333882 - Ruling on praying with gaps in the rows for fear of catching coronavirus (Covid-19)

the question

What is the ruling on spacing between worshippers in congregational prayers because of the coronavirus epidemic?

Summary of answer

What appears to be the case is that it is permissible to offer prayers in congregation in the mosques with gaps between worshippers in the row for fear of spreading contagion and sickness, and that is better than closing the mosques. Not forming tight rows in this case is for a valid reason, and there are similar cases in Islamic teachings with regard to the obligatory parts, conditions and essential parts of the prayer that may be waived when there is a reason to do so, even when they are more important than the issue under discussion here. But it may be noted that this applies in the case when there is no instruction from the appropriate authorities to refrain from praying in congregation in the mosque and to close the mosques temporarily until the pandemic is over, as has happened in many Muslim countries during this coronavirus [Covid-19] pandemic. In that case, it is obligatory to comply with these instructions until the pandemic is over and people are told to resume normal life, in accordance with what is in the public interest.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Firstly:

The instruction in the Sunnah is to perform the prayer with the rows tight and close together, to fill the gaps, and to complete the first row, then the next and the next.

Ahmad (12352), Abu Dawood (671) and an-Nasaa'i (818) narrated from Anas that the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "Complete the first row, then the next, and if there is to be any shortcoming, let it be in the last row."

The version narrated by Abu Dawood says: "Complete the front row, then the next, and if there is to be any shortcoming, let it be in the last row."

Classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh Abi Dawood.

It was narrated by Ahmad (5724) and Abu Dawood (666) from 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar that the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "Straighten your rows, make your shoulders level, fill the gaps, be gentle in the hands of your brothers, and do not leave any space for the Shaytaan. Whoever completes a row, Allah will grant him His mercy, and whoever makes a gap in a row, Allah will cut him off (from His mercy)." This hadith was classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh Abi Dawood.

Abu Dawood (667) and an-Nasaa'i (815) narrated from Anas (may Allah be pleased with him) that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "Form tight rows and make them close together, and make your necks in line with one another." Classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh Abi Dawood.

What is meant by forming tight rows is:

As-Sindi (may Allah have mercy on him) said: The words "Form tight rows" refer to standing close to one another in straight rows. "Make them close together" means: make the space between rows small, so that the rows are close to one another. End quote.

Ibn al-Mundhir (may Allah have mercy on him) said: 'Ali narrated that Abu 'Ubayd said: al-Kisaa'i said: Forming tight rows (at-taraass) means that the people stand very close to one another, so that there are no gaps between them. One example of a word from the same root may be seen in the verse in which Allah, may He be glorified and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): "as though they are a [single] structure joined firmly [bunyaan marsoos]" [as-Saff 61:4].

End quote from al-Awsat by Ibn al-Mundhir (4/19-20).

An-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said: What is meant by straightening the rows is completing the first row, then the next, filling the gaps, and standing in line with one another, so that no person's chest sticks out in relation to the one next to him. The second row should not be started until the first row is complete, and no one should stand in a row [by himself] until the row in front of it is complete.

End quote from al-Majmoo' by an-Nawawi (4/123).

Shaykh Ibn 'Uthaymeen said: Straightening the row means standing in a straight line, so that no one is ahead of anyone else. But is what matters the front of the feet?

Answer: What matters is the shoulders at the top of the body, and the heels at the bottom of the body…

Moreover, the straightening of the rows concerning which there is a warning against not doing it refers to straightening the row by being next to and in line with others…

There is another meaning of taswiyah as-saff (translated here as straightening the row) which is perfection or making the row perfect; this is like when Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): "And when he attained his full strength and was [mentally] mature [astawa]" [al-Qasas 28:14], that is, he attained perfection. If we refer to straightening the row in the sense of making it perfect, that is not limited to the worshippers being in a straight line only; rather it includes a number of things:

1. Being in a straight line, which according to the correct view is obligatory, as mentioned above.
2. Forming tight rows. This is part of making the rows perfect. The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) used to enjoin that, and recommend his ummah to make their rows like the rows of the angels before their Lord, as they form tight rows and complete the first row, then the next. But what is meant by forming tight rows is not leaving gaps for the devils; it

does not mean jostling one another and pushing and shoving, because there is a difference between forming tight rows and jostling one another…

End quote from ash-Sharh al-Mumti‘ (3/10).

