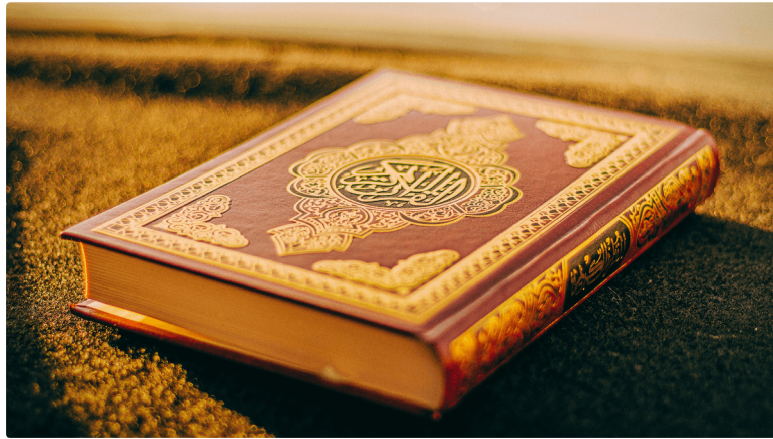


FAITH & SPIRITUALITY

To Allah Belongs All Izzah: Why Honor Cannot Be Sought from Creatures

By: Mai Jianjun October 5, 2026



During the final days of Ramadan, a respected scholar addressed a gathering of students at IIUM. He told them about something that happened to him in Egypt.

On his way to the mosque, a group of poor people stopped him and begged for money. He gave what he could, but more followed, and their desperation accompanied him the rest of the way. He said the scene grieved him, both for the people in front of him and for the economic and political decline of so much of the Muslim world. He ended with a charge to the students: the purpose of their learning is to enable Muslims to live with dignity.

The speech was moving, and its intention was clearly sincere. But one participant stated what many in the room took from it: Muslim students should study in order to raise their

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...honored, so that whoever acquires them acquires honor.

This article argues that the assumption runs against one of the clearest teachings of the Qur'an. The honor the speaker had in mind has a Qur'anic name, *al-‘izzah*, and the Qur'an states plainly to whom it belongs, and it leaves nothing of it to anyone else. Everything other than Allah is His creation, including the wealth, power, and qualifications people pursue. A created thing possesses no ‘izzah of its own, and it cannot give ‘izzah to anyone. It can bring neither benefit nor harm except by the will of Allah. Whoever wants ‘izzah must therefore turn to Allah, because no one else has it to give.

‘Izzah, Not Karāmah

Before going further, the term needs to be defined, because English blurs a distinction that Arabic keeps clear.

The root ‘-z-z carries the sense of strength, hardness, and imperviousness. Something ‘*azīz* cannot be overpowered or easily reached. Its opposite is *dhillah*: abasement, subjugation, being brought low. Allah's name *al-‘Azīz*, the Almighty, draws on this root. ‘Izzah, then, is standing joined to strength: the condition of a person or people who cannot be subdued.

It differs from *karāmah*. Allah says:

وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ وَحَمَلْنَاهُمْ فِي الْبَرِّ وَالْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى كَثِيرٍ مِمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا

"We have certainly honored the children of Adam, carried them on land and sea, provided them with good things, and favored them above much of what We created." (17:70)

Karāmah is the honor Allah gave every human being simply by creating them human. Believer and unbeliever share it, and

For this reason, this article keeps "dignity," the word modern English uses for inherent human worth, for *karāmah*, and leaves ‘izzah in transliteration. When people lament that the ummah lives without dignity, what they mean is that it lives without ‘izzah. The question is where ‘izzah comes from.

All ‘Izzah Belongs to Allah

The Qur'an answers this question more than once, and always in the same terms:

إِنَّ الْعِزَّةَ لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا

"Indeed, all ‘izzah belongs to Allah." (10:65)

مَنْ كَانَ يُرِيدُ الْعِزَّةَ فَلِلَّهِ الْعِزَّةُ جَمِيعًا

"Whoever desires ‘izzah: all ‘izzah belongs to Allah." (35:10)

The decisive word is *jamī‘an*: all of it, entirely. The verse does not say that most ‘izzah belongs to Allah while a portion remains with kings, wealthy people, or the learned. Nothing is left for creatures to own independently. So the person who seeks ‘izzah from anything other than Allah is not seeking it from a lesser source. He is seeking it where none exists.

The Qur'an names this mistake directly and condemns it:

الَّذِينَ يَتَّخِذُونَ الْكَافِرِينَ أَوْلِيَاءَ مِنْ دُونِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ۚ أَسْتَغْنُونَ عَنْهُمْ الْعِزَّةَ فَإِنَّ الْعِزَّةَ لِلَّهِ جَمِيعًا

"Those who take the disbelievers as allies instead of the believers: do they seek ‘izzah with them? Then indeed, all ‘izzah belongs to Allah." (4:139)

standing to follow. The verse replies that the ones they looked to had no 'izzah to give.

