

10 Points for Excelling in Ramadan

by Shaykh Yaser Birjas

My dear brothers and sisters everywhere, *assalamu alaykum wa rahmatullah*, and Ramadan Mubarak to all of you. *Alhamdulillah*, I'm honored to be a part of this beautiful program.

My message is very simple and that is to remember that you will never be too ready for the month of Ramadan. No matter how much you try and how much you think you have done, Ramadan deserves much more, so always remember that you are never too ready for the month of Ramadan.

Alhamdulillah, Ramadan is an annual opportunity to review our goals in life. We adjust our schedules and know we will spend longer hours in the *masjid* and exhausted during the days. It is an exclusive opportunity for Muslims every year. As Muslims, we always feel that we are under achieving what we should be doing in Ramadan, and we all have the feeling that we could have done better and should have done more. At the end of the month, we regret so much of the time we spent wasted. There is always a chance for improvement every single Ramadan.

My talk this evening is on the art of excelling in Ramadan and how we cannot repeat the same mistakes. Don't expect me to give you a full program of waking up at such and such time and *suhur* and *fajr* in the *masjid*. Each person has different responsibilities and circumstances and you can write your own schedule.

I'm going to share with you ten points to help you reach excellence in Ramadan. *Insha'Allah* I will share with you principles on how to reach success in the month of Ramadan.

1. Have the hunger for success.

Imam Al-Bukhari was one day asked about the medicine that would help people memorize, and he said, "I have nothing except for the ardent desire." If you truly and really have the ardent and burning desire and hunger to succeed, then you will achieve it. The *ulema* said that whatever expectations you have, you will achieve at least 80%. Imam Al-Bukhari excelled in that field because he had the ardent desire and hunger for success. Ibn Abbas was a young man when the Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) passed away, but the amount of knowledge he collected made him the top of his field and he was an expert in the interpretation of the Qur'an. He was once asked, "How were you able to collect all this knowledge in such a short time?" He said, "I had an inquisitive tongue and the heart that comprehends." He had the ardent desire and didn't waste his time. Don't make failure an option in Ramadan. Don't give yourself an exit. Many people start making excuses, and once you give yourself an excuse to fail, you will lose success. Never give yourself that excuse and always have that hunger to succeed.

2. Set your goals. Make sure that these goals are very high. Fear Allah (*subhanahu wata'ala*). In order to help us achieve the path of success, he gave us the ultimate goal: to reach *Al-Firdaws Al-'Ala*. In many *ayat*, Allah says to race and rush. Allah is helping us set our goals and making our goal *Jannat Al-Firdaws Al-'Ala*. The Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) when he met the *ansar* at *bayat al-'aqabah*, The *muhajirin* asked him, "Ya Rasulallah, what do we expect out of this?" The Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) said, "Jannah." That is the ultimate goal and should be a very high and lofty goal.

When you start Ramadan, set your goals as high as you can. If you want to do *khatm'l-Qur'an*, set a higher goal of two, three, or five. If part of your goals is to achieve righteousness and *taqwa*, then you have to start making plans on how to do so by adding more good deeds to your schedule. If part of your goals is to pray *qiyam'l-layl* every night in the *masjid*, then commit yourself. If you fall short a little from achieving these lofty goals, *insha'Allah* they will still be higher than what you did last year.

3. Build confidence in the month of Ramadan. Some people come with high expectations for themselves such as finishing the Qur'an ten times and praying night prayer every night and not missing *takbirat* al-ihram. Build confidence that you can achieve these goals. Set a plan and strategy on how to achieve these goals and build confidence that you can do that. Abdullah ibn Amr ibn Al-'As was a young man at the time of the Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*). He used to finish the Qur'an every single night, and the Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) was surprised. He (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) came to him and told him it was a righteous and good deed, but he should recite the Qur'an in one month (this is besides Ramadan, by the way, and Ramadan is a special occasion when you can do more). He (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) said, "Try to finish the Qur'an once every month." He said, "Ya Rasulallah, I can achieve more than this." The Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) said, "Do it in one week." He said, "Ya Rasulallah, I can achieve more than this." The Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) said, "Do it in every three days." He said, "Ya Rasulallah, I can achieve more than this." The Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) said, "There is nothing better than this." If it is done more often than three nights, then it may be rushed and you will not benefit a lot. This *hadith* applies outside of Ramadan, and in Ramadan you can do more.

