

## **When Right Goes Wrong     Acts 16:16-40**

### **Introduction**

Have you ever done something that you knew was the right thing to do only to have it blow up in your face?

I'm sure we've all experienced that phenomenon at one time or another

In fact, it happens so often that there is a common expression that says, **"No good deed goes unpunished"**

Just ask Tomas Lopez who was a lifeguard at Hallandale Beach down in Florida

While Mr. Lopez was on duty he noticed a man in distress so he rushed into the sea and rescued the man from drowning

Instead of being hailed as a hero, though, Mr. Lopez was fired from his job because it seems that the man was outside of the jurisdiction of the lifeguard in an area that was clearly marked as "swim at your own risk"

According to company policy the lifeguards were not supposed to render aid to anyone in that area and when six other lifeguards all stood up for Mr. Lopez and said they would have done the same thing, they were also fired

### **Sometimes doing the right thing can go very wrong**

That can happen in our Christian walk as well and as we will see today it happened to the apostle Paul

As we continue the mission that Jesus began while on the earth we should expect to be treated no better than he was

But while we accept that being Christ-followers requires us to do what we know to be right at all times we tend to expect that we will be rewarded when we do – or at the very least we trust that we won't be punished for doing right

But as we progress in our Christian walk we find that doing right isn't always pain free because there is often a price to pay for doing the right thing and right is often repaid with wrong

As we open our Bibles to look at **Acts 16:16-40** this morning we will see that Paul and Silas experience gross mistreatment at the hands of the Roman authorities in Philippi for doing what they knew to be the right thing and we will see how they respond to being treated wrongly and what we can learn from their example

### **Sometimes doing the right thing can go very wrong and what we do in those instances can be very powerful**

The first thing we learn is that:

## **I. Right Behavior May Result in Wrong Treatment**

Follow along in your Bible as I read **Acts 16:16-24**

*As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.*

*But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.*

Once again we notice that this is one of the "we" passages that informs us that Luke is present for these experiences

And Luke records that there was a girl who was possessed by an evil spirit that gave her the power of supernatural insight so that she could see the future

And we see that she was a slave in that she was being used by others for profit much the same as we would think of a young prostitute being turned out by a pimp – this unfortunate girl was doubly used by the spirit and her owners

Luke relates that as he and Paul and the others were one day going back presumably to the same "place of prayer" where they had met Lydia, this slave girl was following them and crying out "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation."

Luke further says that she kept it up "for many days" and that eventually, on this particular day, Paul had enough of it so he commanded the unclean spirit in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her - and that it immediately left her

### ***So, what was the problem?***

Aside from the obvious irritation that having someone following you around calling out like a herald everywhere you went would produce after a time, what was wrong with what the girl was doing?

After all, what she said was true –

Paul regularly referred to himself as a slave of Christ and they certainly were serving the Most High God and their message was the message of salvation

So why did Paul stop her from proclaiming the truth?

Whether on purpose or accidentally Paul was actually following the example of Jesus

Look with me at **Mark 1:34** –

And he [Jesus] healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons. **And he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.**

Let's also look at **Luke 4:33-35** –

And in the synagogue there was a man who had the spirit of an unclean demon, and he cried out with a loud voice, "Ha! What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God." **But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent and come out of him!"** And when the demon had thrown him down in their midst, he came out of him, having done him no harm.

**Jesus refused to permit the demons to testify about him in part simply because they were demons and even the truth spoken by a lying mouth becomes suspect**

### ***Confusion***

Paul also likely stopped her because her words were causing confusion in the people

The people of Philippi were pagans who worshipped a multitude of gods and they knew nothing of the true God of the Bible so they likely thought the girl was proclaiming Paul and the others were servants of Zeus or Isis or whatever god each individual considered to be supreme

And for the pagan audience the “way of salvation” was a means to well-being, health, and a release from the powers governing the fate of humankind and the material world

Actually, our English translations provide the definite article “the” which the Greek doesn’t have so the girl was really leaving it open for misinterpretation as she was crying out they proclaimed a way of salvation not the way

And that’s so common with Satan, the father of lies, as he tells just enough truth to make his lies believable

So Paul ordered the demon out of the girl on the authority of Jesus Christ and the demon immediately fled

