

We live in a world of cause and effect. When something happens, we expect something else to happen, right? What goes up must come down. That's a very natural, normal thing for us to think. And we apply that to our own lives too. If I fix something, I expect it to work. If I change something in my life, I expect things to improve. Again, very natural, very normal. But we can be tempted to think that that's true also of the things of God. That if I just fix what's wrong with my soul, then God is going to be satisfied with me. That if I do what is right in his sight, then he's going to do what I want. And Christians, this temptation exists for us even as Christians, so that we must always be on guard against it.

Because you can see it happening in our Old Testament reading for today. Because ask yourselves: how do you respond to what is happening in that text? Josiah was one of the last kings of Israel, one who lived in a very troubled time. In fact, it's hard to imagine there being a worse time in all the history of the kingdom. Because at that time, Israel had fallen into idolatry. So bad, in fact, that they were worshiping false gods, worshiping idols even in the temple itself. They weren't trying to hide it. They weren't trying to keep it out of everyone's eyes. They were doing it openly, so that they were worshiping these Canaanite gods even within God's temple.

And Josiah's father Manasseh was one of the very worst of all of them. Because we hear some of the things he was doing in 2 Kings 21, verse 6, where it says this: "And Manasseh burned his son as an offering and used fortune telling and omens and dealt with mediums and with necromancers. He did much evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger." Now, think about that. This is a king of Israel we are talking about, a descendent of David himself. And this king of Israel has burned one of his own children in the fire as an offering to Moloch. This king of Israel is using omens and fortune tellers. This king of Israel is dealing with mediums and with necromancers, worshiping the way the Canaanites did. Can we imagine a worse situation to be in? And besides this, we hear later in this chapter that he also persecuted those who worshipped God faithfully, that he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood from one end to the other. So that things got so bad that verse 9 says that: "Manasseh led the people astray to do more evil than the nations had done whom the Lord destroyed before the people of Israel." Things were so bad that the world was better than Israel, that the pagans were better than Israel. Think of how bad that is, Christians! When someone who doesn't believe in God is more righteous, is more moral than the people of God themselves! Things had fallen very low indeed.

But perhaps the worst part about all of this, honestly, was that they still thought that they were righteous. They still thought that everything was just fine, that God was happy with all the things that they were doing. The temple was still among them. That must mean God is okay with this, that they can worship both the Lord and Baal and get away with it. Things have become so bad that is it any wonder the Lord is so angry at this kind of hypocrisy?

So Josiah wants to make things right. He wants to fix everything. And so early in his reign, he fixes up the temple. It had fallen into disrepair, and as part of his service to the Lord, he fixes it up again. And Josiah also begins to get rid of evil. He tears down the idols. He takes those idols out of the temple. He puts the false teachers to death, all as God wants him to do. And we hear in our reading that he kept the Passover to the Lord, as God had commanded him to do. In fact, he kept it so greatly that, as we hear in verse 22: "No such Passover had been kept since the days of the judges who judged Israel or during all the days of the kings of Israel or of the kings of

Judah." Now, think about that! No other king kept the Passover like Josiah did. That means that even David did not keep the Passover with the same devotion, with the same intensity that Josiah has done. Josiah has done a truly great thing. And Josiah also drove away the mediums, those who claim to speak with spirits. Josiah drove away the necromancers, those who claim to speak to the dead. Josiah drove out all of this evil from the land. And remember, some of this stuff has been here for centuries. Some of this stuff has been in place since the days of Solomon. But Josiah drives it all away, so that as the Bible says, verse 25: "Before him there was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses, nor did any like him arise after him." So there was no king, not even David, who was as great as Josiah in turning to the Lord with all that he had. He truly was the best and the greatest king that Israel ever had.

So we might be tempted to think, then: "Well, that must mean that things are going to change. Surely, this counts for something, right? Josiah did all of these wonderful things. Josiah is the greatest king that Israel ever had. Surely, that must mean something!" But it didn't. Because our reading says, verse 26: "Still the Lord did not turn from the burning of his great wrath by which his anger was kindled against Judah, because of all the provocations with which Manasseh had provoked him. And the Lord said, 'I will remove Judah also out of my sight, as I have removed Israel, and I will cast off this city that I have chosen, Jerusalem, and the house of which I said, "My name shall be there."'"" So destruction is still on the way. The city would still be destroyed, and the temple along with it.

Now, we might ask: "Well, why? This is confusing. Why is this still going to happen? Josiah did everything right. Josiah did what God wanted him to do. Why is God still angry? Why is God still going to destroy the city?" But it's right here at this moment, Christians, that we can see the temptation. We are tempted to think that what Josiah has done is the most important thing. We are tempted to think that what we do is the most important thing, that our actions are what truly matter, that we are the cause and God must have an appropriate effect because of what we have done. But in so doing, Christians, we lose sight of the Lord and instead begin to focus entirely on ourselves.