Abdullah ibn Abbas (*radhi Allahu 'anhu*) after the Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) passed away was still a teenager. He had an *ansari* companion he would seek knowledge with. His companion said, "This is going to be a far journey. Who is going to waste his time and come listen to someone like you?" Abdullah ibn Abbas said, "I left him and continued my journey seeking knowledge." Eventually, he became the great scholar we all know. His friend later saw hundreds of people at the *masjid* and said, "That young man was much smarter than me and knew that one day this would happen." Have the confidence that you will achieve your goals and have a strategy and plan.

4. Do what you love to do in Ramadan.
There are so many good deeds that you can do. Some people love to feed the poor and cook food and give to others. Others invite a lot of people to their house or take food to the *masjid*. Other people love to read the Qur'an a lot and dedicate more time. Other people love to do *salah* and *qiyam'l-layl*. Some people love spending more time in the *masjid* and others love to spend more time in seclusion. Some people push themselves so hard in what is not what they enjoy in acts of *ibaadat* and may force themselves to read the Qur'an more and are too exhausted to do *adkhaar* or *tarawih*, and this is not a smart plan. Do what you really love to do. Choose and select the good deeds you enjoy doing and increase them more and more. Make your plan around these deeds that you love and enjoy doing. The Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) recommended us to achieve that which is little but continuous. Many people love to start Ramadan with as many good deeds as they can, which may be too much. Take it easy and start with what you enjoy. As you build momentum, add more. The whole point is to be proactive, so start your plan and choose the good deeds you enjoy and start working on it.

5. Study the successful and learn from the best.
Experts in the field of success teach this to people. Why is our *ibaadah* less when it comes to studying from the experts and learning from the best and successful? What do we mean by this? The *ulema* say, "Stories at tales are like the gems of Paradise." When you hear a story, you enjoy it so much because you can relate to it. Allah (*subhanahu wata'ala*) says, "We sent you the best of stories..." At the end of the story of Yusuf, Allah said, "There is in the stories instructions for men of understanding." When you learn from the successful and from the best, it will encourage you and raise your morale. Achieving all of these great goals has been done by the people before you.

The *sahabah* were the best examples after the Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*). Check the stories of the successful in Ramadan – How did they succeed? What did they do? Read some of the biographies of the people and the great scholars and how they spent their time in Ramadan.

Remember, keep these stories with you throughout the month of Ramadan, and when you feel weaker and weaker, go back to the stories and remind yourself.

6. Be in the company of the successful ones.
The previous point was about people you learn about in history: the Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*), the *sahabah*. Many people say that this is theoretical. Look for people around you in your own community who can help you achieve these lofty goals. You will definitely find one or two people around you. You should go and look for those people. Remember that your companions in Ramadan can help you go higher in goals or can pull you down. Habits are contagious. Look for high achievers in the month of Ramadan. If you

always associate yourself with high achievers, *bi'idhnillah* you will go higher in your goals. The Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) said, "The example of the good and bad companion is the example of the one who sells perfume and the blacksmith. He may give you something good for free or you may buy something, but at least you will get a nice smell from him. The blacksmith will blow smoke and he may burn your clothes or at least you will smell something bad." The same is with those you associate with during Ramadan. Are you going to associate with those who will encourage you to watch tv or play cards? Or will you associate with those who will help you go higher? Look for those who are high achievers and associate with them throughout the month of Ramadan as much as you can.