### ***The consequence***

Of course that ended the girl’s use as a cash machine for her owners and they were less than thrilled

Their interest in the girl was only in profiting from her and they cared not a bit for her well-being

So they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them before the Roman authorities where they levied three charges against the two men

**First**, they said that they were **Jews** – which is probably why only Paul and Silas were brought before the authorities – remember that Luke was a full Gentile and Timothy was half-Gentile

This was no doubt brought out to play upon the anti-Semitic tendencies that existed in Rome at that time

Claudius had just recently expelled all the Jews from Rome and the ill will toward the Jews likely extended to Philippi as well since it was considered to be Rome away from Rome or “Little Rome”

So the girl’s owners were quick to point out that these two were foreigners and not Roman citizens or even Greeks like the remainder of the population of Philippi

No, these were wandering Jews that were causing trouble

That was the **second** charge – **creating a disturbance**

Nothing was more feared by a Roman authority than a breach of the peace and rabble-rousers were typically dealt with swiftly and severely

**Third**, they accused the pair of **promoting a foreign religion** contrary to Roman convention

Rome was typically tolerant of most religions but they took a dim view of proselytization which while not exactly illegal would have caused the magistrates to take notice

### ***What was left unsaid***

Notice though what was left unsaid

They conveniently forgot to tell the magistrates the real reason why they were upset was that their means of income had been exorcised along with the unclean spirit

### ***Swift punishment***

Because the magistrates saw Paul and Silas as itinerate troublemakers they didn’t bother with any sort of investigation or, so it appears, any questioning at all of the charges

They simply ordered them to be stripped of their clothing and beaten with rods and then they were given over to the jailer with orders to be locked up

This would have been a severe beating and not some mild spanking

The skin on the backs of Paul and Silas would have been left split open and bleeding when they were handed over to the jailer's custody to be kept "safely" or "securely"

The jailer took this order seriously and he placed them in the innermost cell of the prison and fastened their feet in the stocks for good measure

These stocks would have been fashioned from wood with holes through which their feet would pass before being locked down forcing the two men to sit upright to avoid lying on their wounded backs

And so they were left to spend the night in great pain and in what had to be dark, dank, deplorable conditions

### **Sometimes doing the right thing can go very wrong**

Paul had clearly done the right thing in commanding the spirit to leave the slave girl

No one can dispute that she would be better off even if that was all that had happened

However, most commentators are convinced that the girl also became a Christ-follower as a result of the exorcism and I would like to believe that as well

Paul had clearly done the right thing in freeing the girl from her captors only to be publicly beaten and thrown in jail

### **How do you think you would react to the way things turned out for Paul and Silas?**

The motto of many is, "I don't get mad; I get even"

There's even a book on Amazon.com titled, "Don't Get Mad-Get Even: The Fine Art of Revengemanship"

And when treated wrongly, especially for doing right, our natural tendency is to lash out

But Jesus spoke to the issue of being persecuted for righteousness sake and showed it comes with a promise

Look with me at **Matthew 5:10-12** –

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Paul and Silas took Jesus' promise to heart and didn't waver, they didn't blame or question God about their treatment, they didn't get mad and curse or issue threats of revenge

And in their actions we see that –

## **II. Right Behavior in Spite of Wrong Treatment is a Powerful Witness**

Look with me at **verse 25** to see how Paul and Silas reacted to their ill treatment

About midnight Paul and Silas were **praying and singing hymns to God**, and the prisoners were listening to them,

Wow! They were praying and singing hymns to God

And I doubt that their prayers were prayers for deliverance or else they would have seen what happened next as the answer to their prayers and they would have taken the opportunity to escape

No, I believe their prayers were prayers of praise to God just as their hymns would have been

In spite of all they were enduring they were busy praising God through the night

And the other prisoners were listening to them as they did – what a testimony!

How many times do you think singing was heard within those cells?

I'm sure the walls were used to the sound of moaning and groaning and cursing but not joyous singing and praising prayer

Look with me at **verses 26-34** –

and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God.