Secondly:

An-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said: Our companions and others are agreed that it is mustahabb (recommended) and encouraged to be in the first row. There are many hadiths in as-Saheeh which speak of that. It is also recommended to be on the right of the imam, to fill gaps in the rows, to complete the first row, then the next, until the last row, and not to start a new row until the row in front of it is complete.

End quote from al-Majmoo‘ (4/301).

In fact, the apparent meaning of the command to straighten the rows and the Prophet’s emphatic enjoining to do that indicates that it is obligatory, as is the apparent meaning of the words of Imam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) when he said:

Prayer in congregation (jamaa‘ah) is so called because the Muslims come together (ijtimaa‘) in time and place to do this action. … In fact they are enjoined to form rows, and in fact the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) instructed them to straighten the rows, with everyone standing in a straight line, to form tight rows, to fill gaps, and to complete the first row, then the next, by way of striving to make their gathering in the best manner possible. Were it not that forming straight rows is obligatory, it would be permissible for people to stand behind one another, and so on. This is something that is common knowledge, that that is not how the Muslims pray. If that were something permissible, the Muslims would have done it at least once…. According to the teachings of Islam, it is obligatory to form rows.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (23/394).

This is the view that was favoured by Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) when he said:

Hence the correct view is that it is obligatory to straighten the row, and that if the congregation does not straighten the rows, then they are sinning. This is the apparent meaning of the words of Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him). But if they do not comply and do not make their rows straight, does the prayer become invalid because they fail to do something that is obligatory?

Answer: there is that possibility. It may be said that the prayer is invalidated because they failed to do something that is obligatory [waajib], but the possibility that their prayer is not invalidated, although they are still sinning, is more likely, because straightening the row is obligatory for the prayer but it is not obligatory in the prayer. In other words, it is not part of performing the prayer. What is obligatory [waajib] for the prayer leads to the person sinning if he omits it, but his prayer is not rendered invalid thereby. One example is the adhaan (call to prayer): it is obligatory for the prayer, but the prayer is not rendered invalid if it is omitted.

End quote from ash-Sharh al-Mumti‘ (3/10).

Thirdly:

With regard to the validity of the prayer, it is valid, even according to the Hanbalis who regard as invalid the prayer of one who prays on his own in the last row.

It says in Mataalib Ooli an-Nuha Sharh Ghaayat al-Muntaha (1/695):

The prayer is not invalidated if there is a gap in the row, regardless of where the row is, whether it is behind the imam or to his right, unless the row is to his left – that is, to the left of the imam – if the one who is standing by himself is standing at a distance of three men. In that case, his prayer is rendered invalid. This was stated by Ibn Haamid, and he stated that it is the correct view in ar-Ri‘aayah al-Kubra. … That also applies to one who drifts away from the row, even though he is in line with it, and the distance between him and it is the same, that is the distance of three men between him and others; his prayer is rendered invalid.

This is not quite sound, because as we noted above, there is nothing wrong with interrupting the

row behind the imam or to his right. That applies whether there is one person or a group of people. End quote.

Al-‘Allaamah ‘Uthmaan an-Najdi said, in his commentary on Sharh al-Muntaha (1/318):

With regard to interrupting the row by leaving a gap, sometimes the gap may be the size of three men or more, and sometimes it may be less than that. The one who leaves a gap may sometimes be one person, or sometimes there may be several people. With regard to this matter, there are twelve scenarios, ten of which are valid, and in two of which the prayer of the one who leaves the gap is rendered invalid. These two scenarios are: when the gap is in a row that is to the left of the imam and the gap is the size of three men or more. In this case, the prayer of the one who leaves the gap is rendered invalid, whether that is one person or more. The author referred to all of these scenarios.

See: Sharh al-Muntaha (1/283); Kashshaaf al-Qinaa‘ (1/488).

The two scenarios in which the prayer is rendered invalid, according to the Hanbalis, are:

1. When the members of the congregation are standing to the left of the imam, and their row has a gap the size of three men or more, and the one who left a gap is just one person.
2. When the members of the congregation are standing to the left of the imam, and their row has the size of three men or more, and those who left the gap in the row are more than one person.

