

Breaking the rules



The 'miracle of Montgomery' marked a pivotal moment in the struggle for black civil rights in the USA, when one woman's challenge against segregation laws kicked off a whole campaign. Rosa Parks' protest probably wasn't a spur-of-the-moment impulse - this courageous Christian activist knew the possible outcome when she refused to give up her bus seat for a white man. She devoted the rest of her life to teaching young African-Americans about their own history, exploring the positive contributions they could make towards their own community.

Any discussion of race or ethnicity must be handled with great sensitivity in the classroom, especially during times of ethnic tension. Do not be surprised if pupils unthinkingly parrot attitudes imbibed at home, but counter them with discussion of positive school values. Some pupils may have received racist abuse, and will need to be reassured and encouraged not to accept the role of 'victim'. Rosa Parks provides children with an excellent role model for tackling injustice and achieving change through peaceful determined protest.

Objectives

Values / Citizenship

- To explore how bad rules can be challenged in non-violent ways.
- To consider when it might be right to break a rule.
- To study how an individual can play a part in bringing about positive changes.

Religious Education

To explore the meaning of James 2:1-9, a Bible passage challenging prejudice based on outward appearance.

Literacy

- To retell a key event in a true story through the imagined reactions of different

characters.

- To research a biography.

Preparation

There are many [images](#) available illustrating the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955. Useful explanatory [videos](#) are also available.

Introduction

Ask: Can you name any of our school rules? Why do you think we have them? (To keep people safe? To make things fair?) Explain that, sometimes, rules get made that aren't fair. See what's happening in this story, and try to work it out.

Breaking the rules

by Chris Hudson

It was a busy Thursday, and Rosa was tired. She'd been working all day as a seamstress, mending and adjusting clothes in the Montgomery Fair department store, and it was time to go home. She was good at her job, but the management were strict. They didn't like you to take a long lunch break, and the supervisor kept looking at his watch if you spent too long in the washroom. But... it was the end of the day.

As the big shop doors were closed and locked, Rosa gathered her things, said goodbye to the other assistants and hurried out along the sidewalk to the bus stop. As always, it was crowded, with lots of other people standing and waiting. There never seemed to be quite enough buses when the shops and factories closed. 'Ease That Squeeze - Ride The Bus!' said the poster. If only!

One bus came, filled up and left without her, and the line of people shuffled forward. Then another bus arrived, and she was finally able to step on. At last! She paid her fare, saw there weren't any seats at the back, spotted one in the middle... and sat down. Phew! Soon, they were moving.

At the next stop, a few more people got on. One white man paid for his ticket, glanced along the bus, saw there were no seats at the front, and remained standing. There was a pause - then the driver noticed him, turned in his seat and yelled back, 'All right, you folks, I want those seats!'

He was talking to the black people in the middle of the bus. This was the company rule - any black passenger sitting on a seat in the middle section would have to give up their seat to a white passenger, if requested by the driver. There might be a whole row of black people sitting there, but if one white person wanted to sit in that row, all the others would have to get up and either sit somewhere else or stand.

That's how it was in the town of Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955 - the 'segregation' laws said that white people weren't supposed to sit next to black people. Rules were rules. Everyone was supposed to stay separated, even if they were all travelling on the same bus and going in the same direction. 'Separate but equal,' they called it.

But Rosa didn't feel very equal. She was paid less than the white women who did the same job, and her friends' children weren't allowed in the same schools as the white kids. Some tall buildings even had elevators marked 'Blacks only' or 'Whites only'. Separate but equal? It wasn't equal if the whites always had more things and more freedom - but 'segregation' was everywhere. If she went to the movie theatre, the whites had the better seats while the blacks sat up in the balcony at the back and, sometimes, were only allowed in by the rear entrance.

Rosa thought this was all crazy, so she joined a local group campaigning to change the rules, then became the local branch secretary. They'd talked, long and hard, so many times, about changing things - but today was going to be different, because Rosa was tired, her feet were hurting... and she was tired of being pushed around.

'Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats!' shouted the bus driver. It was a threat. Don't make trouble. The other black passengers obediently left their seats and retreated to the back of the bus - but something inside Rosa said, 'Don't do it.' So instead, she shuffled sideways, nearer the window. The driver looked puzzled.

'Look, woman, I told you I wanted the seat. Are you going to stand up?'

Rosa sighed again. 'No, I'm not. I paid for my ticket.' She pulled it out of her bag and showed it, but it didn't make any difference.

'Well, if you don't stand up, I'm going to have to call the police and have you arrested!'

'Then you may do that.'

All around the bus, there was nervous whispering. 'Who is she?' 'She's refusing to move!' 'Is she crazy?' Some passengers were getting up and heading for the door, to avoid trouble. Others were getting cross. One woman at the back was shouting. 'I've got to get home! My husband will be wondering where I am!' The white man (who was still standing nearby) looked confused...

Just like me, Rosa thought, but something inside her had gone hard. *I've come this far, and I'm not stopping now*. Suddenly, uniformed policemen were getting on the bus. The bus driver pointed out Rosa, then a large policeman came and stood next to her. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'I think you're sitting in the wrong section.'

Rosa looked up at him, then stared straight ahead, avoiding his gaze. 'I'm not.'

'You've been asked to move!'

'I paid for my ticket.'

'But your section's at the back!'

'There aren't any seats there.'

He looked slightly confused. 'But that's where you're supposed to go. You are causing a public disturbance.'

'I'm not. I bought my ticket. I have a right to sit here.' Then she turned to stare him in the face. 'Why do you treat us so badly, always shoving us around?'

He looked a little shame-faced. 'I don't know, but the law is the law, and you're under arrest.'

