

Bismillāh ir-Raḥmān ir-Raḥīm

Iḥsān: The Qur’anic Journey

Part I — Allah Commands Iḥsān

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَالْإِحْسَانِ وَإِيتَايَ ذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَيَنْهَىٰ عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ وَالْبَغْيِ ۚ يَعِظُكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ

“Indeed, Allah commands justice, iḥsān, and giving to relatives, and He forbids immorality, wrongdoing and transgression. He admonishes you so that you may take heed.”

(Qur’an 16:90)

From Taqwā and Honour to Iḥsān

In our previous reflection, *Honour in the Sight of Allah (SWT)*, the Qur’an corrected the worldly standards by which human beings often judge one another. Wealth, lineage, nationality, influence and social position do not determine a person’s standing before Allah.

إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتَقْوَا

“Indeed, the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is the one with the greatest taqwā.”

(Qur’an 49:13)

Taqwā therefore became the measure by which honour is granted in the sight of Allah. It is the believer’s continuing consciousness of Him: fearing His displeasure, hoping for His mercy, obeying His commands and remaining mindful that nothing within the heart or conduct is hidden from Him.

The Qur’anic journey, however, does not end when taqwā is established. Among the passages studied in our previous reflection, Qur’an 5:93 connected the believer’s continued taqwā with iḥsān and concluded:

ثُمَّ اتَّقَوْا وَأَحْسِنُوا ۚ وَاللَّهُ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

“...then they remained mindful of Allah and did good. And Allah loves the muḥsinīn.”

(Qur’an 5:93)

This relationship will be examined fully later in this article. For now, it creates our transition. Having encountered Taqwā as the foundation of honour, we now turn towards the Qur’anic reality of **Iḥsān**.

Many Muslims first encounter iḥsān through the famous Ḥadīth of Jibrīl. Yet the Qur’an itself presents iḥsān through several distinct movements: as a Divine command, as the

character of the muḥsinīn, as excellence during difficulty and obedience, as a development arising through taqwā, and finally as a journey of striving that ends with Allah's guidance and special companionship.

Our journey begins where Allah commands it most comprehensively:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَأْمُرُ بِالْعَدْلِ وَالْإِحْسَانِ وَإِيتَاءِ ذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ

“Indeed, Allah commands justice, iḥsān, and giving to relatives...”

(Qur'an 16:90)

The Structural Qur'anic Context (Ibn 'Āshūr, Sayyid Quṭb, etc., on the flow of the sūrah)

Ibn Kathir observes that Sūrah al-Naḥl repeatedly directs humanity towards the signs and favours of Allah: creation, livestock, rain, vegetation, the succession of night and day, the seas, mountains, pathways and the means through which human beings receive provision. The sūrah also addresses revelation, gratitude, covenant, justice and steadfastness.

Qur'an 16:90 appears within the concluding portion of this discourse. The verse contains three commands:

Justice, iḥsān and giving to relatives;

followed by three prohibitions:

Immorality, wrongdoing and transgression;

and concludes with the Divine reminder:

“He admonishes you so that you may take heed.”

At this stage, the wording itself allows us to observe only that Allah places iḥsān within a comprehensive Divine command. The verse does not provide a separate definition of iḥsān. Its meaning and relationship with justice must therefore be sought through the recognised mufasssīrūn, rather than inferred independently.

Historical and Exegetical Context (Al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, Al-Qurṭubī explaining how the verse was understood and applied)

Unlike several later passages in this study, Qur'an 16:90 is not dependent upon a particular legal question or a single historical incident for its meaning to be understood. The recognised mufasssīrūn treat it as a broad Divine command directed towards the moral and religious life of the believer.

This does not make its historical setting unimportant. The Qur'an was forming a believing community in which loyalty to Allah would govern worship, dealings, family

obligations and treatment of others. Yet the breadth of the verse prevents its commands from being confined to one event or circumstance.

For that reason, the historical imperative here is not a specific incident that defines *iḥsān*. It is the Qur'an's establishment of a comprehensive order of righteous conduct within the emerging Muslim community—an order whose meaning the *mufasssīrūn* then illuminate.

Al-Ṭabarī: Preserving the Breadth of *iḥsān*

Imām al-Ṭabarī approaches the verse through explanations transmitted from the early authorities.

Regarding **al-‘adl**, he preserves more than one understanding. These include justice and fairness between people, but also reports connecting justice with *Tawḥīd*: that Allah alone must receive the worship owed to Him. In this understanding, justice begins with giving the Creator His exclusive right before extending to the rights of creation.

