

The Distance Of The Feet In Salah (Prayer)

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Many Ahadeeth have been narrated about the straightening of the rows and they include a number of different expressions to emphasise this point, such as the following narrations:

1) Sayyiduna Anas (ra) narrates that the Prophet (saw) said, '**Pull your rows together, keep them close and keep your necks in line, for by He in Whose hands rests the soul of Muhammad, indeed I see the shayateen entering the gaps in the row as though they are small sheep.**' [1]

2) Sayyiduna Nu'maan ibn Basheer (ra) says, '**The Prophet (saw) turned his face to the people and said thrice, "Straighten your rows." (He then said), "By Allah, you will straighten your rows or Allah will make your hearts differ."**' (Sayyiduna Nu'maan ibn Basheer (ra) continues), '**I saw each man join his shoulder with the shoulder of the person next to him, his knee with his knee, and his ankle with his ankle.**' [2]

This is one of the hadiths put forward as evidence by those who assert that each person's feet should be joined with the next person's during congregational prayer. Some of them are overly particular about this, so much so that if someone standing next to them happens to draw in their feet, these people would adjust their legs even further just to maintain foot contact with their neighbour. They continuously criticize those who do not leave a wide gap between their feet, as though the sunnah method is only what they claim.

In vain, however, are their attempts to use the above hadith and other similar hadiths to establish that joining the feet in salat is necessary [wajib]. This is true for a number of simple reasons:

(1) The words which actually describe the joining of the feet are not the words of the Messenger of Allah (saw), but are rather the words of the narrator. Hence, this portion of the hadith is not a direct statement from the Messenger (saw) himself [marfu'], but rather the narrator's description of the reaction of the Companions to the Messenger's (saw) warning. Hence, it becomes quite clear that the Messenger (saw) did not command the joining of the feet together.

(2) The hadith of Nu'man ibn Basheer (ra) merely tells us about the behaviour of the Companions before the prayer began. In other words, the observed behaviour of the Companions was to join their ankles, knees, and shoulders together prior to the prayer's commencement. Nowhere in the hadith does it indicate that this posture was maintained throughout the prayer.

(3) If, for the sake of argument, we were to accept that the joining of the feet was maintained throughout the prayer, a number of questions arise. One such question is whether the feet should be joined together in all postures of the prayer or only during the standing posture (qiyam). If the answer is that it is required only during the standing posture, then the next questions are: 'What is the evidence for that?' and 'Why is this arrangement confined to the standing posture only and not

required in any other posture?' If the answer is that it is necessary in all postures of prayer, then the question is: 'How will people in each row go about joining their feet and shoulders together while in prostration or in the sitting posture?' Clearly it would be quite impossible to achieve this.

Moreover, if the counter-argument is that it is only necessary to have the feet together while in qiyam (standing) because of its difficulty in the other postures of prayer, then the reply is that it is also very difficult for a row of people to ensure that this joining arrangement is maintained between them during the standing posture as well.

(4) Based on the above mentioned hadith, if it is deemed necessary to join the shoulders and feet together, then why have the knees been excluded from this ruling? In the above narration, the Companions joined their knees together as well. It should therefore follow that the joining of the knees also be treated as an obligatory act throughout the prayer. However, one must be warned that standing even for a short while with one's knees joined to the next person's knees can be quite painful. This is even impossible in some cases, when there is a significant size difference between two people standing besides one another.

(5) Another interpretation of the above hadith offered by some scholars is that the narrator Nu'man ibn Basheer (ra) only intended to show how the Companions attempted to form extremely straight rows at the instructions of the Messenger of Allah (saw), and not that they actually joined their feet, shoulders, and ankles together. It is for this reason that the title of this chapter in Sahih al-Bukhari, 'Chapter on the Joining of the Shoulders and Feet Together While Forming the Rows,' has been classified by Hafiz Ibn Hajar (ra) as an exaggeration. He writes in his commentary, Fath al-Bari, that: **'(Imam Bukhari's) reason for choosing this specific title to exaggerate (mubalagha) the importance of straightening the rows and filling gaps in between.'** [Fatha al-Bari 2:247]

It is deduced from this statement that the above-mentioned narration is not to be taken literally. Imam Shawkani, who is constantly referred to by those who prefer not to follow a school of thought in Islamic Jurisprudence, also does not take the hadith's literal interpretation. He writes in his Naylk al-Awtar: **'[This statement] means: place the parts of the body [shoulders, etc] in line with each other, so that the shoulder of each person performing prayer is in level with the shoulder of the next person. This way everyone's shoulders, knees, and feet will be in a single straight line.'** [Nayl al-Awtar 3:65]

In clear words, he indicates that the actual reason for joining the shoulders and other body parts, was to straighten the rows and not because the joining itself was an obligatory act.

(6) Anas (ra) has also stated in a narration of Ma'mar, which Ibn Hajar has recorded in his Fath al-Bari, that: **'If I were to attempt this [joining the shoulders and feet together] with anybody today, they would scurry away like restive mules.'** [Fath al-Bari 2:247]

It is apparent from Anas's (ra) statement that even the Companions did not continue this practise after the death of the Messenger of Allah (saw). If it had been a continuous action of the Messenger (saw) [sunnah mustamirra], the Companions would never have abandoned it, let alone speak of it in such a manner.

(7) Once it is established that the primary reason for the Companions joining their feet together was to achieve perfect order in their rows, it can be easily understood that this joining of the feet is not required any longer, since, in most of the masjids and places of worship today, the lines are well marked on the carpets, marble, and floor coverings. By standing together with their heels on the markings, the worshippers will automatically come together in perfectly straight rows. Hence, there is no need to be overly critical and go around ensuring that everyone's feet have been joined together.