At first glance, one verse seems to complicate this:

وَلِلَّهِ الْعِزَّةُ وَلِرَسُولِهِ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَلَكِنَّ الْمُنَافِقِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

"And to Allah belongs 'izzah, and to His Messenger, and to the believers, but the hypocrites do not know." (63:8)

The context explains it. The leader of the hypocrites had boasted that on returning to Madinah, "the more honored (*al-a 'azz*) will expel the more humble (*al-adhall*)." He was counting on his tribal standing and local influence. The verse overturns that calculation. The 'izzah of the Messenger and the believers is not something they own beside Allah's. It comes from Allah and depends on their relationship with Him. That is why the hypocrites "do not know": they measured 'izzah by what they could see, and missed the One who gives it.

The Qur'an teaches the believer to address Allah in exactly these terms:

تُؤْتِي الْمُلْكَ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَتَنْزِعُ الْمُلْكَ مِمَّنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُعِزُّ مَنْ تَشَاءُ وَتُذِلُّ مَنْ تَشَاءُ طَبِيعُكَ الْخَيْرُ

"You give sovereignty to whom You will and take it from whom You will. You grant 'izzah to whom You will and abase whom You will. In Your hand is all good." (3:26)

Granting 'izzah and imposing dhillah are both Allah's acts. They are not results that human beings produce by assembling the right resources.

Creatures Possess Neither 'Izzah Nor the Power to Benefit or Harm

follows from what they are. They are created, and the Qur'an is clear about what created things can and cannot do.

Of everything worshipped or relied upon besides Allah, it says:

لَا يَخْلُقُونَ شَيْئًا وَهُمْ يُخْلَقُونَ وَلَا يَمْلِكُونَ لِأَنفُسِهِمْ ضَرًّا وَلَا نَفْعًا

"They create nothing while they themselves are created, and they possess for themselves neither harm nor benefit." (25:3)

Something that cannot benefit itself cannot benefit anyone else. The Qur'an puts the point more sharply still. Those called upon besides Allah "do not possess even a *qimīr*" (35:13), the thin membrane covering a date stone. And in a parable addressed to all of humanity, it says:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ ضَرْبٌ مِّثْلُ مَا سَأَلْتُمُوهُ لَهُ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ لَنْ يَخْلُقُوا ذُبَابًا وَلَوْ اجْتَمَعُوا لَهُ وَإِنْ يَسْلُبْهُمُ الذُّبَابُ شَيْئًا لَا يَسْتَنْقِذُوهُ مِنْهُ ضَعُفَ الطَّالِبُ وَالْمَطْلُوبُ

"O people, an example is presented, so listen to it. Those you call upon besides Allah could never create a fly, even if they all gathered together for it. And if the fly should snatch something from them, they could not recover it. Weak are the seeker and the sought." (22:73)

The verse ends with a judgment on both sides of the relationship: the one who seeks from a creature, and the creature he seeks from. Both are weak. This is exactly the condition of the person who looks to wealth, power, or qualifications for 'izzah.

The clearest statement comes from the noblest of creation. Allah commands His Messenger ﷺ to say:

قُلْ لَا أَمْلِكُ لِنَفْسِي نَفْعًا وَلَا ضَرًّا إِلَّا مَا شَاءَ اللَّهُ

If the Prophet ﷺ disclaims any independent power over benefit and harm, then a bank account, a government, or a university certificate certainly has none. The qualification *illā mā shā' Allāh*, "except as Allah wills," marks exactly where all efficacy lies:

وَأِنْ يَّمْسَسْكَ اللَّهُ بِضُرٍّ فَلَا كَاشِفَ لَهُ إِلَّا هُوَ وَإِنْ يُرِدْكَ بِخَيْرٍ فَلَا رَادَّ لِفَضْلِهِ

"If Allah touches you with harm, none can remove it but He. And if He intends good for you, none can repel His bounty." (10:107)

The Prophet ﷺ taught the young Ibn 'Abbās the same lesson in words that every Muslim student should know by heart:

وَأَعْلَمُ أَنَّ الْأُمَّةَ لَوْ اجْتَمَعَتْ عَلَى أَنْ يَنْفَعُوكَ بِشَيْءٍ لَمْ يَنْفَعُوكَ إِلَّا بِشَيْءٍ قَدْ كَتَبَهُ اللَّهُ لَكَ، وَلَوْ اجْتَمَعُوا عَلَى أَنْ يَضُرُّوكَ بِشَيْءٍ لَمْ يَضُرُّوكَ إِلَّا بِشَيْءٍ قَدْ كَتَبَهُ اللَّهُ عَلَيْكَ

"Know that if the whole community gathered to benefit you with something, they could not benefit you except with what Allah has already written for you. And if they gathered to harm you with something, they could not harm you except with what Allah has already written against you." (al-Tirmidhī)

If the entire community cannot benefit a single person beyond what Allah has written, then the means that community uses cannot do so either. Wealth, power, and qualifications do not give 'izzah, because they do not possess it.

