

**Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> October 2021**  
**Glynde Lutheran Church**  
**Sermon on Ephesians 2:1 – 10**  
**Theme: “By grace alone”**  
**“Appreciate afresh the incredible mercy that God has  
shown to you”**

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***Introduction:***

One thing that I have learnt over the years, *so far as preaching is concerned*, is the value of the story. I’ve realised that I can preach ideas and concepts to you until I am blue in the face, and maybe you’ll remember some of them.... But if I tell you a good story, then you’re likely to remember it, and the point *or points* that flow from the story (*cf. the stories of William R. White, and in particular his preface to his book of sermons, “Fatal Attractions”*).

You know, Jesus didn’t just preach ideas and concepts. Often he told stories with a point to them, *stories that we call “parables”*. This morning, I want to tell you a story to help you understand how incredible God’s love and mercy towards us is....

I want to tell you this story to help you understand what the Reformers were so excited about when they rediscovered that God is a merciful and gracious God.

I want to us to understand *more fully* what the phrase “By grace” means....

## *Story:*

The story that I want to tell you this morning is the story that lies at the heart of Victor Hugo's book, *Les Miserables*. It's a story that has been made into a couple of movies of late, and a story that lies at the heart of the wonderful musical based on this story.... *By the way, I think that the musical Les Miserables is the best musical ever made....*

I don't know if Victor Hugo was a Christian, or if the writer of the musical was a Christian, but as you read the book *or watch the movie*, and as you watch and listen to the musical, you can't help be struck by how God changes people by his love and his mercy. You can't help but marvel how great it is to live in a relationship with God, *rather than to live your life without God....*

Let me tell you the story that lies at the heart of *Les Miserables*:

**The central character in this musical, and in the book on which the musical is based, is a French man by the name of Jean Valjean. The story is set in France and it begins around about the end of the 18th century.**

**Jean Valjean is a woodcutter, who has fallen on hard times. It's winter and he has no work. He is not alone. He is living with his sister and her seven children, and he is the sole provider for them. One day, when there is no bread in the house and the children are crying from hunger, Jean Valjean goes out, breaks a window of the bakery, and steals a loaf of bread from the baker, so that the children can be fed.**

**But he is caught. And he is sentenced to five years hard labour in prison. He is no longer Jean Valjean, but simply a number: No. 24601. In the hell hole, which is the prison at Toulon, Jean**

**Valjean struggles to survive. He tries to escape a number of times, and his sentence is increased each time. Finally, after 19 years in prison, now aged in his 40s, Jean Valjean is released from prison with the yellow card of a person on parole.**

**After 4 days of walking, he comes to a town. He is covered with the dust and the sweat of travel, with frayed clothing, a long beard, and disheveled appearance. He shows his yellow card at the local police station, and then heads off to find food and lodging for the night. He has with him the little bit of money that he has earned over his 19 years of hard labour.**

**But word travels fast in a small town. And no one, not anyone will give him food and lodging. They are afraid of him, and justly so. For after 19 years in prison, Jean Valjean is capable of anything, even murder. He is now a hardened man, a man to be afraid of.**

**Finally, a woman points him to a door, and says, “Try over there”. Inside the door, two women are talking with an old man, and they are warning him about the presence of a paroled convict in town, and warning him to get better locks on his doors.**

**There is a knock at the door, and the man calls out, “Come in”. Jean Valjean comes in and he sees a priest with his two elderly female helpers. The priest, actually, the bishop of the town, makes this disheveled, dangerous man welcome: he feeds him at his own table, using his very best cutlery, his silver cutlery set, puts the silver candlesticks on the table, calls him “Monsieur”, and makes up a bed with fresh linen so that he can**

stay the night. Jean Valjean is utterly overcome by the priest's generosity and love.

But that night, when he wakes up in the middle of the night, Jean Valjean thinks of the silver in the cupboard by the priest's bed. He thinks of what he can buy with it. After a while, he decides to take it. He creeps into the priest's bedroom, prepared to jimmy the cupboard open and even clobber the priest if necessary. But the priest has left the silver cupboard open. Jean Valjean takes the silver and flees through a window, and over the garden wall.

The next morning, the theft of the silver is discovered by one of the women. She comes to the priest, who isn't upset by the news. When she says to him, "The monster –he's gone off with our silver!", the priest looks at her and says gently, "In the first place, was it really ours..."

I think it was wrong to keep it so long. It belonged to the poor. And what was that man if not one of them". The woman is dumbfounded.