Rosa was led off the bus, taken to the police station to be charged and fingerprinted, then put in a locked cell designed to hold drunks and dangerous criminals. *Well, it's happened*, she thought, sitting on the hard cell bed. She prayed for strength, remembering all the times Jesus had got into trouble for breaking bad rules in his own time. 'Lord,' she asked, 'give me your strength to go through with this.'

Meanwhile, another bus passenger had got in touch with Edgar Nixon, the leader of Rosa's campaign group. Edgar raced round to the police station with a white friend who was a lawyer.

'What have they charged you with, Rosa?'

'Defying the bus segregation law.'

'That's wonderful!'

'Wonderful' was not the first word she'd have chosen. 'Why?'

'Because you're the ideal person to take a stand against it. We'll bail you out tonight, and you'll go to trial on Monday, be found guilty and sentenced. But listen, Rosa, if they fine you, don't pay it.'

She was let out, then Edgar started calling lots of local black community leaders to tell them about the case. A meeting was called at a local church on Friday night, and many people came, because the bus problem affected everybody. After a lot of confused talking, it was decided to call a boycott. Nobody would use that company's buses until they changed the rules about segregating blacks and whites. On Sunday, all the black ministers told their congregations about the boycott. Leaflets were printed and delivered across the city. Then came Monday morning. What would happen?

All over the city, buses pulled up at stops, ready to take their passengers in to work. But nobody was getting on. Everyone was finding other ways to get to work and school. Some people shared cars and taxis. A few cycled. Many walked, and for some it was quite a distance, especially the children going to school - but they weren't going to use the buses, not while that 'separation' rule was in place.

That morning, Rosa went to the local courthouse to be tried, found guilty and fined 14 dollars for disobeying the segregation law. It was a small fine, but she refused to pay it, because the rule it supported was wrong. Her lawyer became very excited. 'It's happening! Supreme Court, here we come!'

There was a local church minister in court with them, watching everything - Dr Martin Luther King. He agreed with the lawyer that this whole case could be the start of something really big. Later, he came round to Rosa's home to ask a favour.

'Mrs Parks, will you join me on the platform tonight at the meeting, when we gather to pray, lift our praises to heaven, and tell people how we're going to change those segregation rules?' His eyes almost twinkled. 'You'll be sitting at the front this time!'

Rosa grinned. 'Yes!'

After sharing the story, ask: What was the rule that Rosa was challenging? (*Black people and white people not being allowed to sit together.*) Why was that rule in place? (*Because at that time, many people believed that white people were better than black people and shouldn't have to sit next to people who they thought weren't as important as them.*)

Activities

Religious Education: making positive changes

Share the story with the class, using sourced images for illustration as suggested earlier.

For writing: Title: 'Changing a bad rule'

- Draw a simple line of chairs inside the outline of a bus. Create a speech bubble for the driver, saying, 'Get to the back of the bus!' Add a thought bubble for Rosa, saying what she might be thinking or worrying about.
- Copy and complete: 'Rosa was a Christian who believed everyone was worth the same. She was angry because...'
- Discuss and write about why you think those rules were made in the first place.

In the Bible, James was a brother of Jesus who was passionate about justice - making things fair. Long ago, he wrote a letter that said:

'My friends, if you have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, you won't treat some people better than others. Suppose a rich person wearing fancy clothes and a gold ring comes to one of your meetings. And suppose a poor person dressed in worn-out clothes also comes. You must not give the best seat to the one in fine clothes and tell the one who is poor to stand at the side or sit on the floor. That is the same as saying that some people are better than others, and you would be acting like a crooked judge' (James 2:1-4, CEV).

What do you think James might say about the separation rules on Rosa's bus? Do you think he would be right? Write about it.

Plenary: Share some pupil responses. Ensure that the meaning of the Bible passage is discussed and evaluated.

Values: Changing bad rules

Questions for discussion and writing:

1. Imagine an obviously bad school rule that it would be right to break (Cheating is allowed in tests?), and say why.
2. Draw a traditional signpost at a road junction. What were the most important choices that Rosa Parks faced in this story? Write the choices, or different directions, on the sign.

3. What was the result of Rosa's action for her community?

Values: Using anger creatively

Questions for discussion and writing:

1. What unfair things in our world (affecting other people) make you angry?
2. What do you think are the most effective and creative ways of changing people's minds?
3. Do you think that children and young people can be 'agents of change' - can they bring about change? Look at the story of someone like Malala Yousafzai.
4. Can you think of any times when rules and laws have been changed because people thought they were wrong and campaigned hard to change them? Research the lives of famous 'protesters' such as Dr Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Mohandas Gandhi, Thomas Clarkson and Emmeline Pankhurst.

Literacy

1. Read the story for yourself, then locate and illustrate the key moment, the 'flashpoint'. Think and write about it: What resulted from this key moment? What might have happened if Rosa had reacted differently?
2. Describe what happened on the bus from the point of view of the driver, the policeman, the white man who got on the bus, or a passenger at the back of the bus.
3. Imagine you are a TV news reporter describing what happened at the end of the day, while Rosa was in jail. Write a news report explaining the key facts about what happened. Use a few sentences of introduction, adding some short imagined 'vox-pop' interviews with other passengers, the bus driver, and the policeman. Finish it by considering what this all might mean for people living in the town of Montgomery in future.
4. Research the life of Rosa Parks using internet resources, especially [Wikipedia](#), [Biography](#) and [Ducksters](#).
5. List the ten most important things that you think happened in Rosa's life. What do you think is the most important thing that people today can learn from her example?

[Image of Rosa Parks](#) (Martin Luther King in background) By Unknown - USIA / National Archives and Records Administration Records of the U.S. Information Agency Record Group 306, Public Domain

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