The Qur'an's two great examples show this. Pharaoh held the greatest political power of his age and declared, "I am your lord, most high" (79:24). Qārūn held wealth so great that a band of strong men could barely carry the keys to his treasuries. When reminded of Allah, he answered, "I was given it only because of knowledge I have" (28:78). One relied on power, the other on wealth and his own expertise. Allah drowned the first and

what they relied on had none to give. The Qur'an's image for everyone who builds this way is precise: "The example of those who take protectors besides Allah is like the spider who builds a house; and the frailest of houses is the spider's house" (29:41).

Means Without Power: The Place of *Asbāb*

An objection follows naturally. If wealth and qualifications cannot give 'izzah, should Muslims stop studying, earning, and building? Was the scholar wrong to send students to their books?

He was not, and the answer lies in the place Islam assigns to *asbāb*, means and causes. Allah has made the world run through means. Fire burns, medicine heals, study produces understanding, and these connections are real. A Bedouin once asked the Prophet ﷺ whether he should leave his camel untied and rely on Allah. The Prophet ﷺ answered: "Tie it, and rely on Allah" (al-Tirmidhī). Neglecting means is not tawakkul.

What tawhīd rejects is the belief that means act by their own power. Fire burns because Allah makes it burn, and He withheld that power from the fire into which Ibrāhīm was cast. The student must therefore study, and the community must build its economy and its institutions. But these are means, not the source. Pursuing them is obedience. Relying on them, as if they themselves produced 'izzah, is exactly what 4:139 condemns.

The Qur'an's own praise of knowledge confirms this:

يَرْفَعُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مِنْكُمْ وَالَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ دَرَجَاتٍ

"Allah raises those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge by degrees." (58:11)

Learning pursued with man becomes a means through which

Allah raises a person. Learning pursued as a source of standing in itself is only another created thing that can promise nothing.

Turning to Allah: How ‘Izzah Is Received

If ‘izzah belongs to Allah alone, the only question left is how to receive it from Him. The verse that declares His ownership of ‘izzah also gives the answer:

مَنْ كَانَ يُرِيدُ الْعِزَّةَ فَلِلَّهِ الْعِزَّةُ جَمِيعًا ۖ إِلَيْهِ يَصْعَدُ الْكَلِمُ الطَّيِّبُ وَالْعَمَلُ الصَّالِحُ يَرْفَعُهُ

"Whoever desires ‘izzah: all ‘izzah belongs to Allah. To Him ascends the good word, and righteous deeds raise it." (35:10)

Whoever wants ‘izzah is directed upward, to Allah, and the path is defined: the good word, which the exegetes understand first of all as the testimony of tawhīd, carried by righteous action. ‘Izzah is not taken from the world. It is received from Allah by those who turn toward Him.

This is how the Prophet ﷺ and his Companions lived. They did not set out to make the Arabs powerful or wealthy. They set out to please Allah and to succeed in the Hereafter. Within a generation, the people who had been on the margins of Persia and Byzantium were honored across much of the known world. That ‘izzah was never their goal. Allah granted it to them as a gift following the direction they had chosen.

‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb understood this precisely. When he arrived in Syria as caliph, he waded through water leading his own camel, in patched clothing. Abū ‘Ubaydah worried how this would look to the people of the conquered land. ‘Umar replied:

إِنَّا كُنَّا أَذَلَّ قَوْمٍ فَأَعَزَّنَا اللَّهُ بِالإِسْلَامِ، فَمَهْمَا نَطْلُبُ الْعِزَّةَ بَعِيرٌ مَا أَعَزَّنَا اللَّهُ بِهِ أَذَلَّنَا اللَّهُ

Umar, al-Mustadarrak

‘Umar was not making a prediction about strategy. He was stating a law of how Allah deals with His servants. The century since 1924 can be read in its light. Again and again, the Muslim world has sought its lost standing through borrowed ideologies, through dependence on foreign powers, and through the belief that science, technology, and economic growth would by themselves restore what had been lost. Means were mistaken for the source. Meanwhile, the gap widened between our du‘ā, in which we ask for good in this world and the next, and our actual effort, which goes almost entirely to this world. ‘Umar's words describe the result.

The scholar's grief for those beggars in Egypt was right, and so was his call to the students to take their studies seriously. What needs correcting is the reason given. "Study so that Muslims may live with dignity" makes the means into the source. It quietly promises that degrees, wealth, and influence can produce what only Allah possesses.

The Qur'anic version of the charge is different. Study, earn, and build, because these are means Allah has commanded us to use. But study for Allah, seek His pleasure, and rely on Him rather than on what you acquire. Created things have no ‘izzah to give, and they bring neither benefit nor harm except by His will. If ‘izzah comes to this ummah again, it will not come from the world it is chasing. It will come from Allah, to people who have turned to Him.

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