But if they are standing behind the imam or to his right and there is a gap, even if it is the size of three men or more, then it does not render their prayer invalid. They did not regard that is coming under the heading of standing on one’s own behind the row, because there are others standing in the same row as the worshipper, even if they are at a distance. This is contrary to the view of al-‘Allaamah Mur‘i in al-Ghaayah, which was refuted by ar-Ruhaybaani in al-Mataalib, as noted above.

As for the majority of scholars, they regard the prayer of one who is on his own behind the row as being valid, even though this is disliked (makrooh), if there is no excuse for that, so it is more

appropriate that his prayer should be valid if he stands in the row but leaves a gap.

In al-Mawsoo'ah al-Fiqhiyyah (23/183) it says: The basic principle with regard to prayer in congregation is that those who are praying behind the imam should form tight rows, as explained above. Hence it is makrooh (disliked) for one person to pray on his own behind the rows with no excuse, and his prayer is valid although it is makrooh. It is not regarded as makrooh if he has an excuse, according to what will be explained below.

This is according to the majority of fuqaha' – the Hanafis, Maalikis and Shaafa'is. The basis for that is the report narrated by al-Bukhaari from Abu Bakrah, according to which he came to the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) when he was bowing, so he bowed before he reached the row. He mentioned that to the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and he said: "May Allah increase you in keenness; Do not do it again."

The fuqaha' said: From this it may be understood that it is not required to repeat the prayer, and that the instruction that was mentioned in the hadith of Waabisah ibn Ma'bad – which was narrated by at-Tirmidhi and says that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) saw a man who was praying behind the row, so he instructed him to repeat the prayer – was only by way of recommendation, so as to reconcile between the two reports.

According to the Hanbalis, the prayer of one who prays an entire rak'ah on his own behind the row, with no excuse, is rendered invalid, because of the hadith of Waabisah ibn Ma'bad, according to which the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) saw a man praying on his own behind the row, so he instructed him to repeat his prayer.

It was narrated from 'Ali ibn Shaybaan that the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) led them in prayer, then he finished. There was a man who prayed on his own behind the row, so the Prophet of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) noticed him when he finished, and said: "Repeat your prayer, for there is no prayer for the one who stands behind the row [on his own]." [Narrated by Ibn Maajah] With regard to the hadith of Abu Bakrah, the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) told him: "Do not do that again." This prohibition implies that the

prayer was invalid, but he could be excused for what he had done because he was unaware of the prohibition, and not knowing has an impact in that the action may be overlooked and forgiven. End quote.

Fourthly:

According to the view that the prayer of one who prays on his own behind the row is invalid, is the prayer valid for one who did not find someone to stand with him in the row? Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

If someone prays behind the row on his own, because the row in front of him is full, there is no blame on him and his prayer is valid, and he will be rewarded because Allah, may He be blessed and exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): “So keep your duty to Allah and fear Him as much as you can” [at-Taghaabun 64:16]. But if the row was not complete, then he must repeat his prayer, because the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “…for there is no prayer for the one who stands behind the row [on his own].” Moreover, the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) saw a man praying behind the row on his own, so he instructed him to repeat the prayer. What we have stated here is the most likely view, that the prayer of one who prays on his own behind the row is valid, if the row in front of him was full.

End quote from Fataawa Noor ‘ala ad-Darb by al-‘Uthaymeen (8/2).

And he (may Allah have mercy on him) said: The correct view is that prayer offered by a person on his own behind the row is not valid, unless it was not possible for him to stand in the row, as the row was full, so he prays on his own behind the row, following the imam. In that case, he is excused, for nothing is to be regarded as obligatory when one is not able to do it, as the scholars (may Allah have mercy on them) said. Moreover, the Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) made a woman stand behind the row, away from the men, for a legitimate reason according to Islamic teachings, which is that she cannot stand with the men. If there is a physical reason (for not standing in the row), then the obligation to stand in the row is waived.

End quote from Majmoo‘ Fataawa wa Rasaa’il al-‘Uthaymeen (15/193).

