wars, for example. I didn't declare war; I can't stop it. I am not the king of any country. What can I do?' The answer is, 'Yes, you didn't declare it, you didn't benefit from it, you couldn't stop it, but what will you do when it comes to helping the victims of wars?' That is a choice. I didn't have a choice in declaring or stopping the war. But I have a choice in whether I want to help refugees or not. Then there is the choice to raise your voice against war and against all that leads to wars. Do we choose to do that, or do we choose to only complain?

Let me give you another simple example. You are in a gathering, and someone is speaking ill of a person you also dislike and who is not present. What do you do? Join in and add your own condiments to the curry? Ask the speaker to stop and remind them that backbiting (Gheeba) is Haraam (cannibalism is not permitted in Islam – Gheeba is like eating the flesh of your dead brother), and results in our good deeds going to the one we are criticizing. Not very smart to give your good deeds to someone you dislike, is it? Or do you simply walk out? Each one is a choice. Each one has consequences. Positive or negative, they are there. And we get to choose what we want.

Which brings me to another thing about choices. In life we are presented with choices, as I said in the beginning of my Khutba, and we must choose. We are not compelled to choose any particular thing, but we are compelled to make a choice. Not choosing is also a choice. There are no abstainers in the theatre of life. Everyone must choose. We are free to choose but every choice has a price tag. This is where people go wrong and when the time comes to check out, they find themselves in trouble.

Allahﷻ doesn't even compel us to worship Him. We are free to choose. We can choose to worship Allahﷻ or anything else or nothing. Each is a choice, and each has a price tag. Allahﷻ said about this:

وَقُلِ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ فَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُؤْمِنْ وَمَنْ شَاءَ فَلْيُكْفُرْ إِنَّا أَعْتَدْنَا  
لِلظَّالِمِينَ نَارًا أَحَاطَ بِهَا سُرَادِقُهَا

*Kahf 18:29 And say: The truth is from your Lord. Then whosoever wills, let him believe, and whosoever wills, let him disbelieve. Verily, We have prepared for the Zalimun (oppressors, disbelievers), a Fire whose walls will surround them.*

Another thing about price tags; the moment you make a choice, the price is automatically charged. People were very amazed to see videos of Amazon stores where you can simply walk in and pick up anything you want and walk out, and everything is automatically charged to your card. But then, why is that amazing? We do that every waking moment of our lives. We make a choice, and it is automatically charged to our account. Amazon made it possible for us to physically see that.

All choices have two effects. One in this life and one in the next. One physical effect restricted to this life. The other, a spiritual effect that influences this life and has its reward in the Aakhira (Hereafter). We are free to eat or drink anything we like. What I eat may have a positive or negative physical effect on me. But depending on whether it was earned in a Halaal way and was itself Halaal, it has a spiritual effect also. This spiritual effect is felt in this world and its reward will be in the next. Similarly, we are free to go to any gathering, have a relationship with anyone, buy or sell anything, in short, engage in all that the life of this world has to offer. But everything we choose to do; we must pay for. There are no exceptions to this rule. This is a universal constant like any other law of physics that operates in this world.

Thirdly, every time you choose something you are opting out of something else. Every time you choose to do something, you are choosing not to do something else. After all, the number of hours in a day are fixed. When we choose to spend time in one activity, with one person, in one place, we are automatically choosing not to do it somewhere else, in some other activity or with someone else. It bears reflection, before we choose, to ask, 'What am I opting out of, when I choose this?' Why must you do that? Because that is the principle of smart investment. Maximize ROI. The best investment is the one which gives the best return. So, before investing, we must check the different options we have, to see which will yield the highest return. This is especially important because our currency is time and energy, which are both, non-renewable.

If for example, I choose to spend most of my time, earning money to provide my family a good standard of life materially, I am opting out of spending time with them, mentoring, guiding, bonding, building trust. Which is more important? What is the price tag? Fewer gadgets, fewer Amazon deliveries, less fancy car but more companionship, more conversation, more sharing of interests, more poetry, fishing, hiking, outings to museums, art galleries, praying together in the masjid. Which is a more valuable return? Which is the better investment?

What is the alternative? I spend most of my productive time earning money, telling myself that it is for my family, but in the process, I have no time to spend in their Tarbiyya, listening to them, helping them learn how to solve problems, emotionally supporting them, teaching them manners, connecting them to Allahﷻ, teaching them the love of Rasoolullahﷺ, studying Qur'an, Seerah, and history with them. Therefore, what have I and they lost and what did we gain? What is the benefit in this life and what is the payoff in the Aakhira? Are such children likely to wake in the night and pray for my forgiveness in Tahajjud in Sujood? Did you do it for your parents today? Children are supposed to be our Sadaqa Jaariya, right? But what kind of children? This is our chance. It won't happen after we are dead. If we want children who will make dua for us after we die, we must grow children who know Allahﷻ and know how to ask Him.

