

Learning the Hard Way

by Jimmy Allen

We must learn to form our character, harness our energies, and master our circumstances in order to become the person God wants us to be.

Duration: 22:48

Scripture: Proverbs 3:5-6, Isaiah 40:31, Matthew 11:29-30, Romans 8:28, 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, Ephesians 2:10, Philippians 4:13, 2 Timothy 2:15, James 1:2-4, 1 Peter 5:10

Topics: "Mistakes", "Character Formation", "Embracing Life's Challenges"

Description

Jimmy Allen emphasizes the process of character formation through life's experiences, illustrating how our choices shape who we become. He draws parallels with the Apostle Paul's journey, highlighting that true strength comes from learning through mistakes, inequities, and circumstances rather than expecting instant transformation. Allen encourages believers to embrace their imperfections and harness their energies for good, reminding them that growth is a gradual process of learning alongside Christ. He concludes with the idea that acceptance of our circumstances can lead to strength and purpose, urging the congregation to welcome life's challenges as opportunities for growth.

Transcript

Loan me, please, your neurological blackboards and transport yourself to a commercial area of ancient Athens or Rome and go into the shop of the silversmith or the goldsmith and watch him stand before the block on which is mounted a small disk of precious metal. It's blank. It has only some intrinsic value, but its chief value has not yet been imparted.

He takes a sharp instrument, bracing one hand steadily against the other. He begins with deft stroke, ever so lightly at first, then increasing in intensity until there appears on the desk either the bust of Diana or the image and superscription of Caesar. And the thing has its value when he's through.

Now, do you know the name of the instrument he held in his hand? In Greek, it's charakter, C-H-A-R-A-K-T-E-R, which meant first an instrument giving worth. By the mutation of words, as so often happens, it turned to the end result and character became what was there after you got through marking on it, not before. Now, that's the way character is formed.

It's the way our personalities are formed, stroke by stroke, act by act, deed by deed, until we are deep-stained by the color of our choices and we become what we are going to become in this long

process. Now, if indeed this is the way we are formed, isn't it futile to neglect the process and then cry out to God about the product? Oh, Lord, make me a certain kind of person. We have those prayers, and the Lord can do this, but not in a moment, not in a transformation.

It is not the way he works. It isn't the way he worked when he designed personality. If you and I are going to be having results of the product, then let us get busy with the process, line by line, choice by choice, stroke by stroke.

Now, to this subject, Paul addresses a classic text. I can do all things through Christ, he says. Now, that's a product.

Ask him on that day he was blindly getting up from his knees on the Damascus Road, Saul of Tarsus, can you do all things through Christ? Saul's answer would have been, don't be ridiculous. Take him anywhere in those 12 years of isolation in Tarsus or in the wilderness. Paul, can you do all things? Not yet.

That's the product. The point is, you and I must be vitally interested in the process, which is precisely contained in the context. Dig out your hermeneutics and respond to the fact that you can't understand one verse if you don't understand the mounting against which it's set.

Paul did not start out by saying, I can do all things. He ended up saying that. He started out by saying, I have learned.

You'll find it two times in the immediate context. Don't ever say, I can do all things, until you've said, I have learned, because you can't, and you won't, and it isn't possible. I have learned, dash, I can do.

That's the great Christian equation, and half of it you'll find most banal and futile. This is either a grandiose claim on the part of the Apostle Paul, or it represents a genuine accomplishment in which case you and I can follow, because such transformation, such learning, such growth in character is not a uniquely Pauline experience. It's an inherent Christian experience for all of us, under all circumstances.

Paul had to learn. You and I have to learn. And by gleaning through the life of the Apostle, which we do so often in seminary, by gleaning through it, three basic experiences, not unlike yours and mine except in degree, emerge to authenticate the claim, I have learned, therefore I can do.

In the light of Paul's mistakes, his and ours, we have to learn, and we can do. In the matter of inequities that we have inherited, he and we can learn and do. And in the matter of circumstances which all of us face, the same process goes on.

It's nowhere more evident in Paul's life than in his mistakes. To his last day, you can hear a kind of note of anguish when he writes, I persecuted the Church of Christ. He didn't live under the condemnation of that.

He quickly took care of that. The grace of Christ was sufficient for that. But you keep hearing this note in the Apostle of the mistakes that he made.

One can almost create a scenario in which while he's being told in those early years of his conversion, when he's being told what God expects him to do, one can almost hear the Apostle remonstrate, Lord, you have got a bad candidate for the ministry here. My whole character is not always of the aura of holiness. I'm a fairly volatile fellow.

I've been known to turn vicious. I react quickly. I'm too aggressive in some ways.

