

Jeremiah 18: 1-6; “In the Potter’s House”, Sermon # 19 in the series –
“Heart Lessons Learned for a Prophet and the People of God”,
Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on October 23rd, 2016,
in the Morning Worship Service.

In the Westminster Shorter Catechism the question is asked – “What are the Decrees of God?” “The Decrees of God are His Eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, He has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.” And the next question states – “And how does God execute His decrees?” “He executes His decrees in the works of creation and providence. God is the Creator of all things and people, and He is the Governor of all things and people. God has created all things for His glory, and His government of the world is what I will term this morning – Dynamic.

Let me give you this proposition: God’s Divine Government of the world shows us that all individuals and all nations experience a dynamic display of His power to save and power to judge, based upon whether they will repent. So in opening up this truth to you who have come here this morning, I would like to pose this question – How is God’s power displayed in governing the nations and in saving men?

In looking closely at these verses which I have just read to you, we find that His holy and wise power is displayed in the following 3 dynamic interactions. 1st – That He is a Divine Potter and we are the clay. (verses 1-6) 2nd – He is the Divine Judge of nations and men, and we are being evaluated. (verses 7-17) And 3rd – He is a Divine King who listens to the complaints of His subjects. (verses 18-23) This morning I only want to open up to you just the first point.

1st of all – We want to go down to the Potter’s house with Jeremiah and see God at work.

Jeremiah was told by the Lord to go down to the potter’s house. And as we step in the door of his house we see him already at work. He has a work on the wheel. He is making a vessel. He is taking great globs of wet muddy clay, slapping them down on a running wheel, and then while turning the wheel (or having someone else turn it), he fashions it. It is a very dynamic process and it pictures for us very well the creative and governing power of God Almighty. Even as a potter’s hands are all over the clay, fashioning it and molding it into the shape that he wants it to be, even so, God’s hands are all over each man, and woman, and every nation. Jeremiah did not go down to the potter’s house to preach a sermon, but rather to prepare a sermon; or, as Matthew Henry says – “to receive it ready prepared”.

It is very important for all people who would know God, and worship Him aright, that they learn to observe the spiritual pictures God gives us of Himself in His word. God is the Divine and heavenly Potter. He is the One who makes and fashions all men and nations. We find this clearly portrayed at the beginning of the world in the creation. In the beginning, God formed man out of the dust of the earth. In those days a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground. You can almost picture the Lord, the pre-incarnate 2nd Person of the Trinity, through whom all things were made, gathering muddy earth together to fashion a man and then breathing into His nostrils the breath of life. There are certain things that we should take notice of, in regard to these things. The first is:

The Lord God is a heavenly Potter executing a purpose, and His purposes began in eternity. God has purposed from all eternity, and when He acts, He is pure act. He does not need to react to things in His creation and things that He actually does in time and space. All is the fulfillment of His original purpose. He does interact very intimately with all of His creation and with all of His creatures, but nothing of His purpose or the way that it is outworked changes. He is the unchangeable God. When He acts, it seems to us as if He changes His purpose, but it is only

because to us, He acts one way at one time, and another way at another time, and in this He seems to us to change, but in reality, He does these things for our sakes, and for our well-being as His people, and not because He has veered one iota from His original purposes and decrees.

He is the One, and the only One, who determined men's times and destinies, according to His Sovereign all-wise purposes. Just like the Potter who considers with Himself what kind of a vessel to make, what it will look like, what purpose it will fulfill, so the Lord God before the foundation of the world considered how all people and events would bring glory to Him. Before He created anything in the physical world of our universe, He decreed in Himself, by the most Holy and wise counsel of his own will, all things whatsoever, which would come to pass.

He predestined and foreordained some men and angels to eternal life, through Jesus Christ, to the praise of His glorious grace. And He decided that He would pass by and leave others to act in their own sinful independent way, to their just condemnation – to the praise of His glorious justice. This was done by Himself freely and unchangeably in a way that will be shown in the Day of Judgment, that He was not the author of sin, nor did He violate the will of man, nor did He control men like puppets on a string. No, His wisdom in ordering and decreeing all things will be seen and acknowledged by all men to have been righteous in His having ordered things in the way that He did.

