

THE POTTER AND THE CLAY

1/5/2014

Jeremiah 18:1-12

INTRO: I want to take us to Jeremiah 18 this morning. I am filling in some time as I prepare another series of messages. I want to encourage us this morning for this coming year to take to heart God's message to Israel in this passage from the weeping prophet. Israel had been called of God to be a special nation to Him. We are called to be a special people to Him. Israel was to be a light to the world around them. So are we. But Israel had the same problem so many of us have of getting side tracked and getting engrossed in the things of our own desires.

Charles Ryrie says that Jeremiah's book dates from 627-585 BC. That is very instructive. The very first king of Israel, Saul, began to reign about 1050 years before Christ. He reigned about 40 years and then David reigned about 40 years and then Solomon reigned about the same length of time and after Solomon God's people divided into two kingdoms. The northern kingdom, which began with Jeroboam, disobeyed God and was warned by God over and over until God finally allowed them to be taken captive. That happened in 722 BC. So that is about 100 years before Jeremiah began writing. And after