



LINGUISTIC DIFFERENCES IN  
QUR'ĀNIC  
PROHIBITIONS

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# Linguistic Differences in Qur'ānic Prohibitions

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



Question: Why does Allāh سبحانه وتعالى mention اجتنبوا about alcohol and likewise about Tāghūt, but ولا تقربوا for Zinā? Are they synonymous or is one more severe than the other?

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This goes back to a discussion among the linguistic Ulamā' pertaining to the issue of whether there are synonymous terms in the Qur'ān. Some said there are some synonymous terms in the Qur'ān, meaning there are words in the Qur'ān that have the same meaning as other words. Therefore, terms like this, ولا تقربوا and اجتنبوا, they could have the same, exact, identical meaning. Some Ulamā' said — and this is pertaining to the Qur'ān specifically — they said there's always a fine line between the terms that appear to be synonymous. According to them, there's a delicate, distinguished, special meaning that differentiates words that appear to be synonymous in the Qur'ān. Ibn Taymiyyah رحمه الله تعالى seemed to agree with the other opinion, because he said synonymous terms in the Qur'ān are either rare or non-existent.

Here, he's asking about اجتنبوا and ولا تقربوا. Both اجتنبوا and لا تقربوا are synonymous and they mean to shun, to avoid, to not go near, but in the Qur'ān, there is possibly a delicate difference in the meaning or how they're used. اجتنبوا, some said, pertains to matters that are normally seen in front of you, but it's not intended — they're just in your way. For example, someone is heading to the Masjid. His destiny, his goal, is the Masjid, but there are speed bumps on the way that he needs to avoid, speed bumps that he needs to get away from. He intended the Masjid, not the speed bumps, but he needs to avoid those speed bumps. اجتنبوا usually comes in the context of what's moral or intangible. It's usually not in the context of being limited to a specific place. It's usually not restricted to time, nor does it have a reason. Let's take an example that will clear that up. He mentioned about Tāghūt,

وَلَقَدْ بَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَسُولًا أَنِ اعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَاجْتَنِبُوا الطَّاغُوتَ

*And We certainly sent into every nation a messenger, [saying], "Worship Allāh and avoid Tāghūt."<sup>1</sup>*

We sent among every nation a messenger to declare to them to worship Allāh *سبحانه وتعالى* and *اجتنبوا* At-Tāghūt — to avoid, to keep away from, to shun the Tāghūt. Based on what we said earlier, let's apply it here. Worshiping the Tāghūt is intangible, it's spiritual. It's not limited to a certain specific place, it's not restricted to a time, nor is there a reason in the verse. It's prohibited at all times and in all places.

*لا تقربوا* now, is not like the unintended speed bumps on the way to the Masjid in the previous example and the previous term *اجتنبوا*. It's generally referring to matters one purposely goes for. *ولا تقربوا* usually comes in the context of referring to material things, things with a place of existence or something similar in nature to that. With *ولا تقربوا*, you usually find that the prohibition on approaching it is somehow conditional upon a time or a reason. With matters where there's *ولا تقربوا* mentioned, if one violates it, there's usually an actual interaction between the human and the prohibited matter. And let's take an example on that to clear that up. Allāh *سبحانه وتعالى* said, *وَلَا تَقْرَبَا هَذِهِ الشَّجَرَةَ*, pertaining to Ādam عليه السلام.

وَلَا تَقْرَبَا هَذِهِ الشَّجَرَةَ فَتَكُونَا مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ

*do not approach this tree, lest you be among the wrongdoers.<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> [16:36]

<sup>2</sup> [7:19]

Don't go near the tree, otherwise you'll be among the Dhālimīn, the wrongdoers. So based on what we just said, the tree that's deterred from is something material. It's a place, a thing, a tree, an existing tree. In the verse, Allāh سبحانه و تعالی mentions the reason.

فَتَكُونَا مِنَ الظَّالِمِينَ

*lest you be among the wrongdoers.*

The interaction between the Human and the matter that's deterred from is eating from the tree. And there are actually, if I'm not mistaken, six verses with اجتنبوا and six verses with ولا تقربوا.

Keep in mind, both ولا تقربوا and اجتنبوا confirm that something is Harām, with an *additional* meaning. It's Harām with an *additional* meaning. لا تقربوا and اجتنبوا is more emphasized in prohibition than the mere word Harām. It's a complete, total distancing from that which is forbidden. It's not only Harām, you must stay away from something completely, and stay away from what leads and takes to it. If being close to what's forbidden is prohibited by the terms لا تقربوا and اجتنبوا, then the act itself is, of course, forbidden as well. With the more severe prohibitions, you'll see ولا تقربوا and اجتنبوا — avoid it, shun it, stay away from it, don't even go near it. اجتنبوا and ولا تقربوا have a meaning above the meaning of Harām, with the delicate, linguistic difference between each of those terms as we mentioned.