

Sunday, July 20, 2025

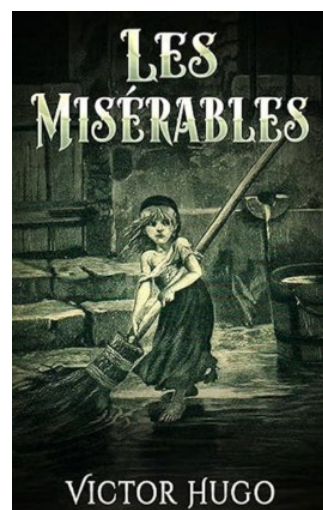
“LES MISÉRABLES: Transforming Grace | Ephesians 2:8-10 | Pastor Charlie Berthoud

The story of Les Mis primarily focuses on a former convict and how he tries to live a good life, despite an excessively harsh prison sentence and being surrounded by poverty, exploitation, and greed, in a time of political turmoil.

The musical is based on the novel by Victor Hugo, written in 1862. Most English versions of the novel have about 1400 pages, so there is a lot to the story. The novel is set in Paris between the years of 1815 and 1832, a tumultuous time following the French Revolution.

Most English language versions keep the French title, but there are a variety of other translations of the title, such as “The Miserable Ones,” “The Wretched Poor,” or “The Dispossessed.”

In the preface to the book, Victor Hugo revealed his reason for writing this massive book, which has become a classic:



So long as there shall exist, by reason of law and custom, a social condemnation, which, in the face of civilization, artificially creates hells on earth, and complicates a destiny that is divine with human fatality; so long as the three problems of the age—the degradation of man by poverty, the ruin of women by starvation, and the dwarfing of childhood by physical and spiritual night—are not solved; so long as, in certain regions, social asphyxia shall be possible; in other words, and from a yet more extended point of view, so long as **ignorance and misery** remain on earth, books like this cannot be useless.

I find the story of Les Mis not only to be compelling and engaging, but also, in the spirit of this quote, useful, since ignorance and misery sadly do remain on earth.

Les Mis the musical is one of the most popular Broadway shows of all time. The musical is just over 2 and a half hours long, so it obviously doesn't go as deep as the book. It debuted in France in 1980 and on Broadway in 1987. It has been seen by 130 million people in 53 countries, and it has been translated into 22 languages including Korean, Icelandic, and Mauritanian Creole.



A movie version of the musical was released in 2012 starring Hugh Jackman, Russell Crowe, and Anne Hathaway. Several of us watched it here at church on Wednesday night. You can find the movie on popular streaming services.

I actually saw the movie version in the theater on McKee Road in Fitchburg, back in 2013, just after I started as your pastor, while my wife and sons were still living in Pittsburgh.

Two years later in 2015, our oldest son was part of a middle school production of Les Mis, where he was police officer #2—and it was one of the finest acting performance in the history of theater, in my humble and unbiased opinion.

As with any of these musicals, there are many themes worthy of sermonic reflection, and I just want to acknowledge a few of them:



Poverty and suffering. The prequel to the story is Jean Valjean stealing a loaf of bread to provide for his sister’s hungry child. So we learn right away that people are hungry enough to do desperate things.

We see poverty and suffering clearly in the story of Fantine, a young mother, abandoned by her lover, trying to raise her daughter. Fantine ends up selling her hair, her teeth, and her body in the

effort to provide for Cosette. Her situation stands in contrast to the greed and indifference of the Thernadiers and of the French elites of the day.

Luke 4 tells us that Jesus began his ministry saying:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Courage and sacrifice. In the second act we learn about an effort of idealistic young men to resist the oppressive monarchy in uprising of 1832, waving their red flags, as they stand up against tyranny and face the guns and cannons of the king. Young Gavroche risks and ultimately gives his life for the sake of others, reflecting the words of Jesus in John 15.

Jesus said, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you.”

And Rev. Martin Luther King said, “An individual has not started living until he can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity.”

Love. Another theme, related to the first two, is love. The love shared by Marius and Cosette is a much-needed positive part of the story, although the love at first sight part of the play didn’t quite work for me. We also see non-romantic sacrificial and committed love in Valjean’s love and care for Cosette, and in his courageous journey through the sewers to save Marius.

The musical concludes with the spirit of the story as people sing

“to love another person is to see the face of God.”

This line echoes many verses in Scripture, including from 1 John 4

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us.

For me the most important theme is GRACE, and the power of grace to change someone’s life, so they become more kind and more generous. Grace is perhaps the most obvious theme as well, but its worth our reflection.