7. Go all out and work hard

When you set your goals, don't just set them to achieve them at your convenience or when you have spare time. If you are serious about achieving these goals, make them a priority. Go all out to achieve these goals. Allah (*subhanahu wata'ala*) reminded the Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*): When he (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) would go out for *da'wah* he would invite as many as he could. No one can achieve more than the Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*), but when he came home, you would expect him to take rest, but the instruction that came from Allah was the opposite. Allah told him: "When you are done, put yourself in worship and *ibaadah* until you get tired." The Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) always maintained *qiyam'l-layl* every single night. With all of the work he did during the day, he did more at night to get to the next level.

People who go to the gym know that once they have achieved the ten reps, they have to add one more. They are excited that they have passed their regular achievement.

Put priorities during the day and night. The Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) is reminding us all the time how to move on from one level to the next. One time the Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) said, "There is one night that is *laylat'l-qadr* which is better than the worship of 1,000 months." The *sahabah* were worshipping in the hope of achieving this night. Then the Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) told them to look for it in the last ten nights. The *sahabah* became more focused. The Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) instructed them that the night is in the last ten nights of Ramadan. Some of them became tired and a little lazy, and to help them achieve more, the Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) told them it was in the odd number of the last ten nights. They would then focus on five nights. The Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) said it may be the 27th, 25th, or 23rd. The Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) sees the momentum going down and helped them become more focused. Go all out and work so hard. It happens only once a year. Only Allah knows if you will even survive today. Make this coming Ramadan the best Ramadan by being more focused and put so much effort in achieving better goals.

8. Be prepared and adaptable.

Be prepared to change your schedule. Many people are effective the first few days but then feel that they are losing it and then lose momentum completely and say they can't do it. Instead of slightly changing their schedule, they try to start over with a completely new schedule and then they quit. Expect yourself to change plans. It may not be a dramatic change, but you need to adapt. It is better for you than completely quitting the program over and over again.

The Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) started his days with plans and changed them. One time he entered the house of one of his wives and asked if there was any food, and if there wasn't, then he would say he would fast. He could have gone out and looked for food somewhere else, but he took the opportunity to fast.

Never put your programs back to back and make them so crowded. When there is an emergency, the whole program will be broken up. Expect yourself to do some changes, which will make it less stressful for you. If you start reading five *juz* every single night and then realize that they are too much and then decrease to three *juz* and then you are short two *juz*. As you try to make up and do seven, you start to lose hope. Expect yourself to adapt and change. Do something reasonable every single night like reading three *juz* and move on with your schedule. Don't simply cancel the good deeds you have started just because you think you are falling behind.

You may fall sick or have an emergency to travel or relatives may come to visit. Expect to change some of your plans.

9. Remind yourself of the virtue of what you are doing.

Allah (*subhanahu wata'ala*) says in the Qur'an: "Reminders benefit the believers." During the month of Ramadan, you are going to feel a little tired and exhausted. Go to someone who you think can help you remind yourself. Ask them for advice. Remind yourself by spending a few minutes each night in *dhikr* and *du'a*. Read about the virtues of fasting every now and then. For many people it becomes a cliché, but the reminder definitely benefits the believers. Keep *Riyadh Al-Saaliheen* handy and the *ahadith* about the virtues of Ramadan handy. Hopefully it will rejuvenate your spirit. If that doesn't work, then have someone else give you advice. If that doesn't help, attend a program in the *masjid*. Revisit your goals.

