

The First Recorded Sit-In

- Acts 16:35-40
- I want to do two things in this sermon. First, we will examine the text for today, and pay special attention to Paul's response when the magistrates come to tell him and Silas they can quietly leave the prison. Second, I will make some closing observations about the unifying power of the Gospel as it is on display in the church at Philippi.
- **The first recorded sit-in**
- After Paul and Silas went to the jailer's house and had dinner with his family, and there was great rejoicing in that family, the two men went back to prison. We know that because that's where we find them the next morning. Remember the prison walls were shaken, and the doors were all off their hinges, but the prisoners are still there. And that morning the magistrates must have huddled, discussed the amazing events of the night before, the earthquake, the destruction to the prison, and the astounding news that none of the prisoners has escaped. And they may have thought that it was more than coincidence that all of this happened on the same day that these two Jewish itinerant evangelists were in town preaching and casting out demons and generally making a nuisance of themselves. Let's get them out of town! So the magistrates send their police to the prison to say, "Hey, we have great news! Your two men that we beat to a pulp yesterday, publicly? You know the two? Well, they can go free! In fact, the magistrates send their blessings and their best wishes for these men to be in peace." They expected the two men to be overjoyed, but instead Paul said, "So you beat us publicly. And we are uncondemned. There was no trial, was there Silas? No, no trial. AND, here's the big one. Ready? We are Roman citizens." At this point the two brutes go pale and start sweating. But Paul's not finished. "And after we were beaten as uncondemned Roman citizens, we were thrown into prison and placed in stocks as...what are we, men? Right. Uncondemned Roman citizens. Let's review. Beaten in public. Thrown into prison. Put in stocks. All as uncondemned Roman citizens. And now the magistrates would like for us to receive their well wishes of peace and prosperity as we leave quietly out the back door, which by the way, I notice doesn't exist any more. Thanks to my God. No, gentlemen, we will not leave. We will stay right here in prison until the magistrates themselves come and escort us out the front door." The police went back to the politicians and told them the bad news, that Paul and Silas were Roman citizens. At which point they went pale and started to sweat. Then they heard that Paul and Silas were participating in the first recorded sit-in.
- I don't remember hearing that Rosa Parks gave credit to Paul and Silas for inspiration. Maybe she knew their story, and on December 1, 1955, she decided it was time to stand up to oppression. Or in this, case, to stay seated. The first four rows of seats on each Montgomery bus were reserved for whites. Buses had "colored" sections for black people generally in the rear of the bus, although blacks comprised more than 75% of the ridership. The sections were not fixed but were determined by placement of a movable sign. Black people could sit in the middle rows until the white section filled; if more whites needed seats, blacks were to move to seats in the rear, stand, or, if there was no room, leave the bus. Black people could not sit across the aisle in the same row as white people. The driver could move the "colored" section sign, or remove it altogether. If white people were already sitting in the front, black people had to board at the front to pay the fare, then disembark and reenter through the rear door. For years, the black community had complained that the situation was unfair. Parks said, "My resisting being mistreated on the bus did not begin with that particular arrest...I did a lot of walking in Montgomery." One day in 1943, Parks boarded the bus and paid the fare. She then moved to her seat but driver James Blake told her to follow city rules and enter the bus again from the back door. Parks exited the bus, but before she could re-board at the rear door, Blake drove off, leaving her to walk home in the rain. Fast forward 12 years...

