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# WHAT IS THE RULING ON PRAYING ALONE BEHIND A CONGREGATIONAL ROW?<sup>1</sup>

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Scholarly discussion surrounding this matter is based on two points:

**Point one:** is the prayer of the one who prays alone behind a congregational row valid or not?

**Point two:** if we say it is not valid, what should he do if finds the row to be full?

As for the first point, then there is a scholarly disagreement. Some of them state that the prayer of the person who prays alone behind the row remains valid, irrespective of whether he does or does not have a legitimate excuse, but some of them stated that without a legitimate excuse it is disliked (مكروه). This was the juristic view of Mālik, ash-Shāfi'ee and Abu Haneefah. They reached this conclusion based on the validity of a woman praying alone behind the rows whereby they stated that the men and women have equal status with respect to legal rulings. They also used as evidence the fact that the Prophet (ﷺ) did not order Abu Bakrah to repeat his prayer when he bowed before entering the row for the congregational prayer.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this, they use as evidence the time when the Prophet (ﷺ) took Ibn Abbās from behind him and made him stand to the right of him during prayer. Thus, if it is permissible to pray alone for a part of the prayer, it should be

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Abu Ameenah AbdurRahmān Bennett.

<sup>2</sup> Reported by al-Bukhari 783.

permissible to stand alone for the entirety of it. Since this is because if it were an act that invalidates the prayer, whether it is done a little or a lot, it would make no difference, like in the case of standing in front of the Imam.

They respond to the ahādith which negate the prayer of the one who stands alone behind the row by stating that the intent was a negation of perfection (and not negation of existence or validity), similar to the Prophet's statement, **“There is no prayer when food has been served”**.<sup>3</sup>

Others among the scholars stated that the prayer of the one who stands alone behind the row is invalid. This is the view of Imam Ahmed which was widely held among his companions. There is also another report from him that agrees with the other three Imams. Those who subscribe to this view do so based on the following textual evidence and investigative evidence.

### **Textual evidence**

In a narration reported by Imam Ahmad (15862) on the authority of ‘Ali ibn Shaybān that the Prophet (ﷺ) saw a man praying [alone] behind the row. So when the Prophet (ﷺ) had finished, he said to him,

اسْتَقْبِلْ صَلَاتَكَ، لَا صَلَاةَ لِلَّذِي خَلْفَ الصَّفِّ

**Repeat your prayer. There is no prayer for the one who prays [alone] behind the row.**

This is a hasan (good) hadith which has corroborating narrations that infer its authenticity.

### **Investigative evidence**

As for the investigative evidence, then the prayer in congregation is an act of coming together which is achieved by uniting in one place and by being united in actions. The congregation is united in action because they are collectively following the Imam and the place they are united in is by means of their formation of rows. So if we held that it is permissible to pray separately to one another, where and when will there be this united, congregational body?

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<sup>3</sup> Reported by Muslim 560.

These scholars respond to the evidences presented by stating that the permissibility for a lone woman to stand behind the rows of men is proven by the Sunnah to be a ruling particular to women, for example the hadith of Anas wherein he said, **“The Orphan and I stood behind him (ﷺ) and the old woman stood behind us”**.<sup>4</sup> And this is because it was not befitting for her to stand beside the men. As for the hadith of Abu Bakrah then he only stood on his own for a brief period of the prayer and the Prophet (ﷺ) said to him, **“Do not do it again”**. As for the hadith of Ibn ‘Abbās then he did not stand behind the row. Rather, he was passing by and not standing still. As for their claim that the meaning intended for the negation of prayer is negation of perfection then their claim is rejected because the point of commencement [with regard to understanding the types of negation] is the negation of the existence of a thing. If that type of negation is not contextually viable then it is understood to mean the negation of the validity of a thing, and if that is not contextually viable then it is the negation of perfection of a thing.<sup>5</sup> The negation in the hadith **“There is no prayer for the one who stands alone...”** can refer to the negation of its validity and therefore it should be understood with that meaning.

As for them referencing the hadith **“There is no prayer when food has been served”** then it is invalid from two angles:

1. The causative factor for this (i.e., negation of prayer) is that the heart can be distracted by the presence of food, but being distracted does not require the prayer to become invalid, as proven by the hadith that speaks on devilish whispers when the shaytān approaches a praying person and says to him **“Remember such and such, remember such and such”** which he was not thinking about before, and this persists until he does not know how much he has prayed.<sup>6</sup>
2. The hadith **“There is no prayer for the one who stands alone behind the rows”** explicitly states that the negation that denotes invalidity since the Prophet (ﷺ) ordered him

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<sup>4</sup> Reported by Bukhari 234 and Muslim 658.

<sup>5</sup> [TN]: Perhaps it would be of benefit to provide an example for each one to conceptually drive home the types of negation. **Negation of existence** would be, for example, لا رجل في الدار (no man [exists] in the house). **Negation of validity** would be لا صلاة لمن لا وضوء له (there is no [valid] prayer for the one who has no ablution). **Negation of perfection** would be لا صلاة بحضرة طعام (there is no [performance of a perfect] prayer when food has been served).

<sup>6</sup> Reported by Bukhari 608 and Muslim 389.

to repeat his prayer and the reason he gave was that there is no prayer for the one who stands alone behind the rows.