When al-Ṭabarī turns to ***iḥsān***, he again preserves a breadth of transmitted meaning. The early explanations include excellence in obedience to Allah, sincere performance of righteous deeds and beneficence towards His creation. He does not reduce *iḥsān* to only one action, such as charity, forgiveness or additional worship.

This is al-Ṭabarī's essential contribution to our first movement: the comprehensive meaning of *iḥsān* is not a modern expansion placed upon the verse. Its breadth is already preserved within the early transmitted tradition. *iḥsān* concerns the believer's relationship with Allah and conduct towards creation.

Al-Qurṭubī: Justice and *iḥsān*

Imām al-Qurṭubī considers why Allah commands **justice** and then commands ***iḥsān***.

Justice, in his explanation, requires that rights be fulfilled. What is owed must be given, obligations must be discharged and people must not be wronged. *iḥsān* extends beyond this strict fulfilment. It includes voluntary generosity, kindness, forgiveness and beneficence that another person may not possess the legal right to demand.

A debt provides a simple illustration. Justice requires that the debtor return what is owed. *iḥsān* may appear through patience from the creditor, additional generosity from the debtor, or graciousness in the manner in which the obligation is fulfilled.

The distinction made by al-Qurṭubī does not place justice and *iḥsān* in opposition. Justice protects rights; *iḥsān* adds voluntary goodness without cancelling those rights. The believer is commanded to fulfil what Allah has made obligatory and is then invited towards forms of excellence that arise from sincerity, mercy and generosity.

The claim that iḥsān rises beyond minimum obligation therefore does not originate from our own reading. It emerges from al-Qurṭubī's explanation of why Allah mentions both commands within the same verse.

Ibn 'Āshūr: Rights Owed to Allah and Creation

Ibn 'Āshūr approaches the verse through its coherence and comprehensive arrangement.

He understands its commands as encompassing both the rights owed to Allah and those owed to creation. Justice protects the proper order of rights and obligations. Iḥsān perfects the believer's performance of those responsibilities, while giving to relatives brings this excellence into the relationships in which responsibility and compassion are especially close.

The prohibitions then protect the individual and society from the conduct that violates this order: indecency, recognised wrongdoing and transgression against others.

Ibn 'Āshūr's explanation helps us see the verse as one coherent Divine command rather than six unrelated instructions. Nevertheless, this coherence is his exegetical explanation; it is not something we need to claim upon our own authority. Through his analysis, Qur'an 16:90 emerges as a passage embracing worship, moral responsibility and human relationships within a single structure.

A Contemporary Linguistic Appreciation

Nouman Ali Khan draws contemporary attention to the remarkable balance of the verse: three commands are followed by three prohibitions, and the verse closes by reminding its listeners that Allah is admonishing them so that they may remember.

His contribution is primarily linguistic and rhetorical. He does not replace the classical explanations of iḥsān. Rather, he helps the contemporary reader slow down before the Qur'anic arrangement and recognise that iḥsān has been placed deliberately within a wider structure of commands and prohibitions.

When read alongside al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī and Ibn 'Āshūr, this appreciation reinforces an important boundary. Iḥsān should neither be isolated from justice nor confined to one charitable act. The verse introduces it within a comprehensive order governing the believer's obedience and conduct.

Scholarly Convergence

These scholars approach Qur'an 16:90 through different methods.

Al-Ṭabarī preserves the explanations of the Salaf.

Al-Qurṭubī examines its ethical and legal distinction.

Ibn ‘Āshūr illuminates its thematic coherence.

Nouman Ali Khan draws attention to its rhetorical balance.

Their explanations are not identical. Yet they converge upon a central finding: **the command of iḥsān is broad and cannot be restricted to one manifestation.** It includes excellence in obedience to Allah and beneficence towards His creation. It accompanies justice, but possesses a meaning that reaches beyond the strict fulfilment of enforceable rights.

This convergence explains why Qur’an 16:90 becomes the opening movement of our study. It commands iḥsān comprehensively; the later passages will disclose particular qualities, circumstances and stages through which it is developed.

The Authentic Sunnah

No authentic narration has been identified in which the Messenger of Allah ﷺ provides a verse-by-verse explanation of Qur’an 16:90. The authentic Sunnah instead illuminates the breadth of its command through two foundational narrations.

In the Ḥadīth of Jibrīl, the Prophet ﷺ was asked:

“Inform me about iḥsān.”

He replied:

“It is to worship Allah as though you see Him; and although you do not see Him, He certainly sees you.”

(Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 8; Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī)

The Prophet ﷺ locates iḥsān first within the believer’s awareness of Allah. The excellence of worship arises from knowing that one stands before Him and remains completely seen by Him.

A second narration expands the principle into conduct. The Prophet ﷺ said:

“Indeed, Allah has prescribed iḥsān in all things.”

(Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 1955)

The hadith then applies this command even to slaughtering an animal: the blade must be sharpened and unnecessary suffering avoided. The recognised hadith commentators understand the opening statement as a comprehensive principle, while the examples demonstrate its application even in circumstances where human beings exercise lawful authority over another creature.

Together, these narrations illuminate both dimensions preserved by al-Ṭabarī: excellence before Allah and excellence towards His creation. The first gives iḥsān its

inward consciousness; the second demonstrates that this consciousness must govern outward conduct.

The Prophetic Embodiment

Anas ibn Mālik (RA) reported that he was walking with the Messenger of Allah ﷺ when a Bedouin pulled the Prophet's cloak so violently that its edge left a mark upon his shoulder. The man then demanded that wealth be given to him.

The Prophet ﷺ turned towards him, smiled and ordered that he be given something.

This authentic incident, narrated in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, does not require us to invent an explanation of Qur'an 16:90. It demonstrates the Prophetic character through which the Qur'anic command became visible. The Prophet ﷺ possessed the authority to rebuke the man for his roughness. Instead, he responded with restraint, generosity and dignity.

His response did not deny justice. It displayed a voluntary excellence beyond what the man's behaviour deserved.

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ therefore taught iḥsān through definition, prescribed it as a comprehensive principle, and embodied it within ordinary human encounters.

Among the Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn

The same concern for authenticated evidence must govern our selection from the lives of the Rightly Guided Caliphs.

The Prophet ﷺ once asked his Companions who among them was fasting that day, had followed a funeral procession, had fed a poor person and had visited someone who was ill. Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (RA) answered each time that he had done so. The Prophet ﷺ then said:

“These qualities are not combined in a person except that he will enter Paradise.”
(Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, no. 1028)

Abū Bakr's day joined worship with service: fasting before Allah, honouring the deceased, feeding the poor and visiting the sick. This authenticated report reflects the breadth of iḥsān preserved by the mufasssīrūn without requiring unverified stories to embellish his character.

An early historical report also describes 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (RA) personally carrying provisions to a hungry family and helping prepare their food. Because this is an early historical report (Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, Biography of 'Umar) rather than a Prophetic narration authenticated to the same level as Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, it should be

presented with that qualification. Its value lies in illustrating how Muslim leadership understood responsibility as personal care, not administration alone.

‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān (RA) provided another well-supported example (**Jāmi’ al-Tirmidhī**, Ibn Kathīr Al-Bidāyah wa al-Nihāyah)

when he purchased the Well of Rūmah and made its water available to the Muslim community, responding to the Prophet’s encouragement with voluntary beneficence. His wealth fulfilled more than a private obligation; it became a continuing source of communal benefit.

No example should be forced merely to create symmetry among all four Caliphs. Where a sufficiently strong and directly relevant report has not been established, silence is more faithful to the research than embellishment. This evidentiary restraint is itself part of the trust owed to the Islamic tradition.

Research Finding

Qur’an 16:90 introduces iḥsān through a broad Divine command but does not define it separately.

The recognised mufasssīrūn then illuminate its dimensions. Al-Ṭabarī preserves excellence in obedience and beneficence towards creation. Al-Qurṭubī explains how it extends beyond the strict fulfilment of rights. Ibn ‘Āshūr shows how it belongs within a coherent order governing duties towards Allah and human beings. Contemporary linguistic appreciation draws attention to its balanced placement within the verse.

The authentic Sunnah completes this opening movement without claiming to be a direct verse-by-verse commentary. The Ḥadīth of Jibrīl establishes the inward consciousness of iḥsān: worshipping under the certainty that Allah sees us. The declaration that Allah has prescribed iḥsān in all things establishes its outward comprehensiveness. The Prophet’s conduct then demonstrates how awareness of Allah produces restraint, mercy and generosity.

We may therefore state the convergence carefully:

Iḥsān is excellence before Allah that becomes excellence in conduct towards His creation.

This is not offered as an independent definition. It is a synthesis drawn from the explanations and evidence that have preceded it.

Transition to the Next Qur’anic Movement

Qur’an 16:90 has given us the command.

A further question now arises:

What qualities appear in the lives of those whom Allah calls the muḥsinīn?

The next movement does not leave that question unanswered. Qur'an 3:133–136 begins with a call to hasten towards forgiveness and Paradise prepared for the muttaqīn. It then describes people who spend in ease and hardship, restrain anger, pardon others, remember Allah after falling into sin and refuse knowingly to persist in wrongdoing.

Within that description, Allah declares:

وَاللَّهُ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

“And Allah loves the muḥsinīn.”

(Qur'an 3:134)

The command of iḥsān has now been established. The Qur'anic journey next turns towards the character of those who embody it.