- After working all day, Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus around 6 p.m., Thursday, December 1, 1955, in downtown Montgomery. She paid her fare and sat in an empty seat in the first row of back seats reserved for blacks in the "colored" section. Initially, she did not notice that the bus driver was the same man, James F. Blake, who had left her in the rain in 1943. As the bus traveled along its regular route, all of the white-only seats in the bus filled up. The bus reached the third stop in front of the Empire Theater, and several white passengers boarded. Blake noted that two or three white passengers were standing, as the front of the bus had filled to capacity. He moved the "colored" section sign behind Parks and demanded that four black people give up their seats in the middle section so that the white passengers could sit. Years later, in recalling the events of the day, Parks said, "When that white driver stepped back toward us, when he waved his hand and ordered us up and out of our seats, I felt a determination cover my body like a quilt on a winter night." By Parks' account, Blake said, "Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats." Three of them complied. Parks said, "The driver wanted us to stand up, the four of us. We didn't move at the beginning, but he says, 'Let me have these seats.' And the other three people moved, but I didn't." The black man sitting next to her gave up his seat. Parks moved, but toward the window seat; she did not get up to move to the re-designated colored section. Blake said, "Why don't you stand up?" Parks responded, "I don't think I should have to stand up." Blake called the police to arrest Parks.
- Mrs. Parks was arrested, spent a night in jail, and worst of all, ended up losing her job. But the Montgomery Bus boycott by the black community that lasted 381 days left dozens of buses standing idle, and eventually led to a repeal of the law requiring segregation on public buses. Her sacrifice led to more freedom for others.
- **There is a time for Christians to respectfully take the offensive approach with the governing authorities.** Paul demonstrates that here. He did it at great risk to himself, because there was no guarantee that the magistrates would not send those brutes back to prison to finish the job they had started the day before. I think Paul knew that, and had counted the cost. But I believe also that he wasn't thinking about himself and about his wounded pride at being beaten unjustly. He wasn't seeking money from the Roman government. It wasn't about Paul at all. I believe he was taking a stand because he knew the freedom that the brand new church he had founded may depend on it. He was thinking about Lydia, a slave girl, and a Philippian jailer. He wanted to establish a precedent for their sake, and secure a safer environment for them to live their faith and tell others about Jesus. That's the question we need to ask before we take the offensive approach in anything! Is this for me or for others? Am I going to do this to make sure I get what I deserve, or am I doing this to serve others? There is a time to turn the other cheek when you've been slapped. Jesus taught us that. There is a time to just allow yourself just to be wronged rather than take a brother to court. Paul taught us that. There is also a time to take a stand, or stay in your seat, not to protect your own interests but to protect the interests of others.
- Paul would write this to the church in Philippi years later from a prison cell in Rome:
- "Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:3-8)
- **The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest unifying power in the world.**
- Before we leave Philippi and move down the road to the next place in Paul's journey, I want you to notice what God did there in that Greek city. Compare it and contrast it with this standard prayer for a Jewish man. The Jewish heads of household would say the same prayer upon rising every morning: "Thank you, O God, that you did not make me a woman, or a slave, or a Gentile."

Who did God save in Philippi? A woman, a slave, and a Gentile. You could even describe these three as representing the different needs that are present in each of us and can only be met in Christ. Lydia, the woman, had a need to understand. She had an intellectual need, and was seeking God along with others down by the riverside. God opened her heart to pay attention to what was being said by Paul, and that day her intellectual need was met in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Of course, her sins were washed away, and that is most important, and is the beginning of wisdom. Then we find the slave girl who had a psychological need. Her mind was owned by a demon. And her life was owned by someone else. She was in double-bondage, and when she hears the Gospel, she finds her true identity in Christ. Then the jailer had a moral need. Notice how he runs to Paul and Silas and falls on his face before them and cries out, "What must I do to be saved?" He was a man full of sin and at that moment he knew it. He heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ and that night his heart was made clean.

- Jim Denison wrote this week, "The other day I was driving to our office and found myself behind a car displaying the popular bumper sticker, COEXIST. As you can see, each of the letters is shaped from a different _religious symbol: _the C is from Islam, the X is a Star of David, the T is a cross, and so on. That wasn't surprising. But this was: higher on the car was a sticker stating, "SOMETIMES I WRESTLE WITH MY DEMONS SOMETIMES WE JUST SNUGGLE."
- Ironically, the rear license plate was set inside a frame which stated, "DON'T FOLLOW ME I'M LOST TOO." More than you know! These three lost people, Lydia, the slave girl, and the Philippian jailer were not desperate to just coexist. They needed new life.
- All three of these are in the Kingdom of God because a man named Paul went looking for them, sent to Philippi by the Lord Jesus. A story is told of two men who got into conversation on a boat when returning from India. One was an English sportsman and the other was a missionary. The sportsman said, "I've been in India for 25 years, and I never saw one of the natives converted." "That's odd," answered the missionary, "did you ever see a tiger?" "Hundreds of them," was the reply, "and I have shot dozens in the hunt." "Well, I have been in India for many years," said the missionary, "but I have never seen a tiger. But under the power of the Gospel of Christ, I have seen hundreds of the natives of India turn to the Savior!" You see, one loved hunting and was looking for tigers. The other loved individuals who needed God and was looking ways to bring them to Jesus!
- I can imagine the very first Sunday service after these events took place. I can see the rich businesswoman, the formerly demon-possessed slave girl, and the rough jailer all embracing and weeping together as brother and sisters in Christ. In a divided Roman colony, filled with prejudice and injustice and abuse, the Gospel of Jesus Christ brought people to freedom, and brought them together. It still does. The Gospel is the greatest unifying power in all the world.