The prisoners weren't the only ones who were listening because God also heard Paul and Silas and he responded in a mighty way

Philippi lay in an area that is prone to earthquakes but nothing like this

This was a powerful quake that threw open the doors and freed the bonds of the prisoners – all without destroying the jail

It was a targeted quake that served a specific purpose

Of course the earthquake also awakened the jailer who, upon seeing the open doors presumed that his prisoners had escaped

The jailer, quite possibly a retired Roman soldier, knew the penalty for losing the prisoners was death so to save himself the humiliation of an execution he drew his sword and prepared to plunge it into either his own throat or heart when Paul, sensing what he was about to do, called out and stayed his hand by letting him know all of the prisoners were still present

What an effect their singing and praying must have had on the other prisoners in order for them to be convinced to stay when they could have easily escaped – **what a powerful witness they provided to the Christian way of thinking**

So the jailer called for a light and rushed in before his legs gave out causing him to fall to his knees before Paul and Silas

### ***The jailer's question***

When he recovered himself he brought the two out of the cell and asked them a very profound question

He asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

It's hard to know just how much the jailer understood and exactly what he meant by his question

Certainly he had just had a profound experience and was undoubtedly in a great deal of emotional turmoil and still recovering from the fear how close he had come to losing his prisoners and his life

And he likely had either heard the slave girl's pronouncements firsthand or heard a report of what was announced by the slave girl

About how Paul and Silas had come to proclaim a way of salvation so his question seems logical even if he was only seeking peace of mind through being saved from his present turmoil

### ***Paul and Silas' answer***

But Paul and Silas took the opportunity to answer with how one can experience not just "salvation" in the sense of a temporal feeling of well-being but how one can experience eternal salvation

They told him that faith in the Lord Jesus whom they proclaimed was the way of salvation for all – he and his household could experience salvation

And then they proceeded to explain to him and all who were in his house just exactly what saving faith entails

This means that Paul and Silas took care to plainly talk about the reality of the gospel to this pagan jailer and his family in a way that they could understand so that they could believe and be saved

### ***The response***

The jailer and his household responded favorably and accepted Christ and were baptized straight away

Then the jailer immediately began serving as a Christ-follower by washing and tending to the wounds inflicted on Paul and Silas and he took them into his home as they broke bread together

And Luke shares that the joy of salvation now resided where fear and uncertainty had been just moments before

What a night it had been!

The jailer who had begun by demonstrating anything but compassion in his heart was redeemed and living a new life in Christ before the sun came up

And with the morning came the news that Paul and Silas were to be set free as we see in **verse 35**

### **III. You Have the Right to Exercise Your Rights – In the Right Way**

We aren't told what precipitated this change of heart in the magistrates

Perhaps they thought that a sound beating and being locked in the stocks overnight had taught Paul and Silas the necessary lesson and that releasing them and kicking them out of town would suffice in making certain they would be no more trouble

So, having received the word that Paul and Silas could be set free the jailer passed along what he no doubt thought would be welcome news only to have Paul throw cold water on that idea

And with his response Paul demonstrates that **believers have the right to exercise their rights but that it must be done in the right way**

Look with me at **verse 37** –

But Paul said to them, "They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and do they now throw us out secretly? No! Let them come themselves and take us out."

It was illegal for a Roman citizen to be beaten as Paul and Silas had been and had the magistrates done a proper investigation they could have avoided committing such an injustice

But there was no investigation, no trial, no cross-examination, not even a legal verdict of guilty before punishment was meted out

They had acted impulsively and ignorantly only to have Paul make their citizenship known after the fact as he demanded a public release commensurate with the public beating they had received the day before

In **verses 38-39** we see what happened next –

The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. So they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city.

Paul and Silas were thought to be a couple of nobodies – itinerate Jews who could be beaten, jailed, and dispatched without anyone raising an eyebrow but now the tables had been turned

And when the magistrates found out that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens who could lodge a complaint against them to their superiors they were afraid

So they came, hat in hand, to apologize and they asked them to leave

A good Roman citizen who had not been convicted of any crime couldn't be thrown out of a Roman city against their will they had to agree to go

But Paul and Silas were still unpopular with the masses and so the magistrates escorted them safely away from the jail asking them I'm sure quite politely to leave the city altogether

And in **verse 40** we see that Paul and Silas did leave Philippi but I find it kind of amusing that they weren't in any real hurry about it

They left but they took their time and left when they were ready after having visited Lydia and encouraging the church they were leaving behind

#### ***Lessons from Paul***

What lessons can we learn from Paul's exercise of his rights?

