

## Orthodoxy vs. Orthopraxis

a sermon by J. R. Luck, Jr.  
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Well folks, assuming you still want me hanging around this February, I can tell you right now that we will be scheduling a church trip to Raleigh to see the 25th anniversary production of the Broadway musical *Les Miserables*. I saw Les Mis in the fall of 1988 when I entered seminary in New York City. Since then I've seen it 9 more times in New York City and on one other occasion in Richmond. Being a grad student I never had great seats, but come February I won't be sitting in the balcony. If you want to sit with me up front, please do so, just be forewarned: I will most likely sing every line of every part, from the first words "Look down" to the last word which is "Amen."

So what's up with my fascination with Les Mis? In short, my most memorable spiritual experience didn't happen in a church, but rather in the Imperial Theater in New York City. though this medium hardly does the music justice, I want to share with you 6 minutes from the opening of Les Mis. You'll find the lyrics and some explanatory notes in your bulletin. We start with Jean Valjean who has just been freed from a 19 year sentence on a chain gang.

### Les Miserables lyrics from Act 1

Jean Valjean has been released from a prison chain gang after serving 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread for his sister's dying child.

[VALJEAN] Freedom is mine. The earth is still. I feel the wind. I breathe again. And the sky clears; The world is waking. Drink from the pool. How clean the taste. Never forget the years, the waste. Nor forgive them for what they've done. They are the guilty - everyone. The day begins... and now lets see what this new world will do for me!

[He finds work on a farm]

[FARMER] You'll have to go I'll pay you off for the day. Collect your bits and pieces there and be on your way.

[VALJEAN] You have given me half what the other men get! This handful of tin wouldn't buy my sweat!

[LABORER] You broke the law; it's there for people to see. Why should you get the same as honest men like me?

[VALJEAN] Now every door is closed to me. Another jail. Another key. Another chain! For when I come to any town they check my papers and they find the mark of Cain. In their eyes I see their fear: "We do not want you here."

[He comes to an inn]

[INKEEPER'S WIFE] My rooms are full and I've no supper to spare. I'd like to help a stranger all we want is to be fair.

[VALJEAN] I will pay in advance. I can sleep in a barn. You see how dark it is. I'm not some kind of dog!

[INNKEEPER] You leave my house or feel the weight of my rod. We're law-abiding people here, thanks be to God.

[They throw him out of the inn]

[VALJEAN] And now I know how freedom feels; The jailer always at your heels - It is the law! This piece of paper in my hand that makes me cursed throughout the land - It is the law! Like a cur I walk the street, the dirt beneath their feet.

[He sits down despairingly outside a house from which emerges the Bishop of Digne.]

[BISHOP] Come in, Sir, for you are weary, and the night is cold out there. Though our lives are very humble what we have, we have to share. 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.

[The bishop's servants are horrified as Valjean enters and begins devouring the food, but they remain silent.]

[VALJEAN] He let me eat my fill - I had the lion's share. The silver in my hand cost twice what I had earned.

In all those nineteen years - that lifetime of despair and yet he trusted me.

The old fool trusted me - He'd done his bit of good. I played the grateful serf and thanked him like I should. But when the house was still, I got up in the night. Took the silver... Took my flight!

[Taking the silver cup, he runs off, but is brought back by two constables]

[CONSTABLE ONE] Tell his reverence your story

[CONSTABLE TWO] Let us see if he's impressed

[CONSTABLE ONE] You were lodging here last night

[CONSTABLE TWO] You were the honest Bishop's guest.

[CONSTABLE ONE] And then, out of Christian goodness

[CONSTABLE TWO] When he learned about your plight

[CONSTABLE ONE] You maintain he made a present of this silver.

[BISHOP] That is right. But my friend you left so early, surely something slipped your mind

[The bishop gives Valjean two silver candlesticks]

You forgot I gave these also, would you leave the best behind? So, Messieurs, you may release him for this man has spoken true. I commend you for your duty and God's blessing go with you.

[Constables leave. The bishop addresses Valjean]

But remember this, my brother. See in this some higher plan. 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 bought your soul for God!

For the next 150 minutes the audience discovers all that is made possible by that one act of unmerited grace. Starting his life over, Valjean becomes a benevolent factory owner, the mayor of a small town, and a father to a young orphan named Cosette. And many years later when Valjean dies, the candlesticks the Bishop gave him will be there by his side, lighting his way into the night.