Let us understand that the doctrine of God's predestination is not a horrible decree, as John Wesley and the Arminians have thought that it is. No, this doctrine, as our own Confession well states it in Chapter 3, paragraph 7: "affords matter of praise, reverence, and admiration of God – and it gives reason for humility, diligence, and abundant consolation to all that sincerely obey the gospel." Our God is a heavenly Potter who designs, selects, appoints, purposes, and fashions men and nations for the demonstration of His glory and grace.

And He does these things in perfect righteousness and wisdom. In perfect wisdom He works after He has decreed, to bring about what He has purposed. The dynamic interaction takes place in His providential preserving and governing of His creatures. God ordains all things, but He also works all things after the counsel of His own will. (Ephesians 1: 11)

Now 2nd – Notice also, that in our text, it says that the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter.

Jeremiah 18: 4 – "And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter." There was no evil in God, just because, according to His purpose, He set before man, in the beginning, the choice as to whether he would partake of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. It was not God's fault that He gave Adam and Eve free will and set before them the choice as to whether they would eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When He created the world and placed them in the Garden, He said – "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Our Confession rightly says: "God has endued the will of man with that natural liberty and power of acting upon choice, that it is neither forced, nor by any necessity of nature determined to do good or evil." "Man, in his state of innocency, had freedom and power to will and to do that which was good and well-pleasing to God, but yet was mutable so that he might fall from it." Chapter 6 of our Confession, "Of the Fall of Man", paragraph 1 says: "Although God created man upright and perfect, and gave him a righteous law, which had been unto life had he kept it, and threatened death upon the breach thereof, yet did not long abide in this honor.

Satan using the subtlety of the serpent to seduce Eve, then by her seducing Adam, who without any compulsion, did willfully transgress the law of their creation, and the command given unto them, in eating the forbidden fruit, which God was pleased, according to His wise and holy counsel to permit, having purposed to order it to His own glory." So in granting to man

free will, God ordained that man should choose whether evil would enter the world and his very being, by their partaking of the knowledge of it. This was a test to man to see whether they could stand in their own original righteousness and confirm themselves in it by their own free will. But they did not pass the test. Why did God permit this? For His own glory and that man's salvation would be of Him, through Christ, and not of himself. It was permitted in order to show that the first couple that they were perfectly free to either obey His word to them, or that they would be foolish and disobey His word to them and commit sin. The entrance of sin was all man's fault, but God had purposed to wisely overrule it for His own glory, and for the good of all His people.

And furthermore we can say that God brings very good things to His people even through and by the means of His having permitted the entrance of sin into the world through man's sin. He proves this in what He ordains in the lives of His dear people. He leads them through this life to glory, but during the time of their earthly experience, they will be further sanctified by their experiencing the evil which others perpetrate against them. All of this is according to the sovereign will of God. It says in 1st Peter 4: 19 – “Therefore let those who suffer according to the will of God commit their souls to Him in doing good, as a to a faithful creator.”

Does this mean that God will not deal with all sin in every person? No, not at all. But He is great enough, and wise enough, and good enough, to be able to establish to all of His people, many profoundly good things for them, even though they wonder at God's permitting it when it happens. You will recall, how in the book of Genesis, Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt by His jealous brothers who told their father Jacob that he had been killed by a wild beast? They meant these actions of theirs for evil, but God meant it for good.

You remember that God so ordered things, that after he was sold into Egypt, that there was a famine in the land of Egypt; a famine so severe, that all the surrounding nations came seeking grain in Egypt because there was none in their own. God, in His wise providence, so ordered these things that these sinful brothers had to come to Joseph himself to buy grain, because Joseph had been appointed by Pharaoh himself to be his second in command to himself, and he appointed him to head up the whole grain distribution operations in the country so that plenty of grain would be stored up during the years of plenty which had gone before, so that they, and many others would have it during the time of the famine.