Because even some other explanations we might come up with to explain what's happening here are going to go along the same way. Maybe we say: "Josiah didn't do enough! The reason why God's still going to destroy the city is because he didn't go far enough, and that's why he still angry." But what else could Josiah have done? What else could he do? He was the greatest king that Israel ever had. The Bible even says that no other king turned to the Lord like he did. There was literally nothing else that could be done. Or we might say, "It was just too late, that Josiah should've done it earlier. And because it was too late, that's why God's destroying the city." But what difference would that make, Christians? If Josiah had done all of this ten years earlier, or if some other king had done this a hundred years earlier, what difference would that make? What would it change? It's not about what we are doing. It's not about what Josiah is doing that is the most important. In reality, it is what God is doing that is the most important thing of all.

Because we are tempted so easily, Christians, to make ourselves the key, to make ourselves the most important thing. When we look at something like our attendance at church or our Bible reading, we might say, "That's important. This is what makes me a Christian, or this is what

makes me stay a Christian, because I do these things." But it doesn't. Because we do not do these things to make God love us. God is not going to love you more, because you have been to church a lot. What matters is that we do these things because we are Christians, because of what God has done for us.

Or we might look at something like our prayers and say that because we have prayed for something, God must answer us in the way that we think he should. "I prayed for it. God promised to hear me, so God has to answer me in the way that I want at the time that I want." As if we can twist his arm into doing something that we want. But Christians, Jesus tells us: "Don't be like the heathen who think they are going to be heard for their many words." You're not going to force God to do anything. God answers prayer, because of Jesus, and he hears us in him.

We might also think that what we don't do is the most important thing. "I don't give into these sins. I have stopped doing this one particular sin. Or even that I don't do things that I think are sins, and that's the reason why I am a good Christian." But Christians, God is not going to love you more simply because you have sinned less. You have only done what was expected of you. You have only done your duty. Because righteousness comes not from what we do, but from the gift of the Holy Spirit. As Romans 14, verse 17 says: "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." So that it is not what we do, but what God does for us that is the most important thing.

And Christians, with this we come to the very heart of the Bible, the most important thing that God wants to teach us. God does not love you because of who you are or because of what you have done. God loves you purely out of grace through his Son, Jesus Christ. Because nothing you do, Christians, is going to bring you any closer to God. As we heard in our epistle reading, especially verse 23: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We are sinners. We are lawbreakers. We stand accused before God. And even what we do as Christians is not going to bring us one inch closer to the Lord. But as Paul goes on to say, verse 24: "We are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." This is a gift, Christians. It is not your wages. It's not your paycheck, as if God owed it to you. Because then it wouldn't be a gift. But God loves you and has given you his Son, Jesus Christ, to be your savior freely, so that it is what he has done for you that is the most important thing of all.

But with that, there's two questions that remain about our Old Testament reading. And the first one of these questions is: "Why then did God still destroy the city? If all of this is true, if this is all a free gift, why does he carry out his judgment upon Israel?" Part of it is that there were many in Israel, Christians, who did not believe. There was much corruption still in the nation, and only a very small, faithful remnant remained. There was only a few who still trusted in the Lord, and Josiah was one of them. And so to purify his people, to take away all this corruption, God carried out the judgment. God would send Israel away into exile, but then he would bring back those faithful few to the land again. Because it is God doing these things and not the people. And through this action, through this purifying, grace and salvation would come to all nations through his Son, Jesus Christ. So what we see happening here is part of God's bigger plan to bring truth and life to all people.

But the other question we might ask is: "If this is all true, was what Josiah did wrong? Was he wrong to try to drive out all of this evil? Was he wrong to do all the things that he did?" Not at all. In fact, as 2 Chronicles 34 tells us, the Lord says to Josiah: "Because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God when you heard his words against this place and its inhabitants, and you have humbled yourself before me and have torn your clothes and wept before me, I also have heard you, declares the Lord. Behold, I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, and your eyes shall not see all the disaster that I will bring upon this place and its inhabitants." So God praises Josiah for what he has done, and he gives him a gift: that he would not see the destruction with his own eyes, that he would die before it came, and that destruction would come in the days of his sons. So certainly, God is happy with what Josiah is doing. And in fact, I have no doubt in my mind that Josiah is in heaven with a great crown of glory for all of the good that he has done for God's people. Because it is not wrong, Christians, to do what is right in the eyes of the Lord.

So should we do things like go to church, read our Bible, to pray, to refrain from sinning? Yes! Absolutely yes. Without any qualifications, yes, we should. But we should not do so thinking that we're going to get paid for it. We should not do so thinking that God owes us something as a result. We do these things as those who have been saved, as those who have been made Christians through the blood of Jesus Christ. So we should live then as Christians because of what God has done for us.

So Christians, on this Reformation Day, as we remember all of the good things that our fathers have done in the past, let us remember this important Biblical truth: You are who you are, not because of what you have done, not because of what you haven't done, but purely because of what God has done for you in Jesus Christ. Let us do the things he would have us do, because he has saved us forever.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, God of our fathers and our help in ages past, we give you thanks for all the good things that you have done for your church through the works of men. We also pray that you would teach us always to trust in you, looking to you for everything, because you have given us all things in your Son, Jesus Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.