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**The Gospel & Les Misérables**  
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**A new story must be told!** Jean Valjean sings out...What is that new story? **That new story is GRACE...**

*During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world were discussing whether any one belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of return from death. The debate went on for some time, until C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. "What's the rumpus about?" he asked, and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity's unique contribution among world religions. In his forthright manner, Lewis responded, "Oh, that's easy. It's grace."*

**GRACE UPON GRACE**

Do you know about Grace today? God's kind of grace?

The Greek word for grace is **CHARIS** and appears about 170 times in the New Testament

**CHARIS signifies the unmerited work of God in people's hearts, through the agency of the Holy Spirit.**

**Grace (CHARIS) is a spontaneous gift from God to people -generous, free and totally unexpected and undeserved"<sup>1</sup>**

Are you aware that Grace is the essence and uniqueness of the Christian faith?

And the reason we are doing a series on Les Misérables is because it is a story based on GRACE....God's kind of grace...

God's grace is the new story...friends

Its not about the law anymore, its not about being a good person  
Its all about who God is...in us...totally undeserved, unmerited

1) Oh by the way...here's \$20. Just thought you could use that.  
Are you surprised?  
Grace always surprises us...Why are you giving me \$20 you might ask?  
Just because I want to  
Did I you do something to deserve it? No. I just want to give you \$20  
bucks  
Is that OK? Can you receive it?  
That's GRACE.

(IMAGES FROM MOVIE TO HELP TELL STORY)

You heard the story that Dan told the kids – the first scene in Les Mis  
Jean Valjean a convicted criminal who is on parole, can't find a job.  
He is sentenced to hard labor for years because he stole a loaf of bread  
to feed his kids...and now on parole he is trying to find someone to take  
him in, to give him a job, to befriend him and no one does.

Finally, *finally* he stumbles upon a bishop who sees his plight and kindly  
takes him into his home. He has pity on him, and he offers him food.  
Jean Valjean –formerly prisoner 24601 – hungrily downs the food.  
He hasn't eaten in forever....  
The Bishop gives him more until he is full and satisfied.  
Then he offers Jean Valjean a warm bed, and bids him goodnight.  
He's so kind!

But in the middle of the night, Jean Valjean, steals the Bishops silver  
cutlery and plates and makes a run for it. He thinks he can make it but  
he is picked up by the police, and dragged back to the Bishop.  
He knows he is going to the hard labor camp again...maybe even to be  
killed.  
He knows there is no possibility for him to be set free ever again.  
He cannot look the bishop in the eye.  
This time he deserves the punishment. This is what happens when you  
do something wrong. You get punished for it.  
Justice has to be served.  
There needs to be a consequence to restore the balance – to make what  
is wrong right.

You just don't get away with things like that.

But instead of condemning him, the Bishop goes and gets his candlesticks

His silver ones...and tells the police...don't arrest him this cutlery was a gift I gave him right before he left...

And by the way...Jean Valjean...here are the candlesticks as well...

(IMAGE)

I think you forgot to take these – you left them behind

Here you go...In the original version of this story the bishop is very poor...it costs him something – his life's earnings to buy Jean Valjean back...it was a sacrifice...

He didn't have to do that! That sacrifice is over and above what was necessary...

He'd already saved this prisoners skin by telling the police he'd given the stolen goods as a gift...

But now he throws the candlesticks in too...

You see that's what God is like

Over and above in generosity and kindness

Over and above in his GRACE

And the candlesticks are of course so symbolic – these are Candlesticks that hold up the light...the light that says I have something more to show you...to illuminate for you...there is more than your dark small world of thievery and guilt

And the bishop shoves those candlesticks into Jean Valjean's bag

And then after the police leave he says to Jean Valjean

**“I have bought your soul for God”**

2) Oh...by the way...here's another \$20. Just thought you could use that.

Again...I just gave you \$20

Not because you earned it, but just because I wanted to do it

I am in a generous mood today

I want to give...I like doing this right now...some days I am stingy but today I am generous

But God is always in a generous mood  
God is the great giver of abundance...and mercy...and a radical outrageous forgiver of sins....we can never out give God  
His love is way beyond us...  
It is in his nature to give...and give abundantly...even when it hurts him  
Even when it breaks his heart...like it did on the cross...he pours out his best for us....

Out of the great love with which he loved us  
On the cross – he bought our soul for God  
Not because we were so good  
But because he wanted to buy us back for himself;

Here, he says...someones got to pay the price (cause there is always a consequence to sin) but I don't want it to be you – I don't want you to suffer  
Let me take your darkness on myself and I will pay the penalty for your sin, and buy you back by sacrificing my life...

Today...It's a new story friends, it's the story of GRACE  
Its no longer about what we do right and wrong  
Rather its all about being so grateful, being so aware that we are set free that we fall head over heels in love with this God of grace  
And become transformed because of that love

How many of you have gone to see the movie Les Mis? (Come see it here this Friday night at 7pm)  
It came in theatres on Christmas Day and we all went with some friends to see it  
And there was this man in front of me...he was a business man – he looked businessy even though it was Christmas Day he had that professional “I am going to work” look about him – even though he was going to a movie

Very reserved, dignified looking...