3) Sayyiduna Anas ibn Malik (ra) reports that the Prophet (saw) said, '**Straighten your rows, for indeed I see you from behind my back.**' Sayyiduna Anas (ra) says, '**We would join our shoulders and feet with the shoulders and feet of the person next to us.**' [3]

Notes:

[1] Ahmad 13324, Abu Dawood 667 and Nasa'i 815

[2] Ahmad 17962, Abu Dawood 662, Ibn Kuzaimah 160, Ibn Hibban 2173 and Daraqutni 1080

[3] Bukhari 692

The Various Opinions

We will begin by stating some of the opinions of the Hanafi school on the issue of feet position in prayer. In all, there seems to be two dominant opinions found in the Hanafi texts. The first of these calls for a gap of four fingers to be left between the feet of a person when he is praying. This opinion is found in Imam ibn 'Abidin's authoritative commentary on 'Allama Haskafi's al-Durr al-Mukhtar, where it states: '**The gap to be left between a person's feet should be equal to that of four fingers of the hand, because this [amount] is very effective in creating [the posture of] submission and humility [sought in prayer].**' [Radd al-Muhtar 1:299]

Leaving a gap equal to four fingers has been described by the jurists (fuqaha) as being the superior method, as it sometimes proves quite uncomfortable to stand with legs spread wide apart for an extended period of time. This discomfort makes concentration difficult and often results in the loss of focus and devotion in the prayer.

The second method according to the Hanafi school can be understood from the following. In Ma'arif al-Sunan, a commentary of Sunan al-Tirmidhi by the late hadith scholar 'Allama Yusuf Binnori, **it is stated that there is no mention, among authentic hadith narrations, of a stipulated amount of space to be left between one's own feet during the prayer. For this reason, it could be concluded that the sunnah method of positioning the feet in prayer is whatever distance a person finds convenient and comfortable while praying.** [Ma'arif al-Sunan 2:298]

A hadith is reported in Sunan al-Nasa'i which states that: "**Abdullah ibn Mas'ud (ra) saw a person standing in prayer with his two feet together [i.e. touching each other] and judged it to be against the sunnah. He advised the person that if he had practised murawaha it would have been more preferable.**" [Sunan al-Nasa'i 1:142]

The Arabic word 'murawaha' usually means to stand on one foot and then the other, alternating

between them as one becomes tired. However, another meaning of 'murawaha is to leave a slight gap between the feet, and this seems to be the most probable meaning of this word in reference to the above narration, since the person had been standing with his feet together. If we take this latter meaning of the term 'murawaha', the hadith means that Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud (ra) instructed the person to maintain a small gap between his feet, since the sunnah was not to completely join the feet together (nor to keep them so far apart).

From the above, we learn of the flexibility of the Hanafi school on this issue. It would therefore be permitted for a person to stand with a gap between his feet equal to or greater than the width of four fingers.

In determining the opinion of the **Shafi's** on this issue, a careful study of their literature reveals that their most popular view is that a person should maintain a gap equal to one hand span between his feet [Nihayat al-Muhtaj 1:347]. However, it is recommended in al-Anwar, another text on Shafi'i fiqh, that the gap should only be four fingers - as is one view of the Hanafis. Furthermore, the great Shafi'i scholar Imam Nawawi concludes: **'It is undesirable [makruh] to join the feet together; it is preferable [mustahab] to keep some distance between them.'** [Sharh al-Muhadhdhab 3:266]

In total, we have three opinions of the Shafi'i school: (1) a gap equivalent to one hand span; (2) a gap of four fingers; and (3) as much a gap as the person deems necessary. The first opinion is particular to the Shafi'i school, whereas the latter two opinions are common to both the Shafi'i and Hanafi schools.

One has probably noticed by now that not a single opinion mentions that a person's feet must be joined together with the feet of the adjacent person(s). If indeed this was the correct and sunnah way of standing in prayer, it would have undoubtedly been accepted as such.

Individual Prayer

A noteworthy point to mention now is that many of those who assert that the feet be joined together are normally observed widening their feet even during their individual prayers. In fact, on many occasions, they widen them beyond shoulder width. Even if they consider the joining of the feet in congregational prayers to be necessary, it does not mean they must also widen their feet beyond shoulder width. The reason for this is that if everybody stood shoulder to shoulder and joined their feet together, the gap between the two feet would only be as wide as the shoulders. It would be quite impossible to spread them any more and still maintain shoulder contact.

Another reason why one should not overspread his feet during individual prayer is that the above-mentioned hadiths only describe the Companions joining their feet while in congregation. Hence, these ahadeeth cannot be used as evidence for the widening of the feet during individual salat.

Conclusion

In the end, we can conclude, without fear of contradiction, that those who insist on joining the feet together have failed to comprehend the true meaning of the ahadeeth, and, as such, do not have any strong evidence to support their position. It is not possible to follow the Qur'an and Hadeeths by

always employing verbatim translations, which is the methodology of the Literalists (Zahiriyya), whose many views majority of scholars have not accepted. The grave consequences of following this type of methodology is quite apparent.

Indeed, it is important to come together during prayer, but this is normally achieved by joining the shoulders together (which has been ordered in ahadeeth) and standing with the heels on the lines. It is virtually impossible not to leave any gaps at all as some people insist. Is it too difficult to understand that when someone attempts to fill in the gap between his and the next person's feet, he opens a gap between his own feet?

Therefore, the Sunnah method would be to either leave a space of approximately four fingers between one's feet or any such gap through which one can achieve a comfortable and humble posture. During the congregational prayer, each person must ensure that he is close enough to the next person as to touch shoulders and that his feet are on the marked lines so that the whole congregation is ordered and comprised of straightened rows.