

BY OMAR USMAN

Once a week, for about 30 minutes on Friday afternoon, we sit and listen to a khutbah (sermon). What is the actual purpose of this talk? What are the audience's expectations? How do we best capitalize on the opportunity of a large, captive audience? Should the khutbah be used for fundraising? What about raising awareness for social causes? What about teaching people how to make wudu properly?

As with most things, it's essential to start with the fundamentals. The other questions can be addressed after this foundation is established.

There is an entire surah in the Qur'an dedicated to the day of Jumu'ah (Friday). The ultimate command comes toward the end of the surah -

***Believers! When the call to prayer is made on the day of congregation [Friday], hurry towards the reminder of God... (62:9)***

Leading up to that command are ayaat of Qur'an that provide insight into the purpose of the weekly khutbah.

***Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies God, the Controller, the Holy One, the Almighty, the Wise. (62:1)***

Allah (swt) is the focus of everything we do. The Names of Allah mentioned here remind us of Allah's greatness, and our need to reconnect with Him in our daily lives.

***It is He who raised a messenger, among the people who had no Scripture, to recite His revelations to them, to make them grow spiritually and teach them the Scripture and wisdom—before that they were clearly astray—to them and others yet to join them. He is the Almighty, the Wise (62:2-3)***

The formula for a khutbah is laid out here - spirituality first, then education.

- 'Recite His revelation' - Remind people about Allah first and foremost in everything they do
- 'Make them grow spiritually' - Inspire and help people with their spirituality so they can reconnect with Allah.
- 'Teach them' - Education is mentioned third. It is not the primary focus of a khutbah,
- 'They were clearly astray' - Always be hopeful in the audience. Do not get angry with them because of their situation or status at a given moment.

- This process of reminding, inspiring, teaching, and serving will continue.

***Such is God's favor that He grants it to whoever He will; God's favor is immense.***  
(62:4)

Delivering a khutbah is a privilege and a trust (*amanah*). It is a message on behalf of Allah (swt) and His Messenger (saw). Give it its proper due - it can be taken away from you at any time.

***Those who have been charged to obey the Torah, but do not do so, are like donkeys carrying books: how base such people are who disobey God's revelations! God does not guide people who do wrong.*** (62:5)

A warning about how preachers acted in the past. Scripture was dumped on people by their leaders, even though they did not have the capacity to carry it. The job of the leader is to inspire, motivate, and inculcate a thirst and desire for more within the people. It is not to merely deliver a message as a means of discharging a duty and then walking away.

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Some years ago, as part of the Qalam Institute Khateeb Workshop program, we sent out surveys to thousands of people. Some major Islamic centers even surveyed their congregations as well.

People were asked how many khutbahs they heard in the past month that had a positive impact on them or were even relevant to their daily life. The answer averaged out to 1.7. That means less than half of what people heard had any real effect.

Overwhelmingly, people shared the same type of feedback. They wanted to hear messages that were relevant to their struggles and inspired them to come closer to Allah (swt), As a community, we have fallen behind that ultimate (and seemingly simple) goal.

There was a heavy sentiment in the surveys of people feeling guilty for falling short, and coming to the masjid in hopes of finding a solution. Instead, they sat through messages that were incoherent, non-sequitur, irrelevant, or made them feel worse and further disconnected from Allah.

It seems that what people want is congruent with what the Qur'anic guidance. So why aren't we getting that?

There are a lot of ways to answer this question, but there is one trend, in particular, I want to highlight: turning the khutbah into a social media platform.

Let me explain.

The Friday khutbah is the one time a week where hundreds or thousands of people are sitting with rapt attention at any given masjid in the country. This is an opportunity to help people with their spirituality.

It's also seen by some as an opportunity to capitalize on that attention to further a particular cause (social justice, political activism, etc.). Instead of the primary focus being on spirituality, the primary focus shifts to something else like fundraising, raising awareness, or even turning the khutbah into a class.

This is not to say those things in and of themselves are wrong or cannot be done (although personally, I feel strongly that fundraising should never be done during a khutbah). The issue is one of priorities and serving the congregation.

When leadership is focused on the people and what they need, that is reflected in the message. When leadership is focused on their own projects and advocacy, that too is reflected in the message delivered.

