

TWO PEOPLE, ONE POINT

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When I was a kid there was Highlights magazine. It was geared for kids and one of the every-month columns featured Goofus and Galant. These were two boys. Goofus was uncivil and uncouth. Galant was the opposite, well-mannered and demonstrating good character. One month would have Goofus chewing gum with his mouth open and spitting it on the ground while Galant chewed with his mouth closed and disposed of it in the wrapper into the trash bin. The communication technique was compare and contrast. Green grass is just green grass and blue sky is just blue sky but when green grass is set against blue sky, the green is greener and the blue is bluer. That's how compare and contrast works.

The Bible uses this same technique. For example, in the gospel of John, chapter 3 and chapter 4. In chapter 3, a Jewish man who was a scholar comes to Jesus by night, then in chapter 4, a Samaritan woman who was a hussy comes to Jesus by noonday.

I am going to bring us to a passage where compare/contrast happens again and we want to ask why? What does God want us to see and know? We pray.

We read. Acts 16:11-34. ¹¹ From Troas we put out to sea and sailed straight for Samothrace, and the next day we went on to Neapolis. ¹² From there we traveled to Philippi, a Roman colony and the leading city of that district^[a] of Macedonia. And we stayed there several days.

¹³ *On the Sabbath we went outside the city gate to the river, where we expected to find a place of prayer. We sat down and began to speak to the women who had gathered there. ¹⁴ One of those listening was a woman from the city of Thyatira named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth. She was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message. ¹⁵ When she and the members of her household were baptized, she invited us to her home. "If you consider me a believer in the Lord," she said, "come and stay*

at my house.” And she persuaded us.

¹⁶ Once when we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a female slave who had a spirit by which she predicted the future. She earned a great deal of money for her owners by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ She followed Paul and the rest of us, shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved.” ¹⁸ She kept this up for many days. Finally, Paul became so annoyed that he turned around and said to the spirit, “In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!” At that moment the spirit left her.

¹⁹ When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace to face the authorities. ²⁰ They brought them before the magistrates and said, “These men are Jews, and are throwing our city into an uproar ²¹ by advocating customs unlawful for us Romans to accept or practice.”

²² The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. ²³ After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. ²⁴ When he received these orders, he put them in the inner cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. ²⁶ Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everyone’s chains came loose. ²⁷ The jailer woke up, and when he saw the prison doors open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself because he thought the prisoners had escaped. ²⁸ But Paul shouted, “Don’t harm yourself! We are all here!”

²⁹ The jailer called for lights, rushed in and fell trembling before Paul and Silas. ³⁰ He then brought them out and asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?”

³¹ They replied, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household.” ³² Then they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house. ³³ At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his household were baptized. ³⁴ The jailer brought them into his house and set a meal before them; he was filled with joy because he had come to believe in God—he and his whole household.

What do you suppose are your two greatest fears? Go ahead and think about that for a second. Got one? Got two? You may not have framed it the way I'm going to go with it, and that's fine. You may have been very specific about being in tight spaces or public speaking or spiders. But do you know what I think can be said are the across-the-board two greatest fears ... for you and for me and all human beings across the globe and through time? Fear of dying ... the candle of our existence going out. We love life and we don't want to face non-existence or worse. But how about the second? Fear of ... living... failure, challenge, not having true color or brass, living tepid, missing true meaning and brightness. Fear of dying, fear of living.

There are two main characters that book-end this story we have read in Acts – Lydia and the jailer. They are going to be, not a Goofus and Galant compare and contrast, but representatives of the fear of dying and the fear of living.

Lydia was a business woman. Trading in purple in that world then would be like selling BMW's in our world now. Materially she was successful. But she, not finding life-satisfaction in the normal practices of her town and culture, has gone outside, *seeking something* from the Jewish women praying by the river outside the town. She is seeking. Something isn't working. See, she has gone outside her local faith and tradition, outside the city, and this happens when what you have isn't working and you're worried there's something more. She has come to the river and is perhaps thinking, like that river, life is passing her by. Fear about her living.

The jailer was not a self-employed business person like Lydia. He was a journeyman. Blue collar if you will. But like everyone in his day, he was at the mercy of the whims of this deity or that. In a few chapters Paul will be in Athens commenting on their 30,000 deities. Life was spent wondering about steps and missteps, proper sacrifice, and configuring the strongest arrangement of gods, that the average

Back then if the prisoner escaped, the prison warden forfeited his life. Rather than go through that agony leading to death, he is choosing the lesser agony of suicide. But Paul stops him.

person might not be possessed (like the slave girl), stave off their mean pestilence or vengeful famine or *angry earthquake*. To be thrown into the hands of these gods and put to death under their tyranny was a fearful thing. This was that world. This is why more than 300 times God in the Bible says, “Fear not.” They had a lot to fear ... especially dying under the caprice and anger of such gods. Paul and Silas were in prison but he was in another, that of fear.

Sometimes the fear of dying is made up in by the fear of suffering leading up to death. Paul and Silas suffered being beaten. They had bruises and open wounds. The jail was dirty, no plumbing, not ventilated, buggy, and the stocks were such their legs were uncomfortably spread apart. They had no idea what lay ahead. But they sang. What can make you sing in those circumstances? And when the earthquake sprang the doors open, Paul and Silas did not spring to freedom. They had a strength to overcome suffering and to overcome “save your skin.” (I think they had it because Jesus suffered for them and didn’t save himself but gave himself for them. They’re doing the same.) Oh, the jailer wants to know how to live this way.

Plain teaching by day with Lydia, earth-shaking work by night with the jailer. But each one brought to a new place with respect to living and dying ... by Jesus.

Do you want to come to a new place – a place free from fear and a place full of living? Then turn to the God peace and life known in Jesus Christ. He is the one who said, “I am the resurrection and the life.” He sent Paul and Silas to Lydia and the jailer with a message. And he has sent me to you with this message. It is the word of the Lord.

If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or have someone pray with you, the pastor and elders would welcome your call. pastorjeffwood@gmail.com.

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