And I am telling you...after the movie was over...that dignified man  
He was just bawling his eyes out – the only reason I looked at him was  
that he was making so much noise – snorting and  
sobbing, weeping with tears streaming down his cheeks  
I couldn't believe it....

And most of the rest of the theatre was in tears as well – rummaging  
around for tissues; wiping their eyes on their sleeves...

And I thought wow...that's the gospel...that why its good news  
There's something about GRACE that hits us at the core of our being  
Cause...

We all long for it...maybe because we know our very existence is based  
in GRACE.

And GRACE is who God is and what he does

He grants us unmerited favor – through Jesus Christ our Lord

Free forgiveness; unconditional love; and over the top generosity

The world just doesn't do that – and yet we were created for it – we long  
for it

*3) (Give another \$20) Maybe you think I am being unwise handing this  
out – that it could be used for a better purpose. Maybe you are thinking  
this is totally not prudent. You know what...God is not prudent with his  
grace...he is no respecter of persons...his rain fall on the just and the  
unjust...he is delightfully generous and unconditionally giving. I can think  
of no better way to spend this money... to illustrate what I am talking  
about than doing this right now. Cause you are going to remember that I  
did this, and when you do, remember God's grace...*

The world is constantly saying “Prove yourself...prove that you are  
worthy of this or that...show me your skills, your talents, your abilities  
and maybe we'll be interested.”

I have three kids...one is a sophomore in hs - - one is in college, and one  
going into college next year- for them its SAT's, ACT's, for the one  
college its GRE's...and GPA's and how many more three initialed  
acronyms are there out there to measure our worth?

The world doesn't operate on grace...it operates on merit

I was working on this talk and I went downtown to have lunch Tim on Friday  
And as I was thinking about all this I went to the meter and there was a guy there fumbling around with some change and I had three quarters... and I said,  
“Here you go sir...Let me just pop this quarter in there for you!”  
It was a quarter. Twenty-five copper pennies!  
And he looks at me in utter astonishment and says “Thank you so much!”  
He was so unprepared for a gracious act – and it was tiddlywinks for me – not even a sacrifice  
The world doesn’t do grace well – they aren’t prepared for it  
It throws them for a loop – it is out of the box – comes in from left field  
But they are so grateful! They weep or they are astounded...

And yet this is who the God of Jesus Christ is – if only people really knew what God was like they’d be all over this thing called Christianity  
I really think that the enemy works overtime to create distorted images of God in peoples minds that will keep them at arms length from the wonder of the gospel..

But see...

This is why we who know God...worship God – the God who is so OTHER than us- so much more wonderful and gracious and merciful than the world has to offer  
You are worthy to be praised...we sing...cause when we catch a glimpse of you Lord...there’s no turning back

When we realize the majesty and greatness of our Creator and see that we are loved by that One – that we are pursued relentlessly and passionately despite ourselves...

Despite our sinful, broken, stingy, small minded, fearful, struggling selves

We worship God...because we can’t believe his grace - that we are loved that much...we’re astounded...

Our lives are not our own...our life is a gift from God...he owns us

And every time we live life on our own, doing our own thing, separate from God, its like we are stealing... (Just like Jean Valjean stole the silver)As if we think we had something to do with all of this -  
But when we come to him, he shoves the candlesticks into our bag that we call our lives and he tells us...get a clue  
Live for me...not for yourself  
Change from being a stealer, a robber – living for yourself - to being a person illuminated by the candles of GRACE  
I love you, I have forgiven you, and you are set free. By my son’s blood I have bought your soul for God. Live for me...love me...worship me

That kind of Divine  
Grace is powerful...that kind of Divine grace changes us

It did for Jean Valjean...he became a different person after this experience with the Bishop; if you know the story...after this he became honest, and noble, and good – not because he had to, but because he wanted to – he found himself, his true identity in the moment when GRACE touched him

*(4)Here’s another \$20 bill. If you had known I was handing out money today you would have brought your friends – this place would have standing room only*

But something far more valuable than money is available here today, and everyday – something we need far more than currency  
It’s the candlesticks of over the top grace....from our Creator God who loves us, and owns us, and has pursued us –  
It’s what we experience when we come to the cross (IMAGE), and lay our burdens down – when we are tired of trying so hard on our own...

Here we find not wrath...not judgment...but grace upon grace...and it astounds us and relieves us

We aren’t expecting no condemnation, but we long for it...  
It isn’t how the world would deal with us, harshly and punitively – and we are surprised at God’s mercy, but so intensely grateful  
Caught off guard that he would make the sacrifice for our sins in our place, but so in awe...so in awe it changes us

And this love captures our hearts, and drives us toward God...

Paul, astounded, awed, mesmerized by God's grace declares the following...:

**“What, then shall we say in response to this (grace)? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all – how will he not also, along with him, *graciously* give us all things?(over the top!)...It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? ... I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 8:31-39 (selec)**

As we come to this table we see Jesus life poured out for us because of God's grace...And

If you wanted to sum up his words to the disciples that night when he had that last supper with his disciples, you might say that his message in essence was “I am about to buy your souls for God – by my own blood”, and **“A new story must begin...Its a story called GRACE.”**

Let us Pray...