A few minutes later, there is a knock at the door. Jean Valjean is there, being held tightly by three gendarmes, three policemen, and the policemen have the silver which Jean Valjean has stolen.

The priest, who is the bishop, turns to Jean Valjean and says: "So here you are! I'm delighted to see you. Have you forgotten that I gave you the candlesticks as well? They're silver like the rest, and worth a good two hundred francs. Did you forget to take them?"

**Jean Valjean is dumbfounded. He expected to have the priest verify that he had stolen the silver, be convicted in a court of law, and be sentenced to prison for the rest of his life. And now, instead of receiving what he justly deserved, he was being set free due to the priest's generosity of spirit.**

**Jean Valjean took the silver cutlery, and the silver candlesticks which the priest also gave to him, and he made a new life. He started up a business, became mayor of another town, and lived his life for others. But that's another story, or two or three.**

**He always remembered the final words of the priest to him: "Jean Valjean, my brother, you no longer belong to what is evil but to what is good. I have bought your soul to save it from black thoughts and the spirit of perdition, and I give it back to God" (Victor Hugo, *Les Miserable*, 71-111).**

***Exhortation:***

It's a great story. And it's a story that reminds us of God's great generosity to you and me, *and everyone*. Jean Valjean deserved to go to prison for this crime of stealing the silver from the priest. And we, too, deserve judgement and punishment from God for our crimes, *for our sins, for the things that we've done to hurt other people, and to hurt God Himself*.

Paul, at the start of our Bible reading for today, reminds us of this. Writing to people who have only recently become Christians he writes:

**In the past, you were *spiritually* dead in your disobedience and in your sins. At that time, you followed the ways of this world, and the ruler of the spiritual powers in space, the spirit who now is active in those who are in disobedient. Actually all of us at**

**one time were like them, and lived according to our natural desires, doing *whatever suited* the wishes of *our own* bodies and minds. In our natural condition, we, like everyone else, were destined to suffer God's anger (*Eph. 2:1-3*)**

But the incredible thing is that we don't get what we deserve from God.... Just as Jean Valjean was given a new life by the mercy and the generosity of the priest, so we too are offered a new life, *due to the mercy and generosity of God to us.*

God didn't leave us to rot in the prison of our guilt and our sin, nor did He abandon us to our justly deserved punishment of life apart from Him in eternity.... But He acted for us, out of love for us.

He sent His own Son, *part of His very self*, to this earth to live among us and to suffer and to die for us. On the cross at Golgotha, Jesus, *God's Son*, suffered the punishment that we deserve and made it possible for us to be set free, *as we cling to Jesus as our Saviour.*

Listen to what Paul goes on to say:

**But God's mercy is so abundant and his love for us is so great that while we were *spiritually* dead in our disobedience, he brought us to life with Christ.**

***It is by God's grace that you have been saved. In our union with Christ Jesus, he raised us with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places, in order that in the coming ages he might show the extraordinary greatness of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:4-7).***

What a magnificent God we have: a God of love, mercy, compassion, and kindness, *a God who is prepared to give us what we don't*

*deserve.* He offers us forgiveness, than the punishment that we justly deserve.

The word “grace” *by they way* means “undeserved favour” or “undeserved goodness”. It is a word that sums up how God’s incredible goodness to us!!

Paul finishes off our *passage in Ephesians chapter two* by summing it all up. He writes:

**For it is by God’s grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the results of your own efforts, but God’s gift. It is not by your works, so that no one can boast about it... (Eph. 2:8-9).**

As I was looking up some of my resources on this story of *Les Miserable*, I came across a radio message that I had given in the past on this story. I said a lot of the things that I’ve said this morning, and then I added the following bit to the radio audience who would largely have not known much about the God, *the God of the universe, who we know through Jesus.* I pointed out:

**Jean Valjean could have refused to accept the priest’s generosity to him. Likewise, we are free to refuse God’s generosity to us. But does it make sense to do that!? No way!!**

**God offers us His forgiveness and a new life, just as the priest in the musical *Les Miserables*, offered John Valjean forgiveness and a new life. And we’d have to be fools not to accept what God offers us....**

### ***Conclusion:***

This morning we are remembering the rediscovery of the Gospel, *the Good News of Jesus*, by the Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.

About five centuries ago, they rediscovered the wonderful news of Jesus that our God is not so much a God who is defined and described by the words “Judge” and “justice”, but rather a God who is best described by words like “love” and “mercy” and “kindness” and “grace”.

One of the great slogans of the Reformation was: “by grace alone”. I hope that today’s story, and our reading from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, have reminded you afresh of how wonderful our God is!!