I'm not sure how much I love. Therefore, Lord, if you wish to use me as your tool like the good housewife who is knitting the sweater, unravel me and start over and do it again. And to Paul's plea fancifully recreated and to yours and mine sometimes implied.

The answer is no, never. Conversion, change, forgiveness does not unravel and start over. What God inferred and implied to the Apostle was you take those same characteristics that you have, harness them to a new lordship and then put them to use for the kingdom of God, which is precisely what Paul did.

Every trait that made him a violent, effective persecutor made him a powerful and effective Apostle. And this is the way it is with us. God is not going to reprogram your 15 or 20 or 30 or 40 years before your conversion.

In regeneration, we find a disposition to do right, but we do not know per se what is right to do. It has to be learned. And it's the disposition that Paul brought to his energies and even to the things which had once led him into wrong.

Now they lead him into right. It's so with yours. The characteristics in an 18 year old boy that make him his mother's joy, his wit, his humor, his easy communication, his leadership ability, all those things that make him such a delight to his mother and father also make him the perfect gang leader.

It just depends on where the mastery is. The best murderer in Marin County would be the best doctor and the best arsonist would be the fire chief and the best criminal would be a prosecuting attorney. It's not a difference in the talent.

It's not a difference in the energies. It's where's the mastery. This is the whole idea of conversion, of change.

How far is it from selfishness, which is evil, to selfhood, which is divine? That's your job and mine. To so harness the energies of the ego to our relationship to Christ that like Paul, you can take the thing that was evil and turn it into good. If this is not true, then am I, am I forever condemned with my selfishness? Can I do nothing about it? So it is with temper.

Am I always going to be a victim of a volatile temper? Or can I put it into a passion for doing right and seeing that others helping others do right? Can the gambler eradicate from his nature, this venture taking risk presumption, or can he turn it into the adventuresomeness of faith? Can the gossip forever be stuck with it or can he turn it into an effective witnessing, a sharing of good news? Either something can happen or we are of all men most miserable. So how did Paul get to the place where he could say, I can do, I can handle these mistakes? Goes back to the text, I have learned. One goes to school, to the master.

Here is the most powerful imagery of a word we encounter frequently in the New Testament, tsougos, yoke. But all our lives I think most of us have thought about the yoke as something harnessed to a burden. We think about the oxen wearing the yoke so it can haul the burden.

But go to your lexicons, go to the word studies, Arndt and Gingrich, for instance, Gingrich. Go to the studies and look and you'll find that the emphasis in tsougos is not on the burden harnessed to but the partnership of the yoke, being linked with someone else. Say, Jesus, take my yoke upon you.

Of course that helps to bear burdens. But the main thing is you are tied up in a yoke with the person of Christ. And in that close proximity you learn.

Now the reason we have reason to believe this is the tendency of the verse is that God says, take my yoke upon you and learn from me. Paul learned. He can do.

What will you do with the mistakes, the sins, the shortcomings? Do they plague you? Only long enough to turn and receive forgiveness and receive the companionship of the one in whom we have found it possible to do anything, provided we have learned the mistakes of his life. It's also visible in the inequities. There's that famous word a thorn in the flesh titillating and tantalizing our minds if we just knew.

Was it epilepsy as someone dared suggest? Was it ophthalmia? Could it have been a kind of gross lust to which he found himself driven? We'll never know. Paul says it's like a stake driven into my flesh. I am under this kind of inequity.

All of us have our disabilities. We didn't inherit the kinds of bodies we might have chosen if we had a choice. We're not as pretty or as handsome as we might have been.

And some of us don't have the kind of personalities we wish we had inherited. Some of us didn't have the kind of families we came from. We're all disabled in one fashion or another.

And Paul had his. And so what did he do? What we do, Paul says, three times I went to the Lord. And the word is I besought him.

I entreated him. It's a strong appeal. Three times I appealed that this be removed.

Never had struck me until about a year ago as to why Paul quit after three times. It's absurd, isn't it? You've got a burden, so you go, you pray three times and then quit. Well, sometimes that's enough to know that a situation is irremediable.

If you've got something that can be removed, keep going. But if it's something you can't help, like your physiology or your background or your childhood or a hundred other things, then how many times do you have to pray before the Lord says to you, my grace is sufficient. I'm not going to remove it, but you can take it.

Now, how many times do we need to go on and pray? Paul says, I've learned, therefore I can do. These inequities of life, these things that come into our lives and seek to rob them of vigor and strength. These are the things which Paul having shared with us is strong enough to say, if you have learned.

And I have one word to suggest here as the learning medium. It's the word acceptance. It's an amazing word.