In the hadith of Wābisah who reported that the Prophet (ﷺ) saw a man praying alone behind the rows and so he ordered him to repeat his prayer.<sup>7</sup> This hadith makes clear that the preponderant view is that it is obligatory to join the rows and that the prayer of one who stands alone behind the rows is invalid and that he must repeat his prayer because he abandoned the obligation of joining the rows. However, this obligation is no different from other obligations in that it is waived if there is no room to join or he is unable to join for some legally or physically justified reason, for Allah states,

فَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ ﴿١٦﴾

16. So fear Allah as much as you are able.

And the Prophet (ﷺ) said,

وَإِذَا أَمَرْتُكُمْ بِأَمْرٍ فَأَتُوا مِنْهُ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُمْ

And if I order you to do something, do of it as much as you can.<sup>8</sup>

So, wherever he can find a space, he must stand in the row. If he cannot find a place then the obligation no longer remains and likewise if there is no legal place for him, the obligation no longer remains. An example of the first scenario is when he finds the row full. In such a scenario, he can pray alone because there is no obligation with inability. An example of the second scenario is when a woman is with the men. She is to pray alone behind the rows, as established in the Sunnah. What has been established in the Sunnah can serve as a basis for analogous reasoning for a man standing alone behind the row when he cannot find space in the row because physical impracticality is like legal impracticality.

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<sup>7</sup> Reported by Abu Dāwood 682 and Tirmidhi 230.

<sup>8</sup> Reported by Bukhāri 7288.

**Scenario:** If a man comes to the prayer and he finds the row full, his choices are he can a) either move forward and stand next to the Imam, b) he can pull someone from the row and stand next to him, c) pray separately from the congregation or d) pray with the congregation behind the last row.

As for standing with the Imam then this results in the following:

1. Contradicting the Sunnah which appoints the Imam to stand on his own so as to make him distinct from the congregation through his advanced position and his leading-by-example actions. The occasion when the Prophet (ﷺ) positioned himself next to Abu Bakr does not serve as a rebuttal of this point because the one who came was the Imam (i.e., the Prophet) and he stood next to the one who was deputising in his place. Furthermore, Abu Bakr could not return to the row and it was in the interests of the congregation for him to remain next to the Prophet (ﷺ) so that he could convey his takbeers.
2. The person who makes his way to stand next to the Imam, because he found the rows full, will annoy the congregants in his attempts to pass them.
3. This will cause the person who comes after him to miss out on joining a row because if the person stood alone, the other person who comes after him would join him to form a row.

As for pulling someone back from the full row so that he can stand with him then this results in three objectionable things:

1. Creating a gap in the row, and the Prophet (ﷺ) ordered to keep the rows compact and tight and he (ﷺ) forbade us to leave any gaps in the row.<sup>9</sup>
2. Mistreatment of the person he pulled back from the row by removing him from a more merited place to a lesser one.
3. Disturbing him in his prayer. It might even lead him to having a dispute with him or being abusive towards him after the prayer.

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<sup>9</sup> Abu Dāwood 666 which was authenticated by Shaykh al-Albāni in *as-Sahēehah*.

This is not disputed by a narration from the Prophet (ﷺ) which states he said to the person he saw praying alone behind the rows, **“Why did you not join the rows or pull someone back [to join you]?”**<sup>10</sup> For indeed, this is a weak hadith which cannot be used as evidence.

As for leaving the congregation completely and praying by himself then this results in forsaking the obligation of praying with the congregation when one is able to, and this is sinful.

As for praying with the congregation behind the last row then this is carrying out one’s duty to its achievable extent. The one who prays with the congregation is obliged to carry out two things:

1. To pray with the congregation.
2. To stand in the rows along with the rest of the congregation. If one of these two is not possible then he must do the other.

If it is said that the words of the Prophet (ﷺ) **“There is no prayer for the one who stands alone behind the rows”** are general and that they provide no detail between the row being complete or incomplete then we reply by saying that this suggests that the prayer of the person who prays alone is invalid due to him forsaking the obligation of joining the rows. However, if he is incapable of joining the row then the obligation is annulled. It is unimaginable that the Prophet (ﷺ) would invalidate his prayer for leaving off something he was unable to do.

Hadith with similar wording to this hadith are **“There is no prayer for the one who does not read the Foundation of the Qur’ān (i.e., al-Fātihah)”**.<sup>11</sup> And his statement, **“There is no prayer for the one who does not have wudhu”**<sup>12</sup>—provided that this is authentic. The person

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<sup>10</sup> Reported by at-Tabrāni in *al-Awsāt* (8/374). Al-Haythami graded this hadith as very weak.

<sup>11</sup> Reported by al-Bukhāri 756 and Muslim 394.

<sup>12</sup> Reported by Imam Ahmed 9137, Abu Dāwood (101) and Ibn Mājah (399).

who is not able to read al-Fātihah or perform wudhu must still pray without them and his prayer will still be valid. What he should do, however, is to recite a chapter from the Qur'an that is as much as al-Fātihah or if he knows nothing of the Qur'an, he should remember Allah and he should perform *tayyamum* (dry wudhu) if for some reason he cannot perform wudhu.

In closing, we say that joining the rows is an obligation. If a person comes and finds the row full then he should pray with the congregation behind the last row—he should not advance to the front and stand beside the Imam and he should not pull someone back from the row so that he can stand beside him, and he should not forsake the congregation to pray by himself. The permissibility of praying in congregation behind the last row alone is the preferred view of Shaykh al-Islam ibn Taymiyyah, our Shaykh AbdurRahmān Sa'di and some scholars are of the opinion that it is permissible in all cases.