The story opens with Jean Valjean being released from prison after 19 years.

The former convict has to show his papers everywhere, and no one wants anything to do with an ex-con. He can't find work or food or a place to stay. He ends up sleeping in the cold outside a church.

The bishop invites him into the church, gives him food, and offers him a bed. In the musical he sings

"There is wine here to revive you. There is bread to make you strong,
There's a bed to rest till morning, Rest from pain, and rest from wrong."

Valjean responds to this gracious gift by stealing the bishop's silver and sneaking away at night, seeming to have lived into his identity as a convict. The next day the police bring Valjean back, throwing him on the floor in front of the bishop, telling the bishop we caught the thief and we have your silver.

But in the moment of amazing grace, the bishop says that he gave the ex-convict the silver and that Valjean had forgotten to take the candlesticks.

After the confused police officers leave, the Bishop tells Valjean to use the gift of the candlesticks and the gift of a second chance to become a better man. He sings:

You must use this precious silver
To become an honest man
By the witness of the martyrs
By the passion and the blood
God has raised you out of darkness:
I have saved your soul for God

The bishop's words and actions seem to be inspired by Ephesians 2:8-10, our scripture reading for today about grace. One way of defining grace is that it is an undeserved gift that has the power to change someone. Listen for God's word.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we may walk in them.

After Valjean receives the candlesticks and the second chance from the bishop, he is stunned, and much of the rest of the story is him wrestling with how to receive this gift.

He is torn between his identity as convict number 24601 and as Jean Valjean.

He isn't sure what to do and how to live.

Is he 24601, a convict, a criminal, destined to never change?

Or is he Jean Valjean, a kind and good hearted person, who becomes a successful businessman named who is kind and generous?

It takes time for him to figure out who he really is and what this new life means.

The book is more detailed, more nuanced in this journey with several ups and downs for this ex-convict trying to figure out how to live a new life.

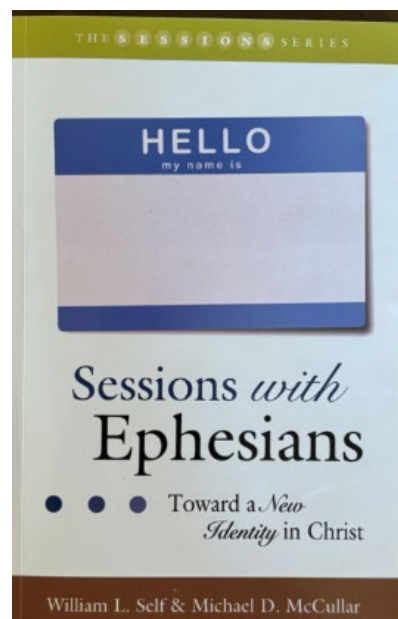
The Christian life is like this. We celebrate the good news of the gospel every week: In Jesus Christ we are forgiven and we are given the gift of new life. We spend the rest of the week—and the rest of our lives—trying to figure how to live this new life.

I have a little study book on the biblical book of Ephesians, and the title is “Toward a New Identity in Christ.” The cover of the book has a blank nametag, inviting us to think about who we are, and who we are becoming.

Ephesians, among other things, tells us that in Christ we are new creations, created for good works.

This idea of growing into new life and new identity and good works is at the core of our theology.

When we baptize someone, we call them by their full name and tell them that they are a beloved child of God. It's like we're putting a new nametag on them. We need to keep reminding ourselves that we are beloved children of God because it's easy to forget who we are.



To help us appreciate this theme of transforming grace in Les Mis, I want to share a little theological and historical info for you.

One of the classic theological documents of the Presbyterian Church, The Heidelberg Catechism was written in 1563, which is 299 years before Les Mis was published.

In the catechism there are three sections which reflect our human experience as Christians

Misery-Deliverance-Gratitude

We are sinful creatures, we are inclined to turn from God. This is the misery. God saves us, forgiving us and delivering us from our selfishness, offering us new life. Gratitude is how we respond.

People who are more clever than me have made alliterative summaries of the Catechism:

Sin-Salvation-Service
Guilt-Grace-Gratitude

This is the movement of the Christian life and this is the movement we see in the life of ex-con Jean Valjean. He moves from sin and guilt, to salvation and grace, which leads to a life of service and gratitude.

This is what we read in Ephesians: By grace you have been saved from your sin for a life of good works.

It's the intention of God that we recognize the blessing of our lives and become people of good works.

In pondering what the "good works" in Ephesians 2 was all about, I discovered something interesting, in the original Greek.

