

## ***Clay in the Hands of God***

Jeremiah 18:1-12

Potter's Wheel Video.

Today we are going to study the passage of Scripture that you just heard from Jeremiah 18. The imagery of the potter and the clay explains something foundational about our relationship with God. It doesn't explain ***everything*** we need to know about our relationship with God, but it does tell us something foundational. This imagery applies to everyone in the room this morning.

If you're walking closely with God and experiencing His goodness, you are clay in the hands of God. If you are running away from God (in an absolute sense or in some area of your life), you are clay in the hands of God. If you are brokenhearted over something tragic in your life, you are clay in the hands of God. If you are confused or anxious or angry, you are clay in the hands of God.

In Jeremiah 18 we find an "acted-out parable."

### ***An Acted-out Parable: The Potter and the Clay (Jeremiah 18:1-12)***

In verses 1 and 2 we see that God tells Jeremiah to go to a specific place:

1 The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord saying, 2 "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will announce My words to you."

Before God spoke to Jeremiah using words, He wanted Jeremiah to see something.

3 Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something on the wheel. 4 But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make.

In those days a potter's wheel had upper and lower discs (made of wood or stone) that were connected by an axle. The potter worked the clay on the upper disc and he turned the wheel with his foot on the lower disc. In that day pottery served an essential function in a household; it was primarily used to store food and drink. But pottery also involved artistic expression. Pottery was both functional and beautiful.

What Jeremiah saw when he went down to the potter's house would have been very familiar. If the clay was defective in some way, the potter would re-work it and refashion it into another vessel. The potter obviously had the right and authority to refashion the clay into another vessel "as it pleased the potter to make." The potter had full sovereignty over the clay. As well, the potter had perseverance; he kept working the clay until he had pottery that pleased him.

Beginning in verse 5 God tells Jeremiah that he has been watching an acted-out parable of His relationship with the "house of Israel" (which in this context refers to the southern kingdom of Judah).

5 Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, 6 “Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter *does*?” declares the Lord. “Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.

The people of Judah were supposed to think of themselves as “clay in the potter’s hand.” Like a potter, God was fashioning them into something useful and beautiful. He would do whatever it took to shape or re-shape them. The real-life implications of this concept are spelled out beginning in verse 7.

7 “At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy *it*; 8 if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it.

It turns out that God’s pronouncements against nations/kingdoms weren’t set in stone. Just like a potter responds to the clay, God responds to the nations. For example, if God pronounced judgment against the Ammonites, and they came to their senses and “turned from their evil,” God says, “I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it.” God actually responds to the hearts of people.

If you’ve read the book of Jonah, you’ll remember that this is why Jonah didn’t want to Nineveh and speak God’s judgment against them. He knew that God’s default position was grace and lovingkindness (not anger); since he really disliked the Ninevites, his greatest fear was that they would repent and that God would shower them with grace and love. That’s exactly what happened, and Jonah spiraled down into discouragement and self-pity. As Philip Yancey says, “After Nineveh God could never be trusted not to be merciful.”

Of course we’re all like Jonah at times: we tend to think that our enemies should be God’s enemies. And we certainly don’t want God to shower our enemies with His blessing; we might even feel like God was being disloyal if He loved our enemies! But God isn’t a pet who exists solely to keep me company, to give me affection, and to bark at everybody else. No, God is like a potter whose primary objective is to make something beautiful and useful. God doesn’t pick up a lump of clay thinking, “I sure hope this clay is ruined and I have to throw it away.” No, that’s always His last option. He really wants to make something beautiful and useful - even out of our enemies.

These verses teach us something incredibly important about God: ***God isn’t nearly as predictable as we might have thought.*** Maybe you’ve had a very static, rigid view of God; the fact that God reserves the right to turn from some judgment He had pronounced on somebody might sound like God doesn’t keep His word or that He is fickle. Neither of those things are true: God does keep His word and He is not fickle. God always acts consistent with His character, but that doesn’t mean we can predict exactly what He’ll do. Here we learn that God leaves Himself the option of canceling some judgment that He had planned. He’s God; He’s not a pre-programmed machine. He’s like a potter whose primary objective is to make something beautiful and useful.