But how did God bring Joseph to that high position? It was by means of Pharaoh's butler and baker each having dreams after they had been arrested on the charge of treason. It was Joseph's being able to rightly interpret those dreams, favorably for the butler and unfavorably for the baker, that led to his being brought to Pharaoh, who himself had had a troubling dream. The dream was of 7 fat cows coming up out of the Nile, followed by 7 lean cows who also came up from the Nile and ate the 7 cows that were fat. It was interpreted by Joseph correctly as that Egypt would have a terrible famine for 7 years after having 7 years of plenty. When Joseph interpreted the dreams correctly, Pharaoh could not think of a better person to put in charge of the grain saving operation than Joseph. Indeed, he made him second in command to himself, over all of Egypt.

You will recall that it was Joseph's dreams concerning his brothers bowing down to him, which had gotten him in trouble with his brothers when he was young. And actually these dreams would be fulfilled, when God saw that the time was right, when the brothers came down to Egypt seeking grain. But I want you to see how all of these things were purposed by God, and they came to pass in the time in which He thought best. He knows how to order all things in order to fulfill His purpose; just like the potter with the clay. In Genesis 45: 7, Joseph says to his brothers – “God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance.” “So now it was not you who sent me here, but God.” “He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt.”

And in Genesis 50, verse 18 it says that Joseph's brothers also went and fell down before his face, and they said, 'Behold we are your servants.' "Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God?' "But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive." I ask you now, who was it who ordered all these things after the counsel of His will? It was God. It was His purpose that Joseph be sold into slavery, but it was not His sin. No, God meant it all for good. I want you to try to grasp the idea that we are always in God's hand, even when our lives are marred by sin. And we are there in His hand, to do with as He pleases. And, we need very much to believe that He is righteous in doing whatever He pleases.

Turn with me over to Romans chapter 9, verse 17. It was God who raised Pharaoh up (this is the Pharaoh that came after the Pharaoh of Joseph's days) and the purpose of God's raising him up is declared for us here: "For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth.'" If you go back and read the story of Genesis chapters 3-15 you will see that Pharaoh was a very strong-willed man, but his will was never at one point stronger than God's that somehow he would be able to defeat God's purpose.

No, let us see this point of truth most clearly: Pharaoh fulfilled God's decreed purpose even though all the while he sinfully resisted God's messengers, Moses and Aaron. Pharaoh was free to sinfully resist, and he freely did so. But the exercise of that man's sinful choices (the free exercise of Pharaoh's will) only demonstrated that God's power was greater, to defeat all of his purposes which were against the people of God. God declared it to all the world that it was futile to resist God or oppose God. God did not show Pharaoh saving mercy, but judged him and the nation of Egypt with His plagues and by overthrowing Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea.

Spiritually speaking, each time after Pharaoh hardened his own heart against God and His will, God in turn hardened Pharaoh's heart; that is, He left Pharaoh to himself, gave him over to the hardness of his own mind and heart, and God determined that Pharaoh would stay in that state as a just punishment for his sins. Romans 9: 19 says that God has mercy on whom He will, and whom He wills He hardens. It is a dynamic display of His power either to have mercy or to harden. We are clay in His hands. We are marred, but we are still in His hands.

3rd – I would like you to see that God is able to make us over again into another vessel as it seems good to Him.

"Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying: 'O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?' says the Lord." "Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!" Listen also to Romans chapter 9, verse 21 – "Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?" The answer is, of course, He does. The problem with you and me is that we attempt to judge the secret things which belong to God. And Deuteronomy 29: 29 says: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever that we may do all the words of this law."

Sometimes we want to pry into the secret counsels of God and look into the book of the eternal decrees. We do not see, or we forget, the dynamic interaction of God in His providence, to display His power to save and to change us and to remake us into new creatures; to make us over into the image of Christ. God executes His decrees in His works of creation and His providence. It is true, that there are vessels of wrath prepared for destruction as it says in Romans 9: 22. And there are vessels of mercy which He has prepared beforehand for glory. But it is the dynamic of the gospel preached to you in time and space that saves you from all of your sins. It is by looking in faith to the Lamb of God slain from the foundation of the world, that you will find mercy and come to know yourself to be a vessel of mercy.

