

30861 - Ruling on Breaking Promises

the question

We know that breaking promises is one of the attributes of the hypocrites, but if a Muslim is unable to keep his promise for some reason that is beyond his control, is he regarded as doing something haram and as having one of the attributes of the hypocrites, or is he excused?

Summary of answer

Breaking promises in Islam is one of the attributes of the hypocrites. But a promise may be broken in situations where the believer is excused such as forgetting, being forced or a promise to do something haram or not to do something obligatory.

Detailed answer

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Virtues of keeping promises in Islam

Undoubtedly [keeping promises](#) and keeping one's word are attributes of the believers. And breaking promises is one of the attributes of the hypocrites. `Abdullah ibn `Amr (may Allah be pleased with him) narrated that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "There are four (characteristics), whoever has them is a hypocrite, and whoever has one of the four has a characteristic of hypocrisy unless he gives it up: when he speaks, he lies; when he makes a promise he breaks it; when he makes a pledge he betrays it; and when he disputes he resorts to foul language." (Narrated by al-Bukhari, 2327; Muslim, 58)

Breaking promises

The believer who makes promises to people and breaks his promise may have an excuse or he may not. If he has an excuse, then there is no sin on him, but if he does not have an excuse then he is a sinner.

Exceptions for breaking promises

There is no text – as far as we know – that makes any exception regarding the prohibition of [breaking promises](#) , but it may be that promises are broken in situations where the believer is excused. For example:

- Forgetting

Allah has forgiven us for forgetfulness whereby obligatory actions are omitted or haram actions are committed. Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Our Lord! Punish us not if we forget or fall into error” [al-Baqarah 2:286]

And Allah has said: “Yes.” – Narrated by Muslim, 125, from the hadith of Abu Hurayrah. According to another version, He said: “I will do that.” (Narrated by Muslim, 126, from the hadith of Ibn ‘Abbas)

Whoever makes a promise to someone then forgets the promise or forgets to do it at the time stated, there is no sin on him.

- Being forced to [break one’s promise](#) .

Being forced is one of the impediments that make it permissible for a Muslim to break his promise, such as one who is detained or is prevented from fulfilling his promise, or who is threatened with a painful punishment.

Ibn `Abbas narrated that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: “Allah has forgiven my ummah for their mistakes, what they forget and what they are

forced to do.” (Narrated by Ibn Majah, 2045, and this hadith has many corroborating reports; classed as sahih by Shaykh al-Albani in Sahih al-Jami’, 1836)

- A promise to do something haram or not to do something obligatory.

Whoever promises someone that he will do something haram for him, or that he will not do something that is obligatory, it is not permissible for him to fulfill that promise.

This may be supported by the hadith of `Aishah – which is also known as the hadith of Barirah – which is narrated in al-Sahihayn. `Aishah (may Allah be pleased with her) had promised Barirah’s former masters that the wala of Barirah [the right to inherit from her when she died – which is the right of the one who sets a slave free – Translator] would belong to them even though `Aishah (may Allah be pleased with her) was the one who was going to set Barirah free. But she did not keep this promise because they had gone against the Shari`ah and they knew that the right of wala belonged to the one who set the slave free, so how could `Aishah set her free and then the wala of Barirah belong to them?

Al-Shafi`i said:

“When news of that reached them, the one who had stipulated a condition that was contrary to the ruling of Allah and His Messenger was a sinner, and there are hudud punishments and discipline for the sinner. One of the ways in which the sinners are disciplined is that their conditions are rendered null and void so as to deter them and others from doing likewise. This is one of the best forms of discipline.” (Ikhtilaf al-Hadith, p. 165)

- If something unforeseen happens to the one who made the promise, such as sickness, the death of a relative or breakdown of his means of transportation, etc.

There are many excuses, which all come under the heading of the verse (interpretation of the meaning):

“Allah burdens not a person beyond his scope” [al-Baqarah 2:286]

And Allah knows best.