

## “Giving or Taking”

March 21, 2021

*The Grace of Les Misérables Series*

In-person & Livestream

Grace is our focus in this season of Lent as we prepare our hearts to celebrate resurrection. We have to go through Holy Week and do the inward of thinking about grace, love, and forgiveness. We’ve explored connections to justice, poverty, and love. It’s really the connections in *Les Mis* that move us and challenge us to examine our hearts.

The **playbill** puts it all together, but today we’re focusing on giving and taking, looking at some of the **minor characters. The Bishop’s connection to Valjean** is the beginning point of Valjean’s conversion, and if we’re taking about giving, this is a great example.

**The Thénardiens** are the innkeepers (*Master of the House* if you’ve watched the stage production) who present as good enough, but we learn that they are the ultimate in taking – the opposite of the Bishop. Thénardier hails himself as a war hero, but is actually a cheat and fraud. He only looks out for himself, and the impact of his greed comes to a head when he’s lost the inn and ends up in the Paris sewers – literally walking among human waste – searching for valuables among the bodies of those who have died in the fighting. If there was ever an image that might make us think twice about a life of only taking, full of selfishness and greed, always looking for the path of least resistance, playing the con as much as possible, shallowness and depravity, the image of a man sifting through the sewers is powerful one. I’m not sure how much worse it could be.

**Eponine and Gavroche** are two of the Thénardiens’ children – each of them becoming examples of selfless love, hope, and truth in the drama even as their parents continue to take all they can get.

We’re going to play the clip of a defining moment in Jean Valjean’s life – when he’s welcomed in the home of the Bishop, offered hospitality, steals from the Bishop, and is brought back by authorities after stealing. For those of you who are watching the livestream, there will be a break in the action because we’re not able to show copyrighted material on our livestream. The link was sent out in Friday’s note, and I’ll send it out again later. It’s about 3.5 minutes, so stay tuned!

**SHOW MEDIA** – *Bishop sings “Release Him”*

This is a moment of pure grace – of giving in love. Right away, the Bishop shares what he has, offers rest for a weary Valjean, blesses him, and saves him from being returned to prison.

And his motivation is clear: *By the witness of the martyrs, by the passion and the blood (of Jesus), God has raised you out of darkness, I have saved your soul for God.* Bienvenu, the Bishop, isn't acting on his own behalf, but is an ambassador for God. He's living out Paul's words to the Corinthians – compelled by God's love, regarding Valjean not from a worldly point of view, but seeking to view him as beloved, worthy of care, a receiver of grace, and following through on the ministry of reconciliation, which we're all called to. God is making an appeal through Bienvenu, who is acting as an ambassador for God and showing amazing grace to Valjean.

The Bishop doesn't know if Valjean will continue in his ways or truly be convicted. But it becomes to the beginning of his conversion – his transformation. The Bishop offers grace – love without strings attached – and it's life-changing. Valjean finds redemption and purpose because this act of kindness starts a journey; it's a catalyst for the rest of his life. God's grace has become very real for Valjean. He claims it and begins to live in it.

Early on in this series, I mentioned those seasons when we have to learn to accept grace from others – allowing others to help us and receive it as a gift – not trying to keep score or pay it back – but instead seeking to pay it forward to someone else and extend grace. That's a part of our spiritual lives, but it's important to consider how we live in the tension of giving and taking.

We're called to a life of giving, being good stewards who use God's gifts in ways that bring honor and glory to God. Jesus uses the language of taking, too: *Take up your cross and follow* or *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me.* Truthfully, we do both – giving and taking – but we're called to search our hearts and grow in holiness – to be more like Jesus who modeled agape love for us and calls us to love one another.

And Victor Hugo offers more on the subject: *To love is to act. God has set his intentions in the flowers, in the dawn, in the spring, it is God's will that we should love.* And finally, *What a grand thing, to be loved. What a grander thing, still, to love.* I wonder if Hugo had words on Scripture in mind as he wrote.

Love is a powerful force. It is our grounding as followers of Jesus. And it's how those who came before us describe a life of faith. John Wesley offers what others have termed "Three Simple Rules" **SHOW SLIDE:** *Do no harm. Do good. Stay in love with God.* I don't memorize well, but those I can commit to memory. Following through, though, is the challenge.

Adam Grant is an organizational psychologist who has studied how people function in the workplace, especially when it comes to reciprocity – giving and taking. Grant says that there are three styles of people:

- **Givers** are focused on the needs of others and tend to provide support to others with no expectation of receiving anything in return. They ask, “How can I add value for this person? What can I contribute?”
- **Takers** are focused on themselves and put their own interests ahead of the needs of others. They try to gain as much as possible from their interactions while contributing as little as they can in return. They ask themselves: “How can I use others to reach my goals?” It’s easy to see that lived out in the Bishop (a giver) and Thénardier (a taker).
- **Matchers** like to preserve an equal balance between giving and taking. Their mindset is: “If you take from me, I will take from you. If you give to me, I will give to you.”

It may not be surprising that takers may rise quickly, but can also fall fast. There’s a sense of paranoia for them – always worried about what they can gain rather than what they can give.

Givers ultimately make organizations better, even though when it comes to metrics of “success,” we find givers are at both ends. Grant says that givers have a sense of *pronoia* – working for others’ well-being. Success is not about competition for givers, but contribution. And it’s important to encourage people to seek help – to reach out to others and make it okay to be vulnerable. And Grant says, “The negative impact of a taker on a culture is usually double or triple the positive impact of a giver.”

This isn’t new news, but it’s important to hear as we journey through this season of Lent and examine our own motivations. Grant says that one good indicator about our motivation is how we treat a server at a restaurant or Uber driver. Even though Grant’s focus was the business world, it works for the church and everywhere else, too. It falls in line with the call of agape love that seeks good for others. That’s the word for love that Paul uses in this letter to the Corinthians – *For Christ’s love (agape) compels us...*

This letter is Paul’s effort to save his reputation among Christians in Corinth and convince them that that his ministry is legitimate – that he’s the real deal among other voices. His motives are pure – to share his story and urge others to be in relationship with God and live as God’s people. He’s asking the Corinthians to trust him, but even more, to trust in God’s movement in the world through Jesus Christ.

God takes the first step to love us – prevenient grace, and accepting God’s love in Christ brings us into right relationship with God – justifying grace. Trusting that relationship and living in that relationship means that we express our faith in love –

sanctifying grace. Jesus' death was for everyone, so everyone can respond to God and receive the gift of new life – everyone! God gave it all in Jesus so that we might experience the fullness of God's love.

And so Paul's looking at things from a resurrection perspective, and that's changed his view of everything! The standards we have for each other don't work in God's kingdom. People have value because Christ died for them – whoever they are, however they are, whether they've responded to God or not. God treasures them - period. People don't need to prove they are worthy to us. God loves them, and Jesus died for them. That's the Bishop's perspective when he offers grace to Valjean, and it should be ours, too.

Paul reminds us that We-who-are-loved love others. Claiming the blessing of God's grace helps us to stay grounded in agape love – self-sacrificing love - and steers us away from greed and selfishness. We are ambassadors for Jesus Christ. God works through you to me to make Jesus real to others. God calls us to be reconcilers because we've been reconciled to God. The Holy Spirit guides us in the work of God in us.

What's your style? Are you a giver or a taker or a matcher? How does Jesus' love for you compel you, motivate and challenge you as we live each day? Those are questions before us as we make our way to the cross with Jesus.

God is calling us to see what we can give and contribute here and now for the sake of others. Where will you show and share God's grace today, this week, as we move toward Holy Week with Jesus who will go to the cross because God so loved the world?

What will we do? May God help us to give in love and faith.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.