

Many of us are familiar with the book *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, which has been made into many different forms of media. This story is still very popular today because it has a lot to teach us about living our own lives for the sake of others and finding God.

The main character, Jean Valjean, begins the story in prison, where he is serving time for stealing a loaf of bread. Upon his release, Valjean is a broken man, beaten down by 19 years of harsh punishment. Even as a free man, he has a difficult time adjusting to life, finding honest work, or even finding a place to sleep. Valjean is a bitter and broken man since the world is so cruel to him.

This all changes when he meets a bishop who offers him shelter. The bishop takes the parolee in, offers him food, and a warm bed for the night. Jean Valjean is at first in disbelief at the kindness shown by this bishop, but he then falls back into temptation and wakes in the middle of the night to steal the bishop's silver. In the morning, Valjean is brought back by police officers to answer to the bishop, who dismisses them, saying that he gave the silver to his guest the night before. The bishop hands his two silver candlesticks, all that was left behind, to Valjean, saying that he must use this money to become an honest man. The bishop tells Valjean that he has bought his soul from evil and given it to God, washing away all his sins. The incredible kindness shown by this bishop causes Jean Valjean to rethink everything about his life, and inspires him to leave his life of sin and to become an honest man.

Valjean breaks his parole and becomes the owner of a factory with the money he got from the silver. He is well-respected and loved by the townsfolk due to the huge economic impact his business provided. He believes that he has done everything needed to become a good and honest man. With this thought in mind, Valjean becomes negligent of his workers, and an innocent young woman who needs all the money she can get in order to support her daughter, is fired by an unjust foreman. Without a job, this woman loses herself. She sells everything she has, including her hair, and falls into a dark state, turning to prostitution in order to pay for her daughter. Valjean comes across her one day and realizes how his negligence is responsible for her falling into this sad and near-death state. He is forced to re-analyze his life and to find a way to help this woman and to keep his promise to the bishop.

This instance of seeing a mistake and working to change it happens several times throughout the course of his life. Valjean makes many mistakes throughout the rest of the story, but with the inspiration from the bishop, his love for others, and his growing relationship with God, he always finds a way to make himself better and to make a good impact on others.

Jean Valjean is a great model for us as Catholic gentlemen. In this very small piece of the story, we see that Valjean is not a perfect man. None of us is perfect, yet we are charged with the task of overcoming our faults in order to live a life in Christ.

Just as all of us were when we were born, Valjean begins the story with no knowledge and no relationship with God. He is miserable until he meets the bishop, who introduces God to him through extreme kindness. Of course, his relationship with God could not be perfect right away, so he continues to make mistakes and learns how he needs to be better. He faces tremendous adversity, but he never gives up in his quest to find God and to become a good man. Much of Valjean's life is spent taking care of others. Most of the fortune he amassed from the silver and from his factory is given out to people

who are miserable, as he once was. Valjean shows the same kindness to others that the bishop showed to him, because that simple act of treating him with kindness was all that was needed to bring him into a path of goodness and faith.

Clearly I am not telling a large portion of the story here, but this short introduction is all that is needed to see how it applies to us as Knights of Columbus. Although we are Knights, we still make mistakes, and we must never give up. We must continue, as Valjean did, to find ways to better ourselves and prevent ourselves from making similar mistakes in the future. Valjean is also very charitable, a trait he learned from the bishop, and something that our order is very familiar with. Through simple acts of charity and showing kindness to others, we can make as big of an impact on someone else as was made on Jean Valjean. We have the ability to both strengthen the faith and goodness in our own lives while at the same turning others from lives of sin toward God.

Jean Valjean grows close to God through prayer, charity, and self-assessment. With these tools, he is brave enough to constantly change his actions in order to keep his promise to the bishop and to God. We also must employ these same tools in order to live out our lives as Catholic gentlemen, as Knights of Columbus, and to bring ourselves closer to God.