10. Never give up!

If the Shaytan wants anything from us, it is for us to give up on ourselves. The Shaytan whispers that you can't do it and that you aren't the person to achieve the good deeds and you give up on doing them. How many times have you vowed after Ramadan to wake up for *qiyam'l-layl* after Ramadan and you never achieve it? How many times have you wanted to fast Mondays and Thursdays after Ramadan? Allah (*subhanahu wata'ala*) says in *Surah Yusuf*: "Never give up

hope of Allah's Mercy. Truly no one despairs of Allah's Mercy except those who have no faith." Never cancel your plans in the month of Ramadan simply because you fell a little short or a little weak. Even until your last breath and last seconds in this world, you are required and asked to do something that is good. In the *Musnad* of Imam Ahmad, the Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) said in a *hadith* of Anas: "If the Day of Judgment is established and you have a plant in your hand, if you are able to put it in the earth before the Day of Judgment completely starts, then do it." With Allah (*subhanahu wata'ala*), you will benefit. Even if it is the last second of the month of Ramadan. What were you doing last year? People were getting ready to finish and prepare for Eid. It is one of the blessed moments. Focus on *du'a* and *dhikr* and give charity. Once Ramadan is over, what was multiplied in Ramadan will no longer be multiplied. Never give up even if you fall short and behind. Continue doing good deeds until the end of the month, even if it is the last night. Even if it is the last hour and you still haven't finished *khatm'l-Qur'an*, still continue reading. Falling short one *juz* is better than falling short 15 *juz*. Remember that you are dealing with Allah, and Allah is the One who rewards. With Allah, it is absolutely worth every effort that you are doing.

These are the ten points on how to excel in Ramadan. Recap: It is never too late to prepare for Ramadan. You will never be too ready for the month. Plant some principles in your mind and heart so that you have something to achieve. Have the hunger of success. Have the ardent desire to succeed in Ramadan. Do you have that or do you think that you are not a strong achiever? Expect to succeed more *insha'Allah* and have a hunger for success.

Set your goals very high. Allah has set your goals higher than you can imagine and is helping you set your goals high. Go and try to achieve these goals. Build confidence that you can achieve these goals. Don't beat yourself down. If you fail once, it does not mean you are a failure.

Do what you love in Ramadan. You may not be able to achieve anything, but start by achieving that which you like. If you like giving charity, then give more. If you like to read the *Qur'an* or spend more time in the *masjid*, do what you love the most.

Study the successful and learn from the best. Read the stories of the *sahabah* and the Prophet (*sal Allahu alayhi wa sallam*) and how much they achieved in Ramadan. Learn from them and learn their techniques.

Be in the company of the successful ones. Associate yourself with good company. Pick one or two people who are high achievers. Habits are contagious. If you associate yourself with low achievers, most likely that is what you will achieve.

Go all out and work so hard. It is once in perhaps your lifetime. It could be your last Ramadan. Only Allah knows. Make this opportunity like your first and last

opportunity. You will definitely do your best and put every single effort to make it successful, particularly in the last ten nights.

Be adaptable and expect changes in plans. As you try to achieve your plans, some emergencies may come up, but it doesn't mean you should quit. Adapt and move on based on the new change. Never cancel the schedule or program.

Remind yourself of the virtue of what you are doing. Keep handy the books on the virtues of fasting. Allah (*subhanahu wata'ala*) says in a *Hadith qudsi*: "All the good deeds of the son of Adam are for himself except for fasting which is exclusively for Me, and I shall reward for it." If you know that Allah is giving the reward, you know that it will be beyond your imagination.

Never ever give up, even if it is the last hour in the month of Ramadan. Make sure to use it wisely.

These are ten points on how you can excel in the month of Ramadan *insha'Allah*. I wish all of you a successful Ramadan this year and ask Allah (*subhanahu wata'ala*) to make this Ramadan the best Ramadan for all of you. I ask Allah to help us all to live to this Ramadan, to make the fasts our best fasts, and the *qiyam* our best *qiyam* and to help us become more generous in the month of Ramadan. I ask Allah (*subhanahu wata'ala*) to help us all achieve some of the *i'tikaf* during the last few nights of Ramadan. I ask Allah (*subhanahu wata'ala*) to help us be of those who will survive and live and worship Allah (*subhanahu wata'ala*) on *laylat'l-qadr*. I ask Allah to make us among those who will learn beneficial knowledge and benefit others.