

## “When Grace and Justice Collide”

February 28, 2021

*The Grace of Les Misérables* series – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent – Livestream

One of the first assignments in my seminary preaching class was to do a mini-sermon. Each of us wrote down a Scripture passage, put the paper in a basket, and then we drew one out (and it couldn't be our own!). We had 2 minutes to prepare and then had to offer some Good News!

When I chose my slip of paper from the basket, it was this passage from Matthew 18—Peter's question about forgiveness and Jesus' answer. And after my initial shock and struggle, I understood why my classmate chose this passage - because it's challenging and thought-provoking and, if we're honest, even a bit uncomfortable to talk about forgiveness - because it can lead to painful places and memories and also challenge our notions of what's right, fair, and just. It's messy. Jesus challenges us: how do we view ourselves, and how do we treat each other?

Grace and justice - what's the connection - or maybe the collision - between them? Today we take that on as we focus on Javert - the police inspector who comes up against Jean Valjean. You can see him on the **playbill**. He chases Valjean throughout his life.

Last week, we saw an important moment in Valjean's life when he felt the power of grace for the first time from the priest. Today we'll flashback to the moment when Valjean has served his time and is released, but it's not necessarily a celebration. **SHOW MEDIA – Javert releases Prisoner 24601**

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l8WSysB5vKM&list=PLKYUKQhWJ0QabeJfzqWR0pS1FQ6UOiPBB>)

This clip is one scene, but it captures Javert's commitment to law - and what he might call justice (though he's off a bit). For Javert, justice means you reap what you sow. If you don't follow the rules, the only way to make amends is by taking the penalty.

Certainly, we need rules and order to function as a society. God brought order out of chaos. God provided order and rules for living together in community. Our modern-day laws are based on the Ten Commandments.

Order is important, but we also need flexibility and adaptability. If this past year has taught us anything (and there are many things), it's that we can and will change because of things we don't and can't control. We will learn how to do new things, even when they're hard, because we have to.

Javert is obsessed with the letter of the law, especially when it comes to Valjean. He can't let Valjean go without reminding him of his past and only seeing him for his

crime. Javert sees Valjean as a number, a prisoner, and a dangerous man – even though his crime was fairly benign and committed because his Valjean’s sister and her children were hungry.

Even after Valjean has done his time, Javert’s main concern is for the law. We learn that Javert was actually born in prison and carries his own trauma, but his focus is on overcoming his past by following the rules. There’s not a lot of room for grace. Javert is convinced that there’s no good in Valjean while Javert says that he himself follows God’s way and God’s law.

Javert’s attitude becomes a problem – and a time of reckoning - when he finds himself at the mercy of Valjean after he tries to disguise himself in order to infiltrate the revolutionaries. Javert is found out, and Valjean volunteers to get rid of him – except he doesn’t. Valjean lets Javert go - even lying to protect him.

Because of his inability to extend grace or receive it, Javert struggles. He cannot comprehend this act of grace because it doesn’t compute with his vision of what should happen. Javert’s inability to accept grace leads him to a dark and painful end. He’s truly one who is miserable.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is teaching about how we should live with each other in community. In all this talk about working toward reconciliation and maintaining connection with each other, Peter wants to know about forgiveness. How often and how much? And it’s forgiveness within the community – an intimate thing.

I think Peter speaks for all of us. He wants more direction on this relationship stuff. “OK, I have to forgive, but how many times do I have to do it?” The answer he gets is staggering. Translations give different numbers—some say 77; some say 70 times 7. Either way, it’s a lot.

But the number doesn’t really matter. The math isn’t important. If we’re actually going to keep a count, then we’re not really forgiving anyway. Peter suggested forgiving 7 times, which was extravagant for his culture. In Jewish law, 3 times was generous, so 7 times was unheard of. Think of what 77 or 70 times 7 would mean for Peter and everyone else!

The parable Jesus adds on is even more shocking - just to bring the point home. First, there’s the king and the servant who is indebted to him. Now understand that 10,000 talents is a lot of money. Consider that just one talent was 15 years’ wages for a normal worker. So, 10,000 is beyond anything we can grasp. There’s no way the servant could ever pay what he owes—it’s impossible! It’s a hopeless situation.

We expect the king to let the servant have it—reprimand, punishment, and all. But when the servant begs for mercy, and even says he’ll pay back what he owes (even

though he and the king both know he can't), we're sure it won't help. Yet, we're shocked. The king erases the debt altogether.

