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FRIENDLY VESSELS

I recently saw a video of a preacher talking about (against) the doctrines of Joel Osteen. He included several clips of Mr. Osteen saying that because he was a follower of God he was beautiful/blessed/powerful/etc. This preacher then proceeded to make an argument from scripture that we are “earthen vessels” rather than vessels of precious metal. He essentially said that God sends the world his message in chamber pots rather than golden goblets, arguing that Mr. Osteen thinks of himself more as the latter. It sounded like a good argument. Then I looked at the scriptures and realized that he was as guilty of twisting the scriptures as he claimed Mr. Osteen was. While I don’t agree with Mr. Osteen’s doctrine, neither do I agree with hand-picking your scriptures to prove a point, while ignoring the whole context. Instead we should look at everything the Bible says about vessels of gold or clay.

The two passages this preacher used come from the apostle Paul. They are:

But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour. (1 Tim 2:20)

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us. (2 Cor 4:7)

The problem with the argument that was given is that the passage in Timothy does not equate the precious metals with honor and the wood and clay with dishonor. Some of each may be for dishonorable purposes. The passage continues

If a man therefore purge himself from these [vain babblings, verse 16], he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master’s use, and prepared unto every good work.

(The passage may be used against the so-called Prosperity Gospel by pointing out that both the rich and the poor vessels are pure before God. Unfortunately for that preacher, it was not used that way. He forgot that Paul said both the metal and the clay vessels are part of the great house.)

The point of the passage in Timothy is the purging or cleansing, not which vessels are more honorable than the others. The Law of Moses, with which Timothy was

intimately familiar, had rules for cleansing all types of vessels that may have become unclean. The difference was not in the use of the vessel but whether it could withstand fire. In purging (cleansing) ourselves from vain babblings and immorality, some must go through the fire while others through the water. God knows which you can withstand. If this says anything about the gold and silver vessels (the rich of this world?) it is that they will suffer more in their cleansing than the wood and earthen vessels.

Then there is the passage in 2 Corinthians. It must be noted that it is an entirely different context than the passage in Timothy. Paul says we have the gospel in less glamorous vessels so that the glory of God is not diminished by the container. It is not that the container is less honorable, but rather that it is less noticeable. Earlier he said, “But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost.” (2 Cor 4:7) It makes me think of Gideon. In Judges 7, Gideon took a small army against the hordes of Midian. Each Israelite held a sword and a lamp inside a clay pot. At the trumpet sound they broke the clay pots so that the light which was hidden now shined forth, confusing the Midianites but encouraging the Israelites. So it is with our earthen vessels. The light is hidden from those who will not see, but shines from the clay pot to enlighten those who would believe.

When God gave the law for the water to cleanse one who had touched a dead body (Num 19:17-19), it had to be in an earthen vessel. We may be “earthen vessels,” but we are not chamber pots. We are the containers for the gospel. Some vessels in the church may be gold and silver, but the earthen vessels are no less honorable. Nor any more so.

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JAVERT/PAUL

Victor Hugo was raised a Catholic by his mother, but later in life followed his father's Rationalist views. Nevertheless, he continued to be a religious man, praying daily and incorporating religious themes into his writings. One of his two most famous novels, *Notre Dame de Paris* (known in English as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*) was written in part to spur the rebuilding of the titular cathedral, which was in a horrid state of disrepair. Although the book has a very anti-Catholic flavor (the character Frollo being a lecherous and avaristic priest), it did result in the renovation of the cathedral into what is still one of the most popular tourist sites in Paris.

It was Hugo's other great (by his own admission, although it got lousy reviews in France at the time) novel, *Les Misérables*, that was written as a "religious book." It is indeed full of religious symbolism. Almost every major character goes through a resurrection of sorts in order to become a better person. The book seems an indictment of social injustice, similar to the writings of the prophet Amos. The main themes are love and compassion; it is those characteristics that change people and are contagious. Another theme is the natures of justice and mercy.

Some Christians have a
hard time believing
justice and mercy can
coexist.

For those unfamiliar with the story, here is a very brief synopsis. Jean Valjean was put into prison for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his family, and ends up spending nineteen years in jail because of escape attempts. While spending the night with a priest he steals some silver candlesticks. When he is caught, the priest shows compassion by claiming he gave him the candlesticks. This prompts Valjean to change his ways. He becomes a philanthropic manufacturer and mayor, who ends up raising the daughter of one of his employees. Meanwhile, Inspector Javert is searching for Valjean to take him back to jail, because he does not believe a man can change his nature. Valjean's foster daughter, Cosette, grows up and falls in love with a revolutionary named Marius. Valjean joins the revolution to protect Marius. Javert joins the revolution as a spy. At the barricades, Valjean has the opportunity to kill Javert but spares his life. Javert lets Valjean go free so that he can save Marius. When Marius and Cosette marry, Valjean confesses his past, and they

forgive him. Javert cannot reconcile his sense of justice with Valjean's mercy, or his own, and ends up jumping off a bridge to his death. Valjean dies a respected man. (This omits several main characters and significant portions of the plot, but is sufficient for the purpose of this article.)

The character of Inspector Javert is very clearly defined, although he is rather one-dimensional. He has spent his life in pursuit of justice. The law is what is important. As far as he is concerned, Jean Valjean is merely a prisoner who is not showing his credentials as an ex-con as required by law. Justice is justice, and has no place for mercy. A man cannot change, so there is no room for forgiveness. When he shows Valjean mercy, he is so conflicted that his only possible solution is suicide.