But for a moment, let's talk not about Valjean, but about the bishop of Digne about whom we know nothing. Does he believe the wine and bread literally become the body and blood of Christ, or is it symbolic? Does he believe in the virgin birth of Christ and that Jonah was literally swallowed by a whale? Does he believe in science and evolution, or does he believe in creationism and the literal interpretation of the two creation stories in Genesis 1 and then 2? Does he believe the Bible is the inerrant Word of God, or does he take the Bible seriously but not literally? What does he believe about Jesus' death? Was it sacrificial? Was it substitutionary? Does he believe in Hell? Would he be closer to Rob Bell's position, or the position of Christian fundamentalists or the Unitarian-Universalists who believe no one is going to Hell? What about people of other religions be it Judaism or Islam? What does the bishop believe will happen to them? What does he believe about the nature of Jesus Christ? Does he believe the Spirit proceeds forth by the Son or by God the Father?

Now some of you may be saying, what does it matter. And that my friends, is my point exactly. And yet, creeds were written and uttered and wars, crusades, and inquisitions were waged over the correct answers to these questions. They mattered enough to somebody to kill. In more recent days, cultural wars are waged as to our beliefs about abortion and homosexuality. In short, our Christian culture has become obsessed with orthodoxy or right beliefs. And if a politician or a pastor or a teacher or a friend espouses something that strays from "the right answer," they are met with disdain or even physical harm. And so even while we attack heresies, Jesus and the early church point us in a radically different direction.

I have 3 theological degrees and I still have trouble following the Apostle Paul. But today Paul sets aside some of his philosophical-theological musings and turns to ethics. Today he wants to talk about not what we believe but what we do and especially those practices and virtues that Christians must cultivate in their daily living.

Love and don't fake it;	Be good friends;
Practice playing second fiddle;	Be cheerfully expectant;
Don't quit;	Help those who are needy;
Be inventive in hospitality;	Make friends with nobodies;
Don't hit back;	Discover beauty in everyone;
Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath;	
Don't insist on getting even as that job is already taken.	

And it's never been more important to learn these lesson in Christian ethics.

In this 21st century we've entered a time called the Great Emergence which means a lot of things. One of the things it means is that Christian beliefs are no longer assumed or given priority. They have become one set of beliefs amongst many in this global cafeteria of religions and philosophies. More and more people are choosing other religious beliefs. Yes, in the 1950's Christian orthodoxy and beliefs meant something, but that day is no longer.

So in a world when Christian orthodoxy and beliefs offer no social capital; when we are competing in the religious marketplace of ideas, what are we to do? Do we simply wring our hands and say woe is me? Hardly. Jesus and Paul and the early church lived in a time when they were not in the majority. They too had to compete in the religious marketplace of ideas. Today we must reclaim their emphasis on orthopraxis; on how we live. Rather that lead with Christian

beliefs, in this century we must lead with our virtues and Christian practices, especially radical hospitality for all; a servant mentality; a willingness to practice forgiveness and the desire to offer unmerited grace. That is what we have to offer in this Emergent world; our behavior, our love, our willingness to share grace.

Jean Valjean did nothing to earn a second chance. Nothing. And yet he was shown grace. Why? Because that is what Christians do; they extend grace and grace is never determined by what people have earned or whether they are the right kind of people. The bishop points the way for us in this new century, and interestingly he points the way by pointing us back to the first century and to Paul. The earliest Christians, the followers of the Way had not yet developed orthodox Christologies or ecclesiologies. The creeds and catechisms wouldn't come for another 3 centuries. But they still succeeded in changing the world through Christian virtues and practices.

When a stranger knocks at the door, most of the world says, "who is it?" But not Benedictine monks. They say, "What blessing have you brought me?" In this world of culture wars and declining church membership, we can say who is it? We can lock the doors and circle the wagons and screen people according to their beliefs. That, after all, is the most popular choice. Or, we can follow the lead of Paul and the Bishop of Digne and the Benedictines and say, "Come inside for you are weary and the night is cold out there... though our lives are very humble what we have, we have to share. Their 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. May it be so with us O God according to thy Word. Amen.