Verse 9 tells us that the image of the potter and the clay also cuts in another direction - one that had special relevance for Judah in Jeremiah's day:

9 "Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant *it*; 10 if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it.

This implication spoke directly to Judah. They clung to the promise God had made to Abraham over a thousand years earlier: those who bless you, I will bless; and those who curse you, I will curse. And so they wrongly believed that because they were God's "chosen people" that their behavior didn't affect how God treated them. Here we learn that even though God has spoken that He would "build up" and "plant" Israel in the Land, because she had persistently and willfully done evil, God said, "I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it." In other words, the blessing was conditional on the people's response (just as His judgment was conditional). John Bright puts it this way:

"The clay *can* frustrate the potter's intention and cause him to change it: as the quality of the clay determines what the potter can do with it, so the quality of a people determines what God will do with them." (*Jeremiah*, p. 125)

We learn here that God didn't give up on them and throw them away; like a potter refashioning clay, God went about the work of refashioning His people into something beautiful and useful. But that working in their lives would require them to turn back to Him in repentance (verses 11 and 12):

11 "So now then, speak to the men of Judah and against the inhabitants of Jerusalem saying, 'Thus says the Lord, "Behold, I am fashioning calamity against you and devising a plan against you. Oh turn back, each of you from his evil way, and reform your ways and your deeds."' "

God wanted them to turn back to Him; He really didn't want to bring calamity upon them. But the people were unwilling:

12 "But they will say, 'It's hopeless! For we are going to follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.'

Apparently they were saying to God, "Thanks but no thanks." They had no intention of following God. They were too stubborn and too evil to follow anything but their own plans. And so the Potter would have to start over: He would send them into exile and refashion a nation out of the "remnant" - the few who would eventually turn back to Him.

We too need to understand that we are clay in the hands of God. We understand this imagery in the context of the new covenant in Jesus' blood. Specifically, when you come to the place where you understand and believe that Jesus died on the cross to pay for your sins, you enter into a secure, eternal relationship with God. You actually become (in Paul's terminology in 2 Corinthians 5:17) a "new creature" in Christ; you now

have a new identity and new appetites. Now your deepest desire is to please God. Even though you don't always live it out, you can say with Paul, "I joyfully concur with the law of God in the deepest part of my soul." In the context of this new covenant, God is the Potter who is more committed than you can image to conforming you into the image of Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29). Through the indwelling Holy Spirit, God shapes and forms you so that you think and feel and act like Jesus Himself.

**Two truths to ponder:** These truths flow out of Jeremiah 18 and the imagery of the potter and the clay. As with any image used in the Bible, these truths don't capture **everything** we need to know about our relationship with God. Other truths about our relationship with God complement (and in some ways qualify) what we see in Jeremiah 18. But these two truths will be powerful in our lives if they captivate our hearts and minds.

**God is the Potter.** God is actively shaping our lives - both individually and corporately. He uses any and all means necessary to form us into something beautiful and useful. This concept comes over into the New Testament in Scriptures such as Philippians 1:6, where Paul wrote to the church at Philippi (corporately and individually):

6 *For I am* confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.

Because Paul had seen such strong evidence of God's working in the Philippian church he was convinced that God would continue that work until the return of Christ. As a Potter, God relentlessly continues shaping us into the image of Christ.

Think of the most troubling circumstance you're experiencing right now; it could be in a relationship, in your workplace, or in your finances. When you find yourself full of fear and anxiety, know that God is the Potter who wants to shape you into someone who prays, someone who instinctively trust God instead of panicking. Honestly, instead of thinking, "I'm a worrier. . . I always get stressed out over my circumstances. . ." God want to make you a person of faith. As a person of faith, you will be much more useful to the Master.

