

July 7, 2019
4th Sunday after Pentecost
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
The Lord Justifies the Wicked

2 Chronicles 33:1–6 (NIV84)

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....

¹⁰ 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.

Dear Friends in Christ,

There have been some wicked rulers in history. Who comes to mind when you think of a wicked ruler? Stalin? Hitler? Herod the Great? Certainly these secular rulers were wicked, but there were some rulers of God’s people who were also considered wicked. King Jeroboam was the first king of the northern kingdom of Israel. The Lord gave him his position as the leader who split the kingdom but he rebelled against God. Jeroboam set up golden calves for the people to worship, set up his own religious festivals

and his own priests. These were the sins of Jeroboam. King Ahab of the northern kingdom followed in Jeroboam's ways. But he also made the gods of his wicked wife, Jezebel, the only gods accepted in Israel. Under his rule, prophets of the Lord were hunted down and killed. He tried to wipe out the worship of the one, true God. He was wicked. Most of the northern kings were wicked while some of the kings of Judah were considered the greatest kings to lead God's people. The king before us today is considered to be one of the worst kings of Judah. Manasseh was a wicked king who did wicked things. And God forgave him. We have a God who justifies the wicked.

The Wickedness of Manasseh

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

Manasseh became king at a young age but he would have been old enough to know about his father. Hezekiah is one of the best kings of Judah. He trusted in the Lord when the Assyrians were at the gates of Jerusalem. He brought about religious reforms to return the people to the worship of the Lord alone. But Manasseh rebelled against his father and against his God. His father, Hezekiah, tore down the high places, the places on the hills where people worshiped idols. Manasseh rebuilt them, encouraging people to worship false gods. Manasseh did not just build altars to false gods like Baal and Asherah to please his people but he also joined in the worship of all kinds of false gods. This is wickedness and leading many others to wickedness.

If if you have not led others to the direct worship of false gods by building altars and bowing down to statues, we may still be guilty of this kind of wickedness. Have we ever given the impression that Jesus is just one way among others to get to heaven? Have we ever failed to speak the truth when someone claims that every religion leads to the same God?

Manasseh built altars to false gods in the temple of the Lord in Jerusalem. He intruded on God's sacred place and position to push the Lord to the corners of the life of the people of Judah. That is wickedness. Does the Lord get pushed to the corners of our life at times? Everyone is busy. The stay at home parent is busy with little ones. You are busy at work. We are busy with after school and evening activities. I've heard that it can be even more busy after retirement. Does the business of life push the Lord and his Word to the corner of our life like Manasseh did?

But then God tells us something about Manasseh that makes him one of the most wicked rulers in history. He sacrificed his sons in the fire. The false god named Molech was made to be a statue with

arms outstretched in order to hold a child above the flames for sacrifice. When Manasseh's father faced the Assyrian army at his gates, he humbly turned to the Lord. When Manasseh faced something horrible about to happen he killed one of his young sons in the hands of Molech, hoping that this false god would be so impressed with what Manasseh gave up that he would help. The weak and innocent killed to make life better for the strong. What can be more wicked?

And it continues but on a greater scale of wickedness today. Weak, helpless children are killed in abortion after abortion to make life better for the one with power. The father of a child can avoid all responsibility he has to care for the mother and the child by having the child sacrificed in the hands of Molech. In a 2004 research study, 74% of the women surveyed said they had an abortion because "Having a baby would dramatically change my life. (i.e., interfere with education, employment and ability to take care of existing children and other dependents)." ¹ Manasseh sacrificed his sons with the hope that life would be better for him and for his society. The same wickedness goes on in even greater numbers today as individuals and societies seek to make life better for the strong by killing the weak.

Manasseh burned his own sons in the fire in a valley outside of Jerusalem. It is called the Valley of Ben Hinnom. About 700 years later, Jesus would use the Valley of Ben Hinnom as a picture of hell. At the time Jesus preached about hell, the Valley of Ben Hinnom was the garbage dump for Jerusalem. They burned the garbage there so it was a place of perpetual fire. But it was also the place where babies were burned alive by some of the wicked kings of the Old Testament. When you consider the wickedness of Manasseh, most people would agree that he deserves to spend time (even eternity) in the place worse than the Valley of Ben Hinnom.

How does your wickedness compare with Manasseh's? It is the same in God's sight. The big difference is that your wickedness probably affected fewer people. Manasseh led many into great wickedness and spilled lots of innocent blood, ending the time of grace for many who opposed him. But by our own wickedness we too deserve to be condemned to the permanent Valley of Ben Hinnom where the fire is not quenched and the worm does not die.

The Justification of God

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.

The Lord used his prophets to proclaim the law to Manasseh and urge him to repent but he would not listen. So the Lord did something to get his attention. Manasseh's father was saved from the Assyrians by God but God sent the Assyrians into Jerusalem to take Manasseh away. And in a humiliating way too! They put a hook in his nose to be led away like an animal. When the Lord took everything from

¹<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3729671/>

Manasseh, he humbled himself. He actually repented of his great wickedness and was forgiven by God. God justifies the wicked!

Paul tells us in Romans 4:5, “However, to the man who does not work but trusts **God who justifies the wicked**, his faith is credited as righteousness.” Manasseh had nothing good in his life to offer God. But he turned to the Lord in repentance and by faith is credited with righteousness. How can God consider such a wicked man righteous?

Only through Christ. Isaiah prophesied especially during the reign of Manasseh’s father and Jewish tradition says that Isaiah was killed under Manasseh’s persecution of the Lord’s prophets. Listen to this familiar prophecy about Christ from Isaiah 53, “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” Focus on that word, “iniquity.” It means sin in the general sense, but more specifically it is guilt and the punishment that is deserved because of the guilt of sin. Christ took all the iniquity of all people to the cross. As the true Son of God, he alone could bear the punishment for all sins and he did. Christ was pierced, crushed and punished for Manasseh’s great wickedness...and for your great wickedness. God can declare that Manasseh is not guilty because of Jesus...and he declares that you are not guilty because of Jesus. In Christ, God justifies the wicked.

Think about that as you look at others in this world. In Christ, God justifies the woman who had an abortion, the man who made her have an abortion and the doctor who performed an abortion. God justifies the child who rebelled against everything their parents handed down to them and the person who shoves God to the corners of their life. God’s greatest desire is to have the wicked turn to him in repentance and faith in Christ to receive the forgiveness Christ has already accomplished at the cross. May we look at others the same way because God has declared us not guilty through faith in Christ.

And then I urge you to be like wicked Manasseh. Be like that wicked king by continuing to humble yourself before God. Be like that forgiven man who went back to Jerusalem a changed man. For his repentance was not an act or mere words while he was in trouble. He responded to the Lord’s forgiveness by changing his sinful life.

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.

No longer did this wicked king sacrifice his sons in the fire to make his life better. Instead, he gave thank offerings to the Lord who made his eternal life possible through forgiveness. Our God sacrificed his Son on the cross to give us a joy filled eternal life. May we give thanks to the God who justifies the wicked.

Amen.