So, when the servant wants his friend to pay him the 100 denarii that he's owed, we're incensed like the people in the parable. Consider that one denarius is just one day's work, so this debt is payable. The forgiven servant could give the friend time to pay it back, but he's ruthless. We expect this forgiven servant to show the same mercy to his friend that he's been shown by the king, but he doesn't.

We can say easily that we get the point: *don't be like the servant*. We can picture the servant violently grabbing his friend and shaking him around demanding, and perhaps we even get a little upset. Why do we react so emotionally? Where do we see ourselves most clearly? Are we like the king who has the power to forgive? Are we like the friend who asks to be forgiven? Or, are we more like the servant who has been shown great mercy, yet doesn't make the connection between his own debt erased - forgiven - and that of his friend?

I wonder if we've been all three of the characters before. We're forgiven people who are called to be forgiving people. It isn't easy or quick - or without a need for boundaries. Forgiveness is messy business. We know that as clearly as the servant learns it.

Last week, we talked about how we sometimes keep track of the times we receive grace so that we can pay it back. We're better off to pay it forward - to extend it to others. But this parable kicks us in the gut with a hard truth: how many of us keep score of others' wrongs?

Jesus says that our forgiveness should go beyond calculation. This parable challenges our thinking because it's about grace and justice. There can be no forgiveness without grace. But how do we they work together?

Justice is a legal and social term - to act with fairness and give people their legal rights based on God's standards (not human standards). We often talk of justice and law in the same breath, but we need to examine that a bit. We worship and serve God who is a lover of justice according to the Psalms, God who's in the business of setting people free from the past and opening up a new future, God who offers grace and second and third chances - and beyond.

It sounds great until we have to allow that to be true for everyone and not just ourselves. I'll confess: I want justice for myself. I'm grateful that God is merciful and gracious, and abounding in steadfast love. I celebrate it and praise God for it.

But sometimes it's easy to let it stop with me (and maybe a few other people I like!). I want justice for me, but I don't always extend it very well to others. But here's

the challenge: justice isn't "just for us." Justice is a part of God's nature, and God calls us to do justice - to make the sacrifices necessary to help others be treated justly and fairly.

We hear Jesus offering a new way of relating in the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5: *"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.* "Eye for an eye" justice was an attempt reign in our human tendency to get back at someone who wrongs us - and go even further. Retribution had to be just - not going beyond the crime. Retributive justice is how we usually view the world.

Jesus speaks out offering an alternative to the strict retributive justice - punishment without an effort of rehabilitation - and encourages those who listen to consider a different approach. Restorative justice emphasizes a right relationship with God, one's self, and community. Jesus is concerned with the heart of the law - not simply the rules - and the heart of the law, the goal and motivation, is to nurture our relationship with God and each other.

How many of us know someone who has been in jail or prison and have visited someone in jail or prison? My first experience was as a pastor, and I can tell you with all honesty that it changed my life and perspective. I felt for the person in jail. I felt for the family. I felt for the community around the person. It was difficult, and the aftermath of it – making appropriate boundaries, finding work, restoring trust and fostering social connections, and everything else was very hard. Navigating the balance of grace and justice is hard. How do we hold them together in faith?

Grace doesn't keep score of how many times we've screwed up, but grace welcomes us when we've screwed up. Grace isn't something we earn; it's something we're given freely. Grace isn't something we control when we need it; it's always there because God offers it. Grace is made real in Jesus because he came to be with us and know us. God forgives us, not because we deserve it, but because we need forgiveness.

And we're called to pass it on. Think about the words we pray every week in the Lord's Prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." Last week, I said that grace is a long view of God's love. Giving and receiving grace – navigating the difficulties of forgiveness – all of it is lifetime work. Forgiveness doesn't mean that everything is resolved. But our witness as followers of Jesus matters, especially around the free gift of grace, God's justice, and the work of forgiveness – not to say that it's easy or should be done easily, but that it's a priority for us.

Lent is a season when we experience that connection and collision between grace and justice. It's a time when we see ourselves - and the absolutes that we want to cling to - break down when we consider Jesus embodying grace and then set against Judas, Pilate, those with authority, and those who are bringing justice, and even set against us - sinners who need a Savior. We want to receive grace well and find freedom - not reject grace because we're so tied to rules rather than relationship. We want to offer it freely - just as it's been offered to us. May God help us...

Thanks be to God. Let us pray...