The Greek word translated as good --agathos (ἀγαθός)

The same Greek root word is used in the list of the fruits of the Spirit from Galatians 5.

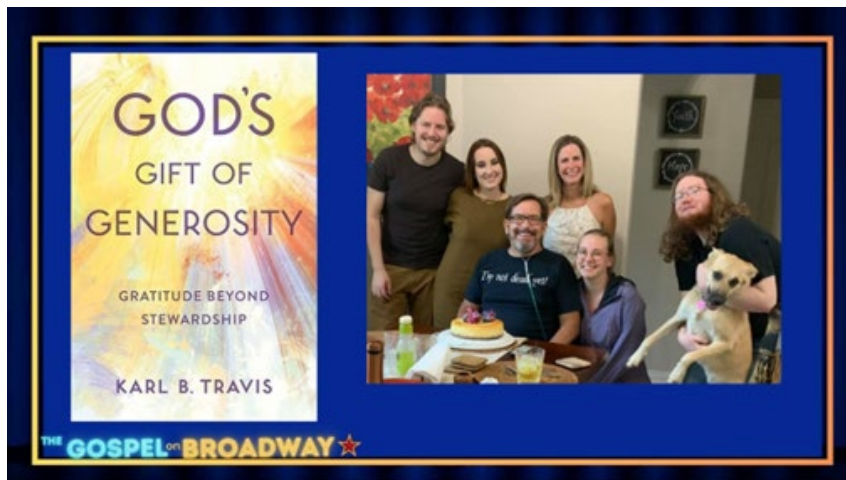
Older translations have: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

However—stay with me here—newer translations replace Goodness with Generosity.

One of the fruits of the spirit is thus generosity, which is more substantive than "goodness".

So that means we could translate the Ephesians 2.10 "For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for generosity, [to be our way of life]."

If you want the really simple version of the message for today, it comes from Genesis 12, where God calls and sends Abraham and Sarah, telling them they have been blessed to be a blessing to others.



A couple months ago, I was given a book, written by a wise and gracious Christian—a Presbyterian pastor who retired early because of a life-threatening lung disease. He has lived longer than expected and says he finished the book from his deathbed. His Facebook cover photo show him with family, and his shirt says “I’m not dead yet.”

Amazingly the book is about

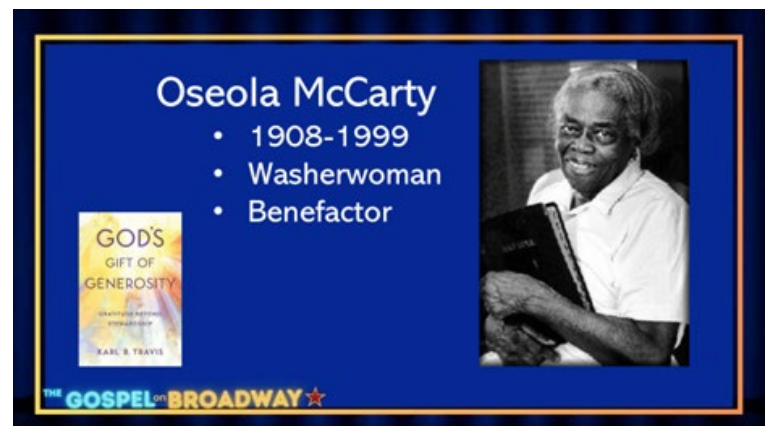
generosity. It’s called *God’s Gift of Generosity: Gratitude Beyond Stewardship*. The author invites us to recognize God’s generosity with us and how that generosity opens us to and shows us how to become more generous.

He has three sections in the book: Generosity of God. Generosity For God. Generosity With God. The idea is to move toward being generous with God. He writes:

“To be generous with God is to become progressively more generous from the heart to the bone.... To practice generosity is to engage in God’s transforming power to make something that we do into something that we are.”

In the book Travis tells the story of Oseola McCarty, who made the news in 1995. Born into a poor family in Mississippi, she stayed in school until sixth grade, when she had to start working. She spent her life washing other people’s clothing by hand. She lived a simple and frugal life. In her 80s, she met with bankers and used ten dimes to show what she wanted to happen with the money she saved. One dime, ten percent for her church. Three dimes for her three relatives, 10% each. The remaining 60% went to the University of Southern Mississippi for scholarships, to help other people get the education she never did.

Her gift was \$150,000!



Apparently she read her Bible, and she recognized her blessings, and she took to heart God’s transforming grace.

God has given us the gift of life and much more. God has in essence given us candlesticks... What are we going to do with them?