

Is it Okay for Us to Claim our Rights?

Acts 16:35-40

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But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, "Let those men go." And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, "The magistrates have sent to let you go. Therefore, come out now and go in peace." 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." 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.

- Acts 16:35-39, ESV

Paul and Silas had been illegally and unjustly arrested, beaten and imprisoned. They had passed up an opportunity to escape when God sent an earthquake to loosen their bonds and open the prison. Instead of escaping, they shared the pure and simple Gospel with the jailer and rejoiced with him and his family in their salvation. After Paul and Silas had baptized the Philippian jailer and eaten with him and his family, they came back to jail and were re-imprisoned.

In the light of morning, cooler heads prevailed within the justice system and the magistrates ordered the police to release Paul and Silas. However, Paul claimed his rights as a Roman citizen who had been treated unjustly and demanded that the magistrates come and apologize and release them themselves. Was it right for Paul to claim his citizenship rights? Why didn't he just leave, like they were asking him to do?

Paul had several good reasons for doing what he did:

1. Injustice is never right, and it harms the one who commits the injustice, just as surely as it harms the one who is being treated unjustly. Injustice is inherently de-humanizing, and Paul was right to oppose it and seek to correct it.
2. Paul wanted to protect other Christians in Philippi from being treated unjustly by the authorities. It would be too easy for the magistrates in Philippi to beat and imprison Christians whenever the mobs demanded it. People in Philippi had the benefit of Roman citizenship, just as Paul did. So, Paul reminded the magistrates of the right of Roman Citizens, in part to protect Christians like Lydia and the Philippian jailer from further persecution.
3. Paul and Silas wanted the freedom to be able to meet with the believers and encourage them before leaving town. They knew they were going to have to leave the city, but asserting their rights as citizens bought them some time. "*So, they went out of the prison and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them and departed.*" (v. 40)

So, is it right for us to claim our rights as citizens? Yes, if we're doing so for the right reasons. We can't just be selfish or use our rights to cover up our own wrongdoing, because that dishonors Christ. We can assert our rights in order to prevent or expose injustice, to protect other believers from persecution and the advance the ministry of the Gospel. In these cases, it is best for us to take advantage of the rights we have for the greater good of justice and the kingdom of God.

Heavenly Father, we thank You that we do have rights established by You and protected by governments. Give us wisdom to discern when we should exercise our rights to promote the cause of justice and serve Your kingdom. In Jesus' name, Amen.