

Law vs Grace

A few days ago I saw a live performance of “Les Miserables”. It is a great story. After being imprisoned for 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his sister’s starving child, Jean Valjean is released on parole. Javert is the policeman he must report to.

But society does not welcome him back and at his lowest point he meets Bishop Myriel. The bishop who is not well off himself gives him food and shelter. But he repays him by stealing the silverware. Of course he is caught and returned to the bishop by the police. But with Jean Valjean’s life in his hands the bishop explains to the police that this man is his friend, and in his rush to leave he forgot the candlesticks which he then gives to him. The police release him, and Jean Valjean is forever changed.

He becomes a good man and even becomes mayor of the town.

Fontine is a single mother, a widow, and works in Jean Valjean’s factory from which she is unfairly dismissed by his foreman. In her desperation she turns to prostitution to provide for her child, Cosette. When he hears what happened to her Jean Valjean rescues her from prostitution and on her deathbed promises to take care of Cosette. And he does, raising her as his own daughter.

The second half revolves around the revolution. Jean Valjean supports the masses in their uprising. And when Javert is captured as a spy Jean Valjean is permitted to execute him. But he allows Javert to go free. To the great distress of Javert who cannot understand this response and suicides because he cannot face the revelation that he has spent his whole life pursuing a man who is actually a good person.

Later Jean Valjean also risks his own life to save the life of Marius, (Cosette’s fiance).

That is not the whole the story, and there are other “sub plots” within the play. But it’s enough to make a challenging point about grace and law.

Javert represents “Law” and despite his constant effort over many years he is unable to change Jean Valjean. In fact the efforts of the Law actually make him a worse person. Initially he very reluctantly stole a loaf of bread. But after 19 years under the Law he willingly stole the silverware from the one person who had shown him any compassion at all.

Javert continued to pursue Jean Valjean for his entire life. Desperately trying to prove what a bad person he was and to condemn him for whatever he could prove that he had done wrong. All the Law wants is to convict people of their mistakes and punish them for them. It has no positive effect on them at all. If there is any change it only makes them worse.

On the other hand, Bishop Myriel represents “Grace”. He interacted with Jean Valjean for only one night. But in that one brief interaction Jean Valjean was permanently changed for the good. He instantly wanted to become a better person. And he did. Becoming mayor, rescuing Fontine, raising Cosette as his own daughter, saving her fiance after the revolution, and giving Javert back his life. Grace wants to overlook the wrong which has been done and to do something to bless the wrongdoer.

The Law is relentless, it never gives up. But Grace needs only one opportunity.

So what? What does that mean for us?

We see the same thing in the Bible. The Law, (the Old Testament), convicts us of sin. It doesn’t help us to change. (At first it looks like it will, but it is powerless to do so). The Law just makes us feel worse. The Law makes us guilty. But even more, Paulus says that the law actually makes us want to break it. And we do.

But the free gift of grace, (the New Testament), which comes from God through Yeshua - changes us. You cannot become a Christian and remain unchanged.

Look at Paulus for example. As for following the Law he was “perfect”, but it made him ruthless, unloving, cold, legalistic. It made him a murderer! But after he was touched by grace he became loving, forgiving, self sacrificing.

A life of following the Law almost destroyed him, but grace changed him from the inside out after one brief encounter.

But Paulus is just typical of all of us. God could rightfully encounter all of us with law. But because of Yeshua, he is able to encounter us with grace. None of us could possibly stand if he used law. We are all guilty. We are all condemned.

But God is not the god of law, he is the god of grace. And in his grace he has accepted us. And it makes us want to change. It makes us want to be better people. It makes us want to live lives which please him.

So how about us? What do people encounter when they encounter us? Especially if they sin against us. Grace or Law?

Do we legalistically point out their flaws and their failings and reject them? Or do we overlook their failings. Do we forgive them? Do we assume the worst or do we struggle to find one possible positive interpretation of their behaviour? Do we presume innocence or do we presume guilt?

Most of us hope the guy speeding past us on the road meets a cop just around the corner. Most of us don’t want people to get away with doing the wrong thing. (Unless of course the person doing the wrong thing is us!). Most of us are upset when some young guy who blatantly broke a serious law doesn’t go to jail.

That is law. But what if we were people of grace instead of people of law.

How incredible would it be if every time someone sinned against us we responded with grace and they were permanently changed for the better. What if the story of your life was a trail of grace? What if everyone who encountered you could trace their new life back to that moment? What if thousands of people celebrating their new lives gave credit to you for that moment of grace. For that instant where you could have chosen law or grace, and you chose grace. When you could have justifiably responded with law and condemned them for their wrong doing, (and would have destroyed their life by doing so), but instead you chose grace.

Just like God did when he encountered you.