

Text: 2 Chronicles 33:1-6, 10-18

Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. 2 He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. 3 He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had demolished; he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them. 4 He built altars in the temple of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "My Name will remain in Jerusalem forever." 5 In both courts of the temple of the LORD, he built altars to all the starry hosts. 6 He sacrificed his sons in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced sorcery, divination and witchcraft, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger. . . The LORD spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention. 11 So the LORD brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon. 12 In his distress he sought the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers. 13 And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God. 14 Afterward he rebuilt the outer wall of the City of David, west of the Gihon spring in the valley, as far as the entrance of the Fish Gate and encircling the hill of Ophel; he also made it much higher. He stationed military commanders in all the fortified cities in Judah. 15 He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the LORD, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city. 16 Then he restored the altar of the LORD and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the LORD, the God of Israel. 17 The people, however, continued to sacrifice at the high places, but only to the LORD their God. 18 The other events of Manasseh's reign, including his prayer to his God and the words the seers spoke to him in the name of the LORD, the God of Israel, are written in the annals of the kings of Israel.

The dictionary defines a cliché as “an expression or idea that has become trite.” In my lifetime I have learned many clichés about life lessons. An example is what Grandpa Laabs used to tell us, in German, when we had not done the right thing. He’d say, “Zu früh alt, zu spät weise!” “So early old; so late smart.” How true! Another cliché that I have heard over and over again about or from a person who has had a difficult life is this: “I have learned my lessons in the school of hard knocks.” Perhaps the most common cliché about a person who seems to learn from experience only and not from words is this: “They always seem to learn things the hard way!”

Has that ever been true about you? I’m not asking for any true confessions in front of the congregation, but if you are like me, and you are, that expression has probably been true about you more often than you would like to admit – “They always seem to learn things the hard way!” It seems to be a trait of human nature not to learn our lessons easily.

The Bible is full of stories about people who learned things the hard way. This morning’s first lesson is a good example of that. When the Apostle Paul was writing his first letter to the Christians in Corinth, he gave them some insight into why God has given us the Old Testament. He wrote, *These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. 12 So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. (1 Corinthians 10:11-13)* In other words, as Peter, Paul and Mary used to sing, “There’s a lesson to be learned from this and I’ve learned it very well.”

But do we always learn those lessons well? Perhaps not. Maybe that is why this Word of God is before us today. May the Spirit teach us well and may we learn from the past! Our first lesson reminds us that:

Sometimes We Learn Things the Hard Way.

- 1. Ignoring God’s will leads to pain and repentance.**
- 2. God’s grace leads to a life that follows his will.**

1. Ignoring God’s will leads to pain and repentance.

You may not know much about King Manasseh of Judah, but if you were listening to the first lesson, you know now that he

didn't learn his lessons easily. The kings of Israel and Judah were a mixed bag, at best. Saul started good and ended badly. David was undoubtedly the best and most noble king, but he had his moments too. Solomon did both good and bad, but at the end of his reign, the Kingdom was divided -- a period of history that saw more bad kings than good in both Israel and Judah, the two parts of the divided kingdom. Eventually, the northern kingdom of Israel was carted off into captivity.

To understand Manasseh we need to know about his father, another king named Hezekiah. Hezekiah was one of the good guys, a faithful King who during his long reign restored God-pleasing worship to the people of Judah. But when Hezekiah's life came to an end, the heir to the throne, Manasseh, was only twelve years old. In the beginning of his career as king his wickedness could be perhaps blamed on the evil advisors who surrounded him. But as time went on he had no one to blame except himself. Not only did he reverse the worship reforms of his father, he went out of his way to do what was evil. So the first lesson of this reading is simple. **Ignoring God's will leads to pain. . .**

Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem fifty-five years. 2 He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites. 3 He rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had demolished; he also erected altars to the Baals and made Asherah poles. He bowed down to all the starry hosts and worshiped them. 4 He built altars in the temple of the LORD, of which the LORD had said, "My Name will remain in Jerusalem forever." 5 In both courts of the temple of the LORD, he built altars to all the starry hosts. 6 He sacrificed his sons in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced sorcery, divination and witchcraft, and consulted mediums and spiritists. He did much evil in the eyes of the LORD, provoking him to anger. . . The LORD spoke to Manasseh and his people, but they paid no attention.