Javert is made the antagonist of the novel because Hugo understood what some Christians have a hard time believing. Justice and mercy can coexist. Some people claim that the God of the Old Testament is a God of justice, and in the New Testament he is a God of mercy. They fail to see that such thinking requires two Gods, not one. Throughout the Bible, God is shown to be both just and merciful.

The LORD is longsuffering, and of great mercy, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation. (Num 14:18)

In spite of this promise, God tells Ezekiel, "The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son." (Ezek 18:20) Justice is tempered by mercy.

Paul

This view that man cannot change is proven false by Paul the apostle. If ever there was a man who seemed unchangeable it would seem to be Saul of Tarsus. When the Jewish leaders had Stephen stoned, Saul participated in the execution. He was so determined to destroy The Way that he even got permission to go to foreign countries to bring followers of Jesus back to Jerusalem in chains. He even describes himself as fervent in his persecution of the church.

If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. (Php 3:4-6)

In the next sentence, however, he says, “But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ.” His alteration was complete; so complete, in fact, that believers in Jerusalem did not trust his conversion. (Acts 9:26) They were like Javert.

Many Christians seem to have the same failing. A few years ago, convicted mass murderer Jeffrey Dahmer was baptized while in prison. Public comments ranged from “Praise the Lord” to “He is just trying to get his sentence reduced.” Admitting that only God knows his motivation for certain, it is not up to Christians to question his sincerity. On a less extreme note, some young ladies who have gotten pregnant while unmarried have publicly confessed sin and asked for forgiveness from God and their congregations. Sometimes God has been willing to forgive, but the congregation has not (sometimes even rejecting the child as well). Now, Mr. Dahmer or these young ladies may not have turned out to be Paul, but they at least deserved better treatment than he got at the hands of the Jerusalem congregation.

Did Saul of Tarsus change? Look at the evidence. The man who was willing to take the lives of Christians gave his life to preaching Christ; further, he gave his life *for* preaching Christ. Over half of the New Testament was written by him. He catalogued the things that he suffered for the cause he once persecuted, and this catalogue contains things that would not be borne by an unchanged man.

Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. (2 Cor 11:24-28)

Other Christians

Paul may be an extreme example, but he is not the only one. In fact, all one has to do is look in churches around the world to see other examples. Everyone, by nature it seems, is or becomes a sinner. “So death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned.” (Rom 5:12) It seems that one of the biggest questions people have is, “Will I go to hell if I...” then insert any act which may be a sin. The proper answer, from Javert’s view, is, “Yes, no matter what the first sin was.” Justice says that a person is deserving of eternal punishment from the time that person commits their first sin, regardless of the nature of that sin. Any sin thereafter just proves that one is guilty of sin.

If Javert and those of his ilk are correct, then everyone is deserving of punishment. This can lead to either of two conclusions. “I must do as much good as possible, even knowing it won’t atone, because there is so much bad in the world.” This is the more favorable of the two, even though it makes no real difference in relieving the guilt or reducing the sentence. The other option is more logical. “Since I have sinned and will be punished, I might as well do whatever I want; the punishment is the same for one sin or a lifetime of sin.” These attitudes, of course, depend on justice being the only option.

Justice can be tempered by mercy. Forgiveness is possible. A failure to see that leads only to the dilemma proposed in *Les Miserables*, a dilemma that resulted in suicide.

He beheld before him two paths, both equally straight, but he beheld two; and that terrified him; him, who had never in all his life known more than one straight line. And, the poignant anguish lay in this, that the two paths were contrary to each other.

Sometimes God has forgiven but congregations have not.

One of these straight lines excluded the other. Which of the two was the true one? (*Les Miserables*, Vol V, Book 4, Chapter 1)

The problem is, the two paths are not contrary to each other. Even justice has a place for mercy, and even mercy has a place for justice. That is because, by the grace of God, man can change. Paul knew this in himself, and he knew it in others.

Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor those who commit homosexual acts, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God. (1 Cor 6:9-11)

Justice must be satisfied. Those who commit the unrighteous acts Paul lists deserve punishment. Mercy, though, allows someone else to take the punishment. That is where Jesus comes in. Someone must bear the punishment to satisfy justice. Jesus, by leading a sinless life, was able to do that for us.

Les Miserables is a religious work. The thing, though, that its antagonist, and seemingly its author, forgets is that justice was satisfied and yet mercy reigns. The love and forgiveness that are the main themes of the book are only possible because Jesus died to demonstrate them.

A PROCLAMATION

FROM A CHRISTIAN
A Proclamation

Whereas:

Jesus, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men (Php 2:16-7); and

Whereas:

Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear (Isa 59:2); and

Whereas:

We have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin (Heb 4:15); and

Whereas:

what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh (Rom 8:3); and

Whereas:

Being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Php 2:8); and

Whereas:

Jesus said, "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also (Jn 14:3); and

Whereas:

The Lord Jesus the same night in which he was betrayed took bread: And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me (1 Cor 11:23-25)

Now therefore:

As often as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim his death till he comes (1 Cor 11:26).

Whereunto:

I do set my signature and my seal on every such day as I partake of the Lord's Supper in accordance with scripture.

[Signature], A CHRISTIAN

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