

LES MISERABLES

Directed by Bille August
Produced by Sarah Radclyffe and James Gorman
Distributed by Columbia Pictures
Released in 1998

*"Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society.
It ever has been, and ever will be pursued, until it be obtained, or liberty be lost in the pursuit."
--James Madison, The Federalist No. 51*

Forgiveness is free, but it costs plenty. All of us chafe at injustice. But when we are in the wrong we plead for mercy. The struggle to reconcile the irreconcilable begins in one's youth and remains unresolved at death.

Though it is a strange amalgamation of terms, if there is a Christian humanism, the notion that man is redeemable through good works inspired by the imprint of the Divine, a work of art that may best epitomize such a philosophy is Victor Hugo's Les Miserables. The 1998 film adaptation directed by Bille August cuts to the heart of the matter right at the film's beginning. The bishop ransoms Valjean from "evil," and gives him "back to God." So it's not Jesus doing the redeeming, but a good man, inspired by Jesus.

There's a delightful exchange in the preceding scene as the bishop and Valjean duel with words. As man is sinful, one could argue that we deserve nothing from God, that every day is, indeed, a gift. But since each of us have fallen short of the glory of God, and will continue to stumble through life despite our best efforts, we deserve better from each other than we usually get.

"How do you know I'm not going to murder you?"

"How do you know I'm not going to murder *you*?"

"What's that—a joke?"

"I suppose we'll have to trust each other."

Jean Valjean becomes kind because he was treated kindly, for no reason, deserving the opposite. Inspector Javert is cruel. He denounces even his own parents because of their moral inferiority. He insists on order and respectability, believing it impossible for a bad man to reform. A keen investigator with a long memory, Javert suspects Valjean from the beginning, embarking on a pursuit of our hero lasting ten years. Indeed, by Javert's way of thinking, if a man is evil and cannot be reformed, then Valjean, for all his wealth, wisdom, patience, self-discipline, and moral strength, must be putting on an act. Javert dismisses the trial in which Valjean betrays his true identity, and Cosette's liberation, and Valjean's generosity to his workers, as totally inconsequential. The man is making a mockery of France's institutions, and his very respectability makes it all the more important that he be destroyed, for the sake of others who would be tempted to deny their true nature. Such misguided notions would upset the proper order of society. Some are destined to look up at others. And others are destined to look down. For Javert, there's no countenancing hypocrisy (even though it's a universal

malady). He is as critical of himself as he is of his prey. He insists on being punished after he denounces *Monsieur le Maire*. Instead, Valjean orders him to forgive himself!

Is there justice in mercy? Are such concepts incompatible or complimentary? Soviet dissident Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn observed in 1978:

I have spent all my life under a Communist regime and I will tell you that a society without any objective legal scale is a terrible one indeed. But a society with no other scale but the legal one is also less than worthy of man. [...] A society based on the letter of the law and never reaching any higher fails to take advantage of the full range of human possibilities. The letter of the law is too cold and formal to have a beneficial influence on society. Whenever the tissue of life is woven of legalistic relationships, this creates an atmosphere of spiritual mediocrity that paralyzes man's noblest impulses.

Javert is right in one respect. If we are not ruled by laws, we are prisoners of bribery and brute force. Valjean has already learned the limits of the law. He sees his incarceration for stealing as disproportionate to the crime, but at least grounded in reality. Now older and wiser, he sees revolution—the disruption of the rule of law—as an invitation to chaos; Marius and his comrades-in-arms will be crushed just as Valjean was crushed in the quarries. And if they somehow succeed, then there is no government, just a constant jockeying for power and a return to Robespierre and the Reign of Terror where brute force, betrayal, and lies poison anything left that is decent in man. That's why he implores Marius to abandon the barricades and escape with Cosette—Marius can have the love that Valjean was denied when Fantine's spirit fled. Love is the only escape from the world's horrors.

Exponents of the late-19th-century Social Gospel thought like Valjean. They launched reform movements confronting poverty, alcoholism, and women's suffrage, using the moral authority of the church to tackle real, but temporal, problems, rejecting any emphasis—as was propounded in the Great Awakening—on contentious issues of eternal salvation or damnation. Their focus was on the here and now. And when arguments to morality or the guilt-inducing example of selfless crusaders was not enough to effect real change, they resorted to overhauling the law, sometimes with unintended—arguably disastrous—consequences.

Javert has a zealot's devotion to the law, and is blind to its limits. That is because he has never suffered like Valjean suffered, and he has never been shown inexplicable kindness.

The inspector, in his final showdown with Valjean by the River Seine, remarks that he's been trying to decide what the convict "deserves." He also says he's worked hard to be in the right, to never break the law. However, these concepts are irreconcilable if the law calls for a punishment that is unjust. Perhaps Javert is right. Perhaps we make too many excuses for our many failings, that punishments meted out by the law are merited—man is corrupt and agonizingly selfish, indeed (just remember the Thenardiens' atrocious treatment of Cosette).

But Valjean is the exception. He was those things (thanks to the blind, uncomprehending force of the State [in the quarries] that took everything from him, reducing him to a beast). Yet he did reform.

However, his beneficence does not extend to love for enemies. This is one of the great distinctions between Christian humanism and Christianity. Javert, at the water's edge, all but implores Valjean to admit that he hates Javert. This would give Javert solace, strangely enough.

Jesus calls us to love our enemies, to bless those who persecute us, a high calling, indeed, and only possible once we realize what wrongs we are, ourselves, guilty of. But Valjean replies, "I don't hate you. I don't feel anything."

So Valjean refused to kill Javert when he had the opportunity, even though he knew his agony would be prolonged. This is too much for Javert to handle. If Valjean is the type of man Javert suspects, then he would have no hesitation in killing a sworn enemy. Moreover, Valjean is willing to sacrifice his own life for the sake of a young woman who is not even his daughter. He is willing to give her to Marius and give himself over to the law. But the law does not countenance mercy, as Javert observes.

He must kill himself. By so doing he has not foresworn his duty to put parole-violator Valjean away, *and* he retreats from a world where, he is finally convinced, justice and the law are *not* synonymous.

Javert was relentless in his pursuit of Valjean, and just when he thought he had trapped him...Javert realized he had trapped himself.

The center would not hold.

Les Miserables challenges us to believe in our fellow man, to forgive, to forego vengeance, to live in peace, embracing one another in charity. It acknowledges that this power is of Divine origin, but it implies that our actions of unmerited faith in our fellow man secure our—perhaps eternal, but certainly temporal—salvation (rather than faith in Christ alone).

In any event, as we reach the denouement we're blessed with one of the greatest endings to any film, thanks, in no small part, to Basil Poledouris's sensitive, unobtrusive scoring.

It is a new day, and the great city is quiet after a fortnight of tumult. Valjean can walk, for the first time, unmolested. He can finally go where he likes, exploring and discovering. He has nothing to fear. And he found this deliverance not by acting as prudence, or cold logic, demanded. No, he has not betrayed the blessing of the bishop, nor squandered that unmerited act of faith. He has not returned evil for evil. And the angry question he posed to the bishop has been answered—it was man, not God, who treated him contemptuously. God was there all along, waiting to reveal His inspired plan of grace at the appointed time.

Jean Valjean's faith has been rewarded. He is finally, unequivocally, free.