You must look to your duty to repent, and your duty to believe in Christ, and to your duty to persevere by His grace as a Christian, in doing His will. God will indeed demonstrate His wrath on vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, but right now He is patiently waiting until all the vessels of mercy have been called out of darkness and into His marvelous light. God has each of us as clay in His hands and He will re-make you if you will believe in His word; that through faith in Christ, His appointed Savior and way of salvation, you will be saved. It is surely true that you are marred by sin. But even though you are marred, you are still in His hands. Come to Christ and be re-made into a new vessel.

Even in a local church like this there are still some who need to depart from iniquity. Turn with me over to 2nd Timothy 2, verse 19. “Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and ‘Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.’” “But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor.” “Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work.”

The great house being talked about here is Christ’s Church, and in our particular case, the local church to which we belong. The Lord knows those who are His own; therefore, everyone who names the name of the Lord should depart from iniquity. They should repent. The specific kind of repentance called for here in these verses is cleansing ourselves from the defilement of false doctrine and the sins of people who say that they are Christians but would have us participate in worldly pursuits which would take us away from being able to truly see success in our laboring for the Lord.

Paul is saying that if you would cleanse yourself from those preaching false doctrine, or those who would have you to lead a worldly life, you will find that you will be in the Lord’s eyes a vessel for honor, sanctified, and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work. Are you a person who is doing this? Or are you tossed about by every wind of doctrine? You may be hanging around with people like Hymenaeus and Philetus, men who have strayed from the truth; full preterists who say that the resurrection is already past, and you don’t realize that they are trying to overthrow your faith. Purge yourself from them and their teaching, you draw near to God asking Him what you can do for Christ’s kingdom and His glory, and He will show you very practically what you can do. And these things will be found to accord with His written word the Bible.

A few concluding and summarizing applications and observations in closing.

We see here the key to understanding whether we are vessels of mercy – remade people – or whether we are vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, is this: Have I been re-made in the hands of the Master Potter, the Lord Jesus Christ? Am I departing from my iniquity? Am I cleansing myself from all defilement of flesh and spirit by breaking off with bad company and pursuing after righteous living; really pursuing my relationship with my Lord Jesus? Because, as the clay is in the potter’s hand, so are you in God’s hand, O house of Israel!

1st – This passage ought to persuade us that each one of us individually, and all of us collectively, are clay in God’s hands. We are not only utterly dependent upon God for life and all things, but we are in His hands to determine everything in our present situation, and our future usefulness. I pray that none of us will take this casually or lightly. God has us in His hand to do what pleases, from cradle to grave.

2nd – We are marred clay in His hands. We not only have inherited a sinful nature from Adam which is not God’s fault, but we confirm our being sinners in many ways each day. God is not, however, standing idly by taking notes. He is dynamically interacting with each of us in His providential governing of the world and His Church. If we will not repent, He will deal with us in judgment, break us and dash us in pieces as a potter’s vessel if we will not repent. This is why

we must “kiss the Son” Jesus Christ, lest we perish in the way. This is why you should come to Christ today.

3rd – We must not sit idly by, saying, “If God has decreed all things, then it matters not what I do.” It is true that God has always had us in His hands; from the conception of our being, to our final destiny. In His decrees we see His sovereignty to make vessels of mercy or wrath out of people’s lives, as it pleases Him. God’s decrees encompass all the actions of men – their repenting, their vacillations, their doubts, and their fears about their salvation. God can and He will address all of these concerns that you have for your eternal soul. He uses the means of His word and His Spirit to do this.

It is yours to trust and obey. It is yours to pray and examine yourself to see if you are in the faith. God’s decrees are not your duties. His revealed will in the Bible is your duty. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved. As a Christian, cast all of your cares upon Him, for He cares for You. Remember to pray often and not to mistrust God’s promises. Believe that He can help you through any difficult situation that you face. Remember that He will be the One who brings you to eternal glory. Salvation is of the Lord.

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