The counter-argument is always making a case for some type of necessity. This is the only chance to reach so many people, so we have to fundraise, or we have to raise awareness for this issue, or we have to get people to do this or that.

As a regular khateeb, I'm often given requests. Things like, "please talk about selling liquor", "talk about teenagers and drugs", "give a khutbah on how to use the bathroom", "give a khutbah on registering to vote", "tell everyone in the khutbah to donate \$20", and the list goes on and on - every social cause, political situation, and so on.

Many khateebes are not qualified to speak on these issues. They aren't imams or scholars. They're often people with full-time jobs who are trying to serve the community by delivering a message of spiritual upliftment the best they can. To have someone like me get up and give a talk on Friday on something like mental health would not help raise awareness for mental health issues - it would be a huge disservice to the community because I'd be addressing the congregation from the minbar on something I have zero experience in.

The khutbah is not the only means of addressing the congregation. You can do a Friday night program, a Saturday workshop, send emails to your community, make videos, or any

of the other options technology has given us to reach people. To isolate the khutbah as the end all be all means that that you're worried people won't listen to you unless they're forced to. This indicates a messaging problem and a lack of patience. In extreme cases, it's borderline spam. Unfortunately, it all comes at the cost of the general spirituality of the audience.

There are, of course, exceptions. It often boils down to the right way and the wrong way of addressing something. I mentioned earlier how someone like me delivering khutbah on mental health could be counterproductive. On the other side of that is an example of how to properly address something of genuine importance for the community in the appropriate way. The khutbahs delivered by Sh. Yaser Birjas ([link](#)) and Omar Suleiman ([link](#)) on mental health and suicide are a good model for how this is done well. These are delivered by Imams who have experience with the issue and have the appropriate credentials and authority within their community to speak about it.

The khutbah is indeed a tremendous opportunity - an opportunity to help people come closer to Allah (swt) and follow the guidance of His Prophet (saw). Each Friday is a chance to sow a small seed of inspiration and awaken souls.

Let's get back to those basics and do our best to deliver messages in service of that mission.

Jabir informs, "When the Prophet delivered the khutbah, his eyes became red, his voice rose, and his anger increased as if giving a warning to the enemy." ... it should be an organized speech that the people can understand. It should not be a speech, which is over the heads of the people, nor should it be shallow or contain foul language as that would defeat its purpose. Its words should be chosen carefully to make them attractive and meaningful."

Giving his views on the subject, Ibn al-Qayyim says, The khutbah of the Prophet reinforced the fundamental articles of faith, like belief in Allah, the Exalted, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the meeting with Him. He would mention the paradise and the hellfire and what Allah, the Exalted, has promised to His devoted servants and the people who obey Him and what Allah has promised to His enemies and the miscreant. While listening to his khutbah, the hearts would be filled with belief in Allah, His oneness, and His majesty. His khutbahs were not like speeches of those who speak only of matters of concern of common folk, lamenting earthly life and frightening people of the approaching death. Such speeches cannot inspire faith in Allah or strengthen belief in His oneness or move

people by allusion to His mighty works in history, nor can they kindle in hearts intense love for Allah, making the listeners look forward eagerly to the time they will meet Him! The people who hear such speeches gain no benefit at all, except that they will die and that their wealth will be distributed and their bodies will be turned to dust. Woe to such poets, what sort of faith is fostered by such sermons, and what sort of tawhid do they teach or knowledge disseminate? If we study the khutbahs of the Prophet sallallahu alehi wasallam and his companions, we find them imbued with perspicuous guidance, tawhid, attributes of Allah, explaining the basic articles of the faith, inviting people to Allah, and drawing their attention to His providential care that makes Him so beloved to His slaves. His khutbahs referred to Allah's dealings with others in the past so as to warn his listeners against His wrath and exhort them to remember Him, thank Him and win His pleasure and love. Those who heard these khutbahs were inspired with the love of Allah and they looked forward eagerly to meeting their Lord. As time went by, the example of the Prophet was forgotten and other things prevailed. The main purpose of the khutbah was forgotten. The eloquent and nice words that moved the hearts became rare in speeches. The main thrust of the khutbah was neglected. The hearts were no longer touched and the basic purpose of the khutbah was lost.

Source: [Ibn Abee Omar](#)