

Part II

The Qur'an Develops Iḥsān

Movement I

The Character of the Muḥsinīn

وَسَارِعُوا إِلَىٰ مَغْفِرَةٍ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ وَجَنَّةٍ عَرْضُهَا السَّمُوتُ وَالْأَرْضُ أُعِدَّتْ لِلْمُتَّقِينَ ۝١٣٣
الَّذِينَ يُنْفِقُونَ فِي السَّرَّاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ وَالْكُلُومِ وَالْغَيْظِ وَالْعَافِينَ عَنِ النَّاسِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ۝١٣٤
وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا فَعَلُوا فَحِشَةً أَوْ ظَلَمُوا أَنفُسَهُمْ ذَكَرُوا اللَّهَ فَاسْتَغْفَرُوا لِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَمَن يَغْفِرِ الذُّنُوبَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَلَمْ يُصِرُّوا عَلَىٰ مَا
فَعَلُوا وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ ۝١٣٥
أُولَٰئِكَ جَزَاؤُهُم مَّغْفِرَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ وَجَنَّاتٌ تَجْرِي مِن تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا ۚ وَنِعْمَ أَجْرُ الْعَامِلِينَ ۝١٣٦

"And hasten towards forgiveness from your Lord and a Garden as wide as the heavens and the earth, prepared for the muttaqīn. Those who spend in ease and hardship, who restrain their anger and pardon people. And Allah loves the muḥsinīn. Those who, when they commit an indecency or wrong themselves, remember Allah, seek forgiveness for their sins—and who forgives sins except Allah?—and they do not knowingly persist in what they have done. Those are the ones whose reward is forgiveness from their Lord and gardens beneath which rivers flow, abiding therein forever. Excellent indeed is the reward of those who work."

(Qur'an 3:133–136)

Structural Qur'anic Context

Imām Ibn Kathīr observes that these verses occur after Sūrah Āl ‘Imrān addresses the consequences of the Battle of Uḥud, where the believers experienced both victory and painful setback. Throughout this section of the Sūrah, Allah educates the believers through trial, correcting their outlook, strengthening their trust in Him and directing them towards repentance, steadfastness and reliance upon His guidance. Within this broader discourse, verses 133–136 shift the reader's attention towards the qualities of those preparing themselves for Allah's forgiveness and Paradise.

Ibn ‘Āshūr similarly notes that these verses form part of the Qur'an's moral education of the believing community. Rather than merely promising Paradise, Allah describes the character of those for whom it has been prepared. Thus, the passage moves naturally from aspiration towards embodiment: Paradise is not simply enumerated; its people are described.

The structure of the passage itself reflects this progression. Allah first commands:

"Hasten towards forgiveness from your Lord..."

He then identifies the destination:

"...a Garden as wide as the heavens and the earth..."

Only thereafter does He describe the people preparing for that destination:

"...prepared for the muttaqīn."

The believer therefore encounters not merely a promise, but a portrait.

Historical and Exegetical Context

Unlike certain Qur'anic passages that are closely connected to a specific occasion of revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*), **al-Ṭabarī** does not record a definitive historical incident restricting the application of Qur'an 3:133–136 to one particular event. Likewise, **Ibn Kathīr**, while discussing these verses within the wider narrative of Sūrah Āl 'Imrān following the Battle of Uḥud, treats them as a general Divine description of the qualities of the muttaqīn and the muḥsinīn rather than as guidance confined to a single historical circumstance.

Al-Qurṭubī similarly focuses upon the ethical characteristics described in the verses rather than identifying a unique cause of revelation. Consequently, the classical exegetical tradition understands these verses as timeless guidance for every believer while recognising their placement within the Qur'an's education of the early Muslim community after Uḥud.

Al-Ṭabarī: The Muḥsin Is Recognised Through Action

Al-Ṭabarī explains these verses through reports transmitted from the early generations.

Regarding Allah's command to hasten towards forgiveness, he records that believers are urged to hasten through obedience to Allah before opportunities pass. Forgiveness is therefore not attained through wishful thinking but through responsive obedience.

When Allah describes those

"who spend in ease and hardship,"

al-Ṭabarī preserves reports explaining that generosity is not limited to times of abundance. The believer continues to give according to his ability, whether circumstances are comfortable or difficult.

Concerning

"those who restrain their anger,"

the transmitted explanations emphasise withholding retaliation despite possessing the ability to respond.

Finally,

"they pardon people,"

is understood as voluntarily overlooking the faults of others.

Thus, the early tradition does not present these qualities as isolated virtues. Together they describe a believer whose relationship with wealth, emotions and other people has been transformed by obedience to Allah.

Al-Qurṭubī: From Self-Control to Benevolence

Al-Qurṭubī observes that the sequence of these qualities is itself instructive.

First comes generosity.

Then restraint of anger.

Then forgiveness.

He explains that restraining anger differs from forgiveness. A person may suppress anger while still harbouring resentment. Forgiveness, however, removes the desire for retaliation.