Perhaps you're battling with some sin that saps your spiritual strength and makes you feel defeated. Know that God is the Potter who never gives up on you; He is absolutely committed to refining this area of your life. As He explained to Jeremiah, He's very willing to make your life miserable if that's what it takes to get you to turn back to Him. Since He is sovereign and powerful, He can either use gently flowing waters or raging rivers. But He is relentless in pursuing us - not to beat us down, but to make us into something beautiful. There is nothing more beautiful than godliness (because there's no one more beautiful than God).

Perhaps you're just weary and tired. Everything in your life wears you out. God is the Potter who wants you to learn that a life of discipleship is a life of rest. Jesus said, "Come to Me all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke

upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

In any and every condition of our lives, God is the Potter. We need to live our lives mindful of the fact that God is trying to mold and shape us through everything we experience. We don't have to understand everything God does; we mainly need to acknowledge that as “the Potter” He has every right to fashion us into something beautiful and useful.

***We are the clay.*** You probably know that feeling when your life is spinning out of control. Well, now you know what's happening: You're on the Potter's wheel. God hasn't abandoned you; to the contrary, God is shaping and forming you. (I'm being a bit playful here. . .)

I'd have you consider whether or not you've ever really accepted the reality that God is the Potter and you are the clay. I'm not talking about merely understanding the concept. I'm talking about living your life in full acknowledgment that you aren't the one in control of your life; you are being formed and shaped by Someone else to do whatever He wants - even if it's incredibly painful. I'm really talking about adopting a stance of humility before God. G.K. Chesterton told a parable about a young boy who was given a choice. . .

He could be gigantic, or he could be miniscule.

He chose to be gigantic.

His head brushed the clouds. He waded the Atlantic like a pond, scooped gray whales into his hand and swished them like tadpoles in the bowl of his palm. He strode in a few bounds from one edge of the continent to the other. He kicked over a range of mountains like an anthill, just because he could and he didn't feel like stepping over it. He plucked a California redwood and whittled its tip for a toothpick. When he got tired, he stretched across Nebraska and Ohio, flopped one arm into the Dakotas and the other into Canada, and slept in the grass.

It was magnificent. It was spellbinding. It was exhilarating.

For about a day.

And then it was boring. And the gigantic boy, in his boredom, daydreamed about having made the other choice, to be miniscule. His backyard would have become an Amazonian rain forest. His gerbil would hulk larger than a woolly mammoth, and he could ride the back of a butterfly or go spelunking down wormholes. A tub of ice cream would be a winter playground of magic proportions.

Life would have been so much more interesting had he chosen smallness.

(as retold by Mark Buchanan in *The Rest of God*, p. 99)

To accept that you are clay is to adopt a stance of humility - being “small” in comparison to God. Being clay (and gladly being clay) means being okay that you’re not omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent; it’s enough that God is all those things. As Larry Osborne says, “God is omni-everything and I’m omni-nothing.” Therefore He has a right to mold us and shape me **however He wants** so that I become **whatever He wants**.

This simple perspective (we are clay in the hands of the Potter) can help us interpret the events of our lives. I think you’ll agree that two people can face the exact same circumstances and interpret those circumstances very differently. One will conclude, “God must hate me; otherwise He wouldn’t allow this to happen to me.” Another person will experience the same thing and conclude, “God is using my circumstances to shape me and refine me.” If we really believe that we are clay in the hands of God, we will look for ways that God is forming/shaping us into something useful and beautiful.

If you adopt the mindset, “God is the Potter and I am the clay,” God will make you beautiful and useful in ways you never imagined. It’s a mindset of faith and anticipation about what God wants to do in our lives.

I’m so glad that we’re celebrating the Lord’s Table today. The Lord’s Table reminds us that the Potter is the One who sent His one and only Son to die for our sins. If we ever wonder whether or not God **really** wants to refine us or whether He’d just as soon roll us into a ball and throw us away, we should look to the cross. When we see Jesus on the cross, we are reminded that God paid the greatest price conceivable to pay for our sin so that we might come into relationship with Him. His refining and shaping work in our lives flows from Jesus’ work on the cross.