Imam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The issue of a woman (not standing in the same row as the men) indicates two things. It indicates that if there is no one to stand with a person behind the row, and it is not possible for him to insert himself in the row, he may pray standing on his own (behind the row) because he has no other choice. This is by way of analogy, because obligatory acts may be waived when there is a valid reason for not doing them. The instruction that he should stand in line with others is one of the obligatory parts of the prayer, but if it is not possible, then it is waived because there is a reason, as in the case of other obligatory parts of the prayer which may be waived if there is a reason. For example, the fear prayer [and the way in which it is performed], for the purpose of maintaining the prayer in congregation. That may also be applied to the case when it is not possible to pray with the congregation unless one stands ahead of the imam, in which case he may do that, because there is a reason for it. This is the view of a number of scholars, and it is one of two views in the madhhab of Ahmad, although those who follow him do not regard it is permissible to stand ahead of the imam if it is possible to avoid doing that. To sum up, standing in the row is not more obligatory than other issues (in the prayer). As other matters may be waived if there is a reason to do so when praying in congregation, it is more appropriate that this [standing in the row] should be waived. One of the general principles [in Islam] is that what one is unable to do of Islamic teachings is no longer obligatory, and that what one is compelled to do, without sinful intent, is not prohibited. For Allah does not make obligatory on a person that which he is not able to do, and He does not forbid to a person that which he is compelled to do.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (20/559).

And he (may Allah have mercy on him) said: Similar to that is the case where someone cannot find anywhere to stand except behind the row [on his own], which is an issue concerning which there is disagreement between those who regard as invalid the prayer of one who stands on his own [behind the row] and the more correct view, which is that his prayer is still valid in this situation, because all the obligatory parts of the prayer may be waived when one is unable to do them. Another such example is regarding as valid the prayer of one who stands ahead of the imam for a

reason, as suggested by a group of scholars, and it is one of the views in the madhhab of Ahmad.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (23/396).

Therefore the correct view is that there is no blame on the one who prays behind the row on his own because the row is full, and his prayer is valid.

Fifthly:

What appears to be the case is that prayer in congregation is valid even though there are gaps between the worshippers, if that is something that will help to protect them from contagion and limit the transmission and spread of the epidemic, by Allah’s leave. But with regard to the view of the majority of scholars, who say that filling the gaps is recommended but not obligatory, the matter is clear.

However, according to the view that filling the gaps is obligatory, the prayer is still valid and the ruling is not different. That is for several reasons:

1.

Forming tight rows is obligatory, according to Imam Ibn Taymiyah, and the prayer is not valid without it. Nevertheless, he regarded the prayer of one who stands on his own behind the row as valid, if there is no space in the row, and he regarded this as better than not joining the congregation at all. Our issue may be discussed by analogy with this view; in fact that ruling is more appropriate in our case.

Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

If there is no one with whom he can stand in a row, and he does not pull someone back to pray next to him, then he may pray on his own behind the row, and not forsake the congregation. This is like the case of the woman who does not find another woman to stand with her; she should stand on her own behind the row, according to the consensus of leading scholars. That is because the instruction to stand in rows only applies when doing so is possible, not when it is not possible

to stand in a row with others.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (23/406).

2.

It may be compared to all the other obligatory parts, conditions and essential parts of the prayer, which may be waived when it is not possible to do them, such as purification, facing towards the qiblah, covering the ‘awrah, and so on. All of these things are more obligatory than forming tight rows. Imam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

If standing, reciting Qur’an, bowing properly, prostrating properly, purifying oneself with water and other matters may all be waived when one is not able to do them, then the same applies to standing in rows and not standing ahead of the imam. That also applies to other issues having to do with forming rows, such as the issue of one who prays and cannot see the imam or the row immediately behind the imam, but is able to hear the takbeer and so on.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (23/396).

3.

All issues having to do with forming rows are waived when it is not possible to do that, as Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah explained in the text quoted above. One of the issues having to do with forming rows is forming tight rows; in fact that is less serious than standing on one’s own behind the row, because with regard to the latter, there are two hadiths which state that the prayer is rendered invalid in that case, in contrast to the former, concerning which there is nothing except an instruction only. Hence Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen favoured the view that the prayer is valid even if there are gaps between the worshippers – although he favoured the view that it is obligatory to make the rows tight – and the prayer is rendered invalid if one prays on his own behind the row. His words are quoted above. This indicates that not forming tight rows is less serious than praying on one’s own behind the row.