It's the word by which we were saved. I accept Christ as Savior. The human power of acceptance or rejection is amazing.

And I have the power to keep at arm's length, whatever happens to me that I don't like, whether it's a personality defect or the loss of someone I love deeply. There's something in me that instinctively says, no, no. How often did I run into this in pastoral duties as I tried to comfort someone who had lost a loved one? The whole answer is no.

And as long as that person keeps at a distance the truth, so long is that truth powerful in his life. But once one reaches out and embraces it and accepts it, somehow the control passes into your power. It is the acceptance.

Paul accepted whatever the thorn in the flesh was. And large measures of acceptance is the way to say, I have learned. Because Jesus said, not only my grace is sufficient, he also said, by your weakness, my power is made perfect, fulfilled.

Paul goes on in the same passage then to say, I am content with my weakness. He accepted it. And the moment he became content with it and accepted it, it turned into a strength, the alchemy of the grace of God.

We learn the hard way, most of us. I don't want to learn the hard way, but I will. I don't plan to learn the hard way, but I will.

And I know enough to know that sometimes it's learning at its best. I walked a mile with gladness, and she chattered all the way, but I'm none the wiser for all she had to say. I walked a mile with sorrow, and not a word said she, but all the things I learned from her when sorrow walked with me.

It's the way we learn. It's the way we get to the place where I can do. So with the inequities of life, as well as with the mistakes of life, Paul says, the same things works with the circumstances of life.

We don't know what's out there for us. A year ago, we didn't know what was out there for us. Now we know.

Every year becomes an awareness. This now is a circumstance in my life. Am I driven by circumstances, or like the apostle, do I become the master of circumstance? With this Christ of every experience, is there something of his guidance and formative power that causes me to mold the circumstance? Paul is amazing about this.

They put him in jail in Philippi, which effectively aborts the European mission of the apostle. That famous vision, come over to Macedonia, help us. And he finds himself forthwith in a prison.

Circumstance. And by morning, the jailer is on his knees in front of Paul saying, tell me, sir, what must I do to be saved? They took him before Felix and Festus successively, and Paul reasoned with them about judgment and righteousness and the things to come. And one of them cried out away with him because he was frightened.

And another said, are you trying to make me a Christian? The answer was, of course. They put him on a ship in chains to send him to Rome. And he winds up on the poop deck, giving commands to the owner of the ship.

They put him in a hard prison in Rome and he winds up with a direct line to the Praetorian guard. There's something about Paul that simply said, it doesn't make any difference which way the winds are blowing. There's the old story of the set of the sails.

You can just turn into the wind. Circumstances. I have learned how to employ them.

Whatever happens to you and to me, those words, Philippians, first part of Philippians, listen to the apostle. My brothers, I want you to know that the things which have happened to me have turned out for the progress of the gospel. Hear the word.

The things that happened to me have turned out. Now the question is what happens to what happens to you? Some things are going to happen to you. What happens to what happens to you? Paul said, I'll not

be blown by circumstance.

I'm going to set the sails in the direction because I can do anything through Christ who is the strengthening agent. He's the one who is my constant teacher and who is learning. There's a parable in the old Testament.

It's a delightful one in a way. Solomon in all his glory had made for his armed Praetorian guard some shields of gold. What a sight they must have been.

That burnished gold in the hot Jerusalem sun as the troops were drawn up in military precision order for the inspection of the commander-in-chief. The time goes on and the scripture says now Shashak, king of Egypt, came up against Jerusalem and the armies of Israel were defeated. And the scripture says, and Rehoboam and Shashak took away all the shields of gold which Solomon had made.

You talk about the breaking of a dream, there it is. All the ancient glories, the splendors of Solomon gone to Egypt. What a fell circumstance.

Except the scripture says almost with a smile on his face, and Rehoboam made shields of brass instead of the shields of gold. Not nearly as glamorous, but much more serviceable. Going into combat, the malleability of gold doesn't make an ideal shield, but a brazen one.

Damascus steel will bounce off of brass. In their stead he made shields of brass. The question which has been asked before is what will you do with life's second best when the shields of gold are taken away? Crumble? Or is it best in the divine economy to make instead shields of brass, much more durable? I will not be swerved from my course because the circumstances are ill.

I can do all things. Is this an absurdity? Not if you add the context. I have learned, and this is the process in which all of us are now.

Welcome it. It is life-saving. Let us pray.

Father, we pray that in all the circumstances of life, that like the Apostle, we may know how to abound and how to be debased. We may know how to succeed and how to fail. We may have good season and bad season.

We do not ask to be exempt from trial or tribulation. We do ask that we may learn under the harness and the yoke with our Master to learn to handle anything. In Jesus' name, amen.

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