**First**, we see that it's permissible to exercise your rights under the law we don't just have to take whatever is dished out against us

Paul was a Roman citizen and it was proper that he use the rights of a citizen to his advantage

**So we are left to wonder why he waited to reveal his citizenship**

Had he done so on the previous day he likely would have avoided the beating and the imprisonment so why did he wait?

We are forced to use a bit of conjecture but it would seem that Paul and Silas put their trust in God and not in their Roman citizenship

They knew that God could and would preserve and protect them if it were his will to do so and so they put themselves in his hands and trusted in his sovereignty

In taking the unjust punishment they demonstrated their complete trust and faith in God to those who were watching in a way that using their "Get out of jail free card" couldn't

Besides, they had no way of knowing the particulars but the jailer likely wouldn't have been saved if they had not been thrown in jail

**But this doesn't mean we need to be passive and take whatever happens to us without protest – we have the right to exercise our rights**

And the next day was the right time and the right way for Paul to speak up for himself and for Silas

By waiting Paul **provided ongoing protection for the church he was leaving behind**

The magistrates were publically humiliated and they knew their future resided in the hands of Paul and Silas

It would probably be a very long time before they would punish another person without having done a thorough investigation

Paul and Silas also **demonstrated a Christian attitude toward being wronged and those who do the wrong**

Paul and Silas had the magistrates at their mercy and they could have gotten revenge on them by reporting them to a higher authority and to let the wrong go unpunished showed the Christian spirit of not getting even

So they exercised compassion while at the same time seeking to make sure the magistrates corrected their behavior in the future

Paul and Silas were not motivated by personal revenge or personal gain

They were seeking God's glory, the furtherance of the gospel, and the protection of others

While there are other passages that help us determine when to stand up for our rights and when to let them go the actions and motivations of these two men are worthy of imitation



## Conclusion

When we do well we expect to be treated well but that isn't always the case

Far too often even as we continue the mission of Christ on this earth, doing right only leads to being wronged and so we must learn how to exercise right behavior while being treated wrongly

In doing so we can exhibit a powerful witness to a watching world that expects us to either moan and groan over the injustice or to lash out and seek revenge against those who did us wrong

Sure, we have the right to exercise our rights and there are times when it is proper that we do so

But we need to be certain that our motivations are pure and give space to allow for a demonstration of dependence on the Lord

Just as the prisoners were watching Paul and Silas sing hymns and give glory to God in prayer there are those who are watching us during our dark moments

We need to be mindful that they are watching and more concerned about their eternal souls than we are with receiving justice

We need to be different

The world says, "I don't get mad I get even" but we need to strive to show forth joy, patience, and forgiveness when we suffer for doing right

We are bound to be treated badly – Jesus himself said that we should not expect to be treated better than he was – and he was crucified

But we can respond rightly to being treated wrongly and in doing so we can win others to Christ

Listen as I close with this short story about the powerful witness available in responding rightly to being wronged

It's a story about the late Romanian pastor Richard Wurmbrand – one of the founders of the Voice of the Martyrs

Richard Wurmbrand once met a man who had experienced the divine release that comes through forgiveness. Wurmbrand was in a Communist prison in Romania at the time, lying in a prison cell reserved for those who were dying. In the cot on his right was a pastor who had been beaten so badly that he was about to die. On his left was the very man who had beaten him, a Communist who was later betrayed and tortured by his comrades.

One night the Communist awakened in the middle of a nightmare and cried out, "Please, pastor, say a prayer for me. I have committed such crimes, I cannot die." The pastor feebly got up, stumbled past Wurmbrand's cot, and sat at the bedside of his enemy.

As he watched, Wurmbrand saw the pastor caress the hair of the man who had tortured him and speak these amazing words: "I have forgiven you with all of my heart, and I love you. If I who am only a sinner can love and forgive you, more so can Jesus who is the Son of God and who is love incarnate. Return to Him. He longs for you much more than you long for Him. He wishes to forgive you much more than you wish to be forgiven. You just repent." There, in the prison cell, the Communist began to confess all his murders and tortures. When he had finished, the two men prayed together, embraced, and then returned to their beds, where each died that very night.

Let's pray