Let me tell you about two things that happened to me this week. First, I learnt that in the psychiatric ward to treat potential suicides, in a very famous specialist hospital here, there are 8 – year old children. I don't

know if you are shocked or not; I was. It blew my mind. If I didn't respect and trust the person who told me, I wouldn't have believed him. 8 – year old children attempting suicide? Second, I overheard a conversation between a 4 – year old boy and his younger sister who were with their mother, aunt, and older siblings, all trying to catch little fish, minnows. The little girl saw two flies in a compromising position and called out, "See these flies! What are they doing?" Pat like a shot her 4 – year old brother answers, "They're making babies." Where did he learn that? Finally, we all heard the case of the two teenage boys, Muslims, who were both brilliant academically. Brilliant enough to get into Ivy League colleges. Yet one day, they both decided to kill their whole family and themselves and did it. I read the blog post of the younger boy and I couldn't sleep for days thereafter. Maybe some of you are saying, "All this can't happen to my children." Let me assure you, the parents of all those children who are screaming for help, say that same thing. Can't happen to my children. That is why they can't hear the scream. They have no time. They have no skill because they never listened to their children. They thought that raising children was only about food, clothing, shelter, and gadgets. It isn't and some people discover it too late.

There are success stories of course. Stories of children who went on to become world class professionals in their chosen fields, Islamic scholars of international repute (though that is not a criterion to judge any scholar) and caring, responsible, and honorable adults, parents, and community members. The reason is the same. Time devoted to their upbringing by

their parents. That is why I call it an investment. It gives a return in this world and an even bigger and better one in the Aakhira. Do we think it is worth our while? Covid provided us the ideal opportunity by giving us time at home with our families. The question is how we use that time. That is why we must live thoughtfully. Not by default, merely breathing, eating, sleeping. But consciously, and deliberately, weighing our options and choosing the one which gives the best return.

Do this experiment. Ask the first person you meet when you leave here, 'Do you want to be a successful person or a failure?' What do you think they will say? No brainer, right? Maybe someone will say to you, "I want to be the greatest failure the world has ever seen." But that is also success. He doesn't want to be a normal, dollar store variety failure. He wants to be a grand, gold plated, glorious failure. Now, ask yourself, 'Given that everyone wants to be a success, how many great successes can you name in your immediate circle?' What happened? How is it that everyone wants to succeed but very few make it? The reason is not that they don't want success but that they don't know what it costs. They never thought about it in terms of cost and so they are not prepared to pay for it at checkout. The reality is that if you want it, you must be prepared to pay for it. Preparation can't be done at payment time.

Someone told me a story about his grandfather who landed at Ellis Island in New York, near the Statue of Liberty and after he had gone through Customs and Immigration, he went into the restaurant and sat at a table, very hungry and wanting to order some lunch. He sat there for a long

time, but nothing happened. Then a man came with a tray full of food and sat down opposite him. The man asked him, "What's up? You look lost." This grandfather said, "I am hungry, but nobody comes to this table." The man laughed and said, "This is America. Here you go to the end of that buffet, pick up a tray, then pick up whatever you want, carry it to the end of the buffet and pay for it. You can have whatever you pay for." That is the reality, not only about America, but about life itself. You can have whatever you pay for. You must pay. Nothing is free. Neither lunch nor dinner. You must pay, one way or another. But if you pay, you can have whatever you want.

Once again, a matter of choice. Questions to ask yourself are: What is my definition of success? What does it cost? What will I have to give up, to get this? Is it worth it?

It is in this context, the context of choices that we are compelled to make, that Islam is such a treasure because it reduces the variables which make choosing difficult. In Islam there is only one criterion to fulfil and that is, 'Does it please Allahﷻ?' That is the criterion for every choice. Nothing else matters. The beauty is that if we live our lives by this principle and take all decisions based on this criterion, then we will become the most popular and influential people in society and earn Allahﷻ's pleasure in the Aakhirah. Allahﷻ declared:

فَمَنْ زُحِرَ عَنِ النَّارِ وَأُدْخِلَ الْجَنَّةَ فَقَدْ فَازَ

*A'al Imraan 3: 185*      *And whoever is removed away from the Fire and admitted to Jannah, he indeed is successful.*

That is the definition of success that Allahﷻ gave us; to be freed from the Hellfire and entered into Jannah. Only such a person is successful. We ask Allahﷻ to include us in the list of people who Allahﷻ considers successful. If we choose this for ourselves, then it means that we must make changes in our lives. If you leave here without deciding what you need to change in your life, then believe me, listening to this Khutba is a waste of time. If we want to succeed, we must define success and see what we need to pay to acquire it. In this case, Allahﷻ defined it for us. Let us ask what we need to do, to get in line for Jannah. It is not magic. It is not a mystery. It is clear. But we must choose the path and we must walk it. The path of Siratul Mustaqeem. The path of Rasoolullahﷺ. The path that leads to Jannah.

This is the single most powerful switch that Rasoolullahﷺ made in the thinking of his Sahaba i.e., to choose based on what pleases Allahﷻ. That changed their lives and took them from being powerless people who nobody cared about, to becoming the rulers of their world. Choose wisely because we must pay for our choices.