Allah then concludes:

"And Allah loves the muḥsinīn."

Al-Qurṭubī notes that this Divine love follows the description of these voluntary acts of excellence. The believer therefore recognises that iḥsān is not confined to external actions alone but extends to the purification of one's inner character.

Ibn Kathīr: The Door of Tawbah Remains Open

One of the most remarkable features of this passage, as highlighted by Ibn Kathīr, is that Allah does not describe the Muḥsinīn as sinless.

Immediately after praising their generosity, emotional restraint and forgiveness, Allah says:

"Those who, when they commit an indecency or wrong themselves, remember Allah and seek forgiveness for their sins..."

Ibn Kathīr explains that righteous believers may fall into sin. What distinguishes them is not absolute perfection but their immediate return to Allah through remembrance, repentance and sincere seeking of forgiveness.

This observation protects the believer from despair. The Qur'an's portrait of the muḥsin is not an unattainable ideal reserved for those who never err. Rather, it is the portrait of one who refuses to remain distant from Allah after falling.

Ibn ʿĀshūr: The Moral Architecture of the Passage

Ibn ʿĀshūr notes that Allah describes qualities governing three fundamental relationships.

The believer's relationship with wealth:

"...those who spend..."

The believer's relationship with emotion:

"...those who restrain anger..."

The believer's relationship with society:

"...those who pardon people..."

Finally, Allah returns the believer to the most important relationship of all:

the servant's relationship with his Lord through Tawbah and forgiveness.

This progression demonstrates that Iḥsān embraces the entirety of human life rather than one isolated act of righteousness.

Contemporary Reflection

Nouman Ali Khan observes that the description moves from outward actions to inward transformation.

Giving can be seen.

Restraining anger is largely hidden.

Seeking forgiveness belongs primarily to the heart.

The Qur'an therefore gradually leads the believer inward, reminding us that Allah's love embraces both visible righteousness and sincere repentance.

Authentic Sunnah

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said:

"The strong person is not the one who overcomes others through wrestling, but the strong person is the one who controls himself when angry."

(Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim)

This authentic narration beautifully illuminates Allah's description:

"...those who restrain their anger..."

Similarly, the Prophet ﷺ said:

"Charity does not decrease wealth. Allah increases the honour of one who forgives others. And no one humbles himself for Allah except that Allah raises him."

(Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim)

Without claiming to be a direct commentary upon Qur'an 3:134, this authentic narration reflects the same moral qualities described within the verse: generosity, forgiveness and humility before Allah.

Prophetic Embodiment

The Prophet ﷺ repeatedly demonstrated these qualities.

Among the clearest examples is the incident involving the Bedouin who harshly pulled the Prophet's cloak demanding wealth. Rather than responding with anger, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ smiled and ordered that the man be given something.

The narration, recorded in both Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, demonstrates remarkable emotional restraint and benevolence in the face of provocation. It is difficult to read Allah's description of those "who restrain anger and pardon people" without seeing these qualities embodied in the life of His Messenger ﷺ.

Among the Khulafā' al-Rāshidūn

Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (RA) provides perhaps the clearest continuation of this Prophetic character.

Following the incident of the slander against our mother ʿĀ'ishah (RA), Abū Bakr had ceased supporting Miṣṭaḥ ibn Uthāthah, one of those involved in spreading the accusation.

Allah then revealed:

وَلْيَعْفُوا وَلْيَصْفَحُوا أَلَا تُحِبُّونَ أَنْ يَغْفِرَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ

"Let them pardon and overlook. Would you not love that Allah should forgive you?"

(Qur'an 24:22)

Upon hearing the verse, Abū Bakr replied:

"Indeed, by Allah, I love that Allah should forgive me."

He immediately resumed his financial support.

This incident is recorded in **Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī** and represents one of the most powerful historical embodiments of Allah's command to pardon others while seeking His forgiveness.

Scholarly Convergence

Taken together, the recognised mufasssīrūn present a remarkably coherent picture.

The muḥsin is not identified by one extraordinary act but by a pattern of transformed character. Generosity overcomes attachment to wealth. Self-restraint overcomes anger. Forgiveness overcomes resentment. Repentance overcomes despair.

Most strikingly, Allah concludes this portrait not by saying that He rewards the muḥsinīn, but that **He loves them**.

Thus, the Qur'an has already advanced beyond the first movement. In Qur'an 16:90, Allah commanded iḥsān. Here, He begins to reveal the inner qualities by which the Muḥsinīn are recognised.

Having described the character of the Muḥsinīn in everyday relationships, the Qur'an next places iḥsān within one of the most difficult human experiences: conflict itself.

In **Qur'an 2:190–195**, Allah will demonstrate that even when fighting has become lawful, the believer remains bound by the moral excellence of iḥsān. There, the command becomes explicit:

وَأَحْسِنُوا ۚ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

"...and do good (aḥsinū); indeed, Allah loves the muḥsinīn."

(Qur'an 2:195)

This movement will show that iḥsān is not suspended in hardship—it is tested by it.