4.

The issue may be compared to the issue of it being permissible to pray when standing ahead of the imam. This is the view favoured by Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah. So all those who stood ahead of the imam will have stood in a place where it is not permissible to stand when there is the option of not doing that. He (may Allah have mercy on him) said: The point here is that the congregation acts according to what is possible. So if the worshipper cannot follow the imam except by standing ahead of him, the most that can be said is that he did not stand (where he should have) for the purpose of catching up with the congregation. This is less serious than other matters.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (23/406).

5.

The scholars stated that if the worshipper is sick, if he prays with the congregation he should pray sitting, and if he prays on his own at home, he should pray standing. The Hanbalis gave him the choice, because in either case he will be omitting something obligatory.

The second view is that he should pray at home, because the obligation of standing [in the prayer] is more important.

The third view is that to which Shaykh Ibn ‘Uthaymeen was inclined, which is that he must attend the prayer in congregation in the mosque, and pray sitting if he is not able to stand.

See: ash-Sharh al-Mumti‘ ‘ala Zaad al-Mustaqni‘ (4/339).

Our issue is like that, if not more so, because we are not speaking about just one worshipper, for the prayer in the mosque will not be affected (by his absence). Rather we are talking about the closure of the mosques and their not being used. Undoubtedly prayer in the mosque in which there is something lacking due to a valid excuse is better than not praying in congregation at all.

6.

The Sunnah is to put two prayers together when there is rain. The reason for that is to avoid

suspension of prayers in congregation in the mosque, because it is possible for each man to pray in congregation at home with his family, but establishing the congregational prayer in the mosque is something very important in Islamic teachings. Therefore putting the prayers together so that they may both be offered in the mosque is better than offering the prayers on time whilst leaving the mosques empty and closed.

7.

It is possible to compare this issue with the wording of Shaykh al-Islam, because he regarded it as more likely that standing in rows is more important than filling gaps, as it says in al-Ikhtiyaaraat:

If two people come to pray, and there is one gap in the row, which is better: for them to stand together in a separate row, or for one of them to fill the gap and the other to stand on his own? Abu'l-'Abbaas regarded it as better for them to stand together in one row and leave a gap, because filling the gap is recommended, whereas standing in a row with someone else is obligatory.

Al-Fataawa al-Kubra by Ibn Taymiyah (5/348).

Ibn Taymiyah regarded it as permissible to leave gaps for the purpose of forming a row, even though he regarded it as permissible for someone to pray on his own behind the row when there is a reason for that. This indicates that leaving a gap is less serious, in his view. Our issue is akin to leaving a gap, so it is permissible when there is a need or a reason for doing it.

Conclusion:

What appears to be the case is that it is permissible to offer prayers in congregation in the mosques with gaps between worshippers in the rows for fear of spreading contagion and sickness, and that is better than closing the mosques. Not forming tight rows in this case is for a valid reason, and there are similar cases in Islamic teachings with regard to the obligatory parts, conditions and essential parts of the prayer that may be waived when there is a reason to do so, even when they are more important than the issue under discussion here.

Shaykh ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan al-Barraak (may Allah preserve him) was asked:

When we pray in congregation at home, we leave gaps between the rows for fear of spreading contagion and coronavirus among ourselves. Is that permissible?

He replied:

, and blessings and peace of Allah be upon our Prophet Muhammad. To proceed:

It is permissible to leave gaps between the rows when offering prayers in congregation if there is a reason for that, because making the rows close together is not obligatory. In fact, what is required is to make the rows straight and tight. But if there is the fear that making them tight may lead to the spread of disease in this case, then there is nothing wrong with not doing that, in sha Allah. And Allah knows best.

[Dictated by ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan ibn Naasir al-Barraak, 21 Sha‘ban 1441 AH].

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But it may be noted that this applies in the case when there is no instruction from the health authorities to refrain from praying in congregation in the mosque and to close the mosques temporarily until the pandemic is over, as has happened in many Muslim countries during this coronavirus [Covid-19] pandemic. In that case, it is obligatory to comply with these instructions until the pandemic is over and people are told to resume normal life, in accordance with what is in the public interest.

And Allah knows best.