

Theology for the miserable ones

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I have long said that one day I'd like to write an article or a book examining the theology and social ethics of *Les Miserables*. The recent release of the newest film adaptation has spurred some theological commentary across the internet on this subject. Two of the best examples of this are [Beth Haile's use of the film as a typology of ethical theories](#) and [Richard Beck's "missional" interpretation of individual mercy in light of social justice](#). Beck's placing Enjolras and Javert along a continuum of justice is an especially interesting move. However, Beck is tempted by [the common interpretation of placing mercy/grace in contention with justice](#). It is here that I make my intervention: *Les Miserables* isn't about grace vs. justice (at least not wholly). *Les Mis* is about *restorative* and *transformative* justice vs. *retributive* justice.

During my years managing a homeless shelter I worked with numerous men who had become homeless upon leaving prison. With empty pockets they entered a society unwilling to give them jobs because of past sins and they wound up in the street. The executive director of the nonprofit, in passing, once told me that *Les Mis* was the greatest story ever told. I had never read or watched it at that point. Since then, I've seen the musical in London and Atlanta, watched the [1998 film](#) countless times, read the (unabridged!) novel, and seen the most recent film. And after all of this I am convinced that my friend and boss may have been correct. (Tangentially, he is also the one who began my move toward seeing the value of a Niebuhrian interpretation of social life. Trying to do justice for and with the poorest can do that to a neophyte Yoderian.)

Anyways, I digress. Clearly, mercy and grace are part of the story. However, and I think the movie does this better than the play (though the novel is most explicit), there is a strong condemnation of the prisons and treatment of those who have committed crimes in Victor Hugo's France. Indeed, Valjean commits his second crime, in part, because he can't get a legitimate job. In this way he is not unlike many of the homeless friends I have known. And the Bishop surely shows mercy by

not having Valjean arrested after stealing he steals the Bishop's silver. But it is here where many people miss or skip over the justice argument.

It is true that this act of grace transforms Valjean. The musical makes this clear during Valjean's soliloquy. The line "He told me I have a soul ... How does he know?" always hits me. However, and this is clearer in the novel, it is the Bishop's material aid to Valjean which makes his transformation possible. Valjean didn't just receive grace, he received the means he needed to live a virtuous life in community. Valjean uses the silver given him by the Bishop numerous times throughout his life: to build a business, to pay for Cosette, to sustain them in Paris, etc. When he realizes that he'll not be able to remain mayor he buries his treasure in the woods and returns to it several times throughout the story when he and Cosette needed for this purpose or that. This is cut out of the musical/film, but is vital to Valjean's and Cosette's survival.

Valjean was first imprisoned for stealing some food to feed his hungry relatives. He then endured 19 years of hard labor (aka state slavery) and is excluded from a dignified existence in society upon his release. He was wronged by his community. And, while the community didn't repay him for that wrong, the bishop, in a mediating position, did. Valjean doesn't just receive mercy from the bishop. He finally receives justice. He receives compensation for the countless injustices he has endured.

After this act of restorative justice Valjean is able to go revitalize a city by running a socially responsible business and governing that city with a vision of the social good that includes mercy and care for neighbors. AND THEN, when faced with the injustice he inadvertently committed against Fantine, he spends the rest of his life making right what he helped to make wrong. This is not just a supererogatory act. It is not some act from a saint. It is Valjean's application of his understanding of what justice demands. Justice demands restoration in whatever way it is possible.

In short, when watching Les Mis don't stop, as Christians are wont to do, at mercy and grace. The bishop didn't stop there and neither did Valjean. Rather, make the move to understanding justice in restorative and socially transformative ways. Because, in my reading, this is what Hugo argues for against Javert's retributivist vision. (And don't cast Javert as a simple villain, he is a man committed to a principle of justice many of us, explicitly or unconsciously, subscribe to. As his suicide makes clear, his world and the world of Valjean are not the same moral world. We live in a

world more like Javert's than Valjean's. Why is this and how can we change it?)

What "the miserable/wretched ones" need is not simply acts of mercy. What they need is a justice that restores and transforms. May we all embrace such a vision.

*Originally posted at [McCarty's blog](#)*