The same God who had given the law to his people for their own good had something to say about those who willfully despise his law. *11 So the LORD brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon.* Ouch! Ancient armies were often very cruel to their enemies. The picture the Hebrew uses is something like sticking a gaff hook in the side of a big fish! This man, this king who so brazenly disregarded God's will for the lives of his people learned a very painful lesson. It's a lesson that all of us need to learn as well. **Ignoring God's will leads to pain . . .and repentance.**

Repentance. There's a word that we often hear but seldom fully understand. Repentance is all about change. The pain led Manasseh to change his mind about sin. Not that he really had any choice, but his imprisonment led him to stop his evil ways and to stop leading the rest of God's people into sin. It also helped him change his mind about God. Our lessons says, *12 In his distress he sought the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers.* Pain and suffering will do that, you know. There's an old expression that says sometimes you have to be flat on your back to look up. Manasseh might add, "or have a hook in your nose!"

Have you or someone you know ever had to **learn things the hard way**? I can see the wheels of your brains turning right now! You are thinking of a child, or a spouse, or a sister or brother, or a parent, or a co-worker who thoroughly messed up their life and, as a result, learned life's lessons the hard way. It's easy to see when it happens, isn't it? You think of the alcoholic uncle, the niece who had her first baby before she was married, or the co-worker who was fired for stealing from the company. You think of the athlete who wrecked his career with drugs, the young man who destroyed his relationships by using pornography, or the sister-in-law who shattered her marriage by unfaithfulness. All of these have something in common. They involve someone else! The question I asked is, Have **you** or someone you know ever had to **learn things the hard way**? You and I have to answer the first part of that question with a head-hanging "yes." Yes, I have ruined my relationship with God by doing what I want rather than what he wants. Yes, I have firmly established the priorities of my life with little regard for God's priorities. Yes, I strive to live every day of my life by my agenda rather than God's. All with painfully bad results. When the lessons of life hurt that much, I'm on course to **learn things the hard way**. I may not have a hook in my nose but every pain of life reminds me that my ways are not God's ways.

2. God's grace leads to a life that follows his will.

But there is a third and final change that repentance brought to Manasseh. *The LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God. 14 Afterward he rebuilt the outer wall of the City of David ... he also made it much higher. He stationed military commanders in all the*

fortified cities in Judah. 15 He got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the LORD...he restored the altar of the LORD and sacrificed fellowship offerings and thank offerings on it, and told Judah to serve the LORD, the God of Israel. Now that's a change! But think about this story. Do God's actions bother you? Why would he deliver and bring back to his land someone as wicked as Manasseh? It's not fair! Why would God lump someone like Manasseh with someone like me and forgive both of us? It's enough to make some people scratch their heads.

All of those questions are answered with a single word, **grace**. Grace is the only word that describes God's kind of love – forgiving love. We sing about it. **“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see.”** God's amazing grace not only forgave the horrible sins of Manasseh. It also moved Manasseh to do the right thing – to restore the proper worship of God to the people of his nation. I wish I could tell you that it was a wonderful turning point for the nation of Judah – it wasn't – under Manasseh's son things went back to their worst. But we have a powerful lesson of how our perfectly loving God can and does forgive anyone – as the hymn writer says, even **“a wretch like me.”**

So the second lesson we learn from this Word today is clear. **God's grace leads to a life that follows his will.** Either grace is grace or it is no grace at all. In the New Testament we might point to people like Peter or Paul or any of the disciples during the Lord's suffering and death. They were all spiritual brothers of Manasseh. All of the disciples forsook Jesus and fled. They turned their backs on him when he needed it the most. Peter still spoke for all of them in his three-fold denial of Jesus. They had been too full of themselves and their own strength and too empty of God's power. Which of them could have said, “I deserve my Lord's forgiveness; I deserve better than Judas or Caiaphas”? Not one!

Maybe the Lord has spared you the anguish of having committed any great outward sin. Perhaps you haven't come from a background of sinful turmoil and chaos. There are no obvious pagan high places in your past and no idol altars out in the open for all to see. But what about the high places in our hearts? The idol altars right there within the Spirit's temple, which no one sees except the Lord? The pride, the ego, the selfishness, and the willfulness. Who will atone for these, and how will we stand before the judgment seat of God?

The answer is Jesus. Jesus was turning the other cheek when He called these bankrupted and faithless men his disciples and brothers. He was risking anew their betrayal of Him, their flight from Him, their denial of Him. But He took the risk of forgiving love, the love which insures its risks only with its own gifts. Or to put it in the words of the Apostle Paul, *By the grace of God I am what I am.* It is that same grace we see displayed in the life of Manasseh – and in our life.

There's another cliché we often hear. It goes, “There, but by the grace of God, go I.” We usually say that to make us feel better when someone is down and out. There's truth to the statement, but perhaps we could say it better. When we feel down and out, we should look at Jesus' cross, remember his loving forgiveness and say, “There **in** the grace of God, live I.”

We don't have to **learn things the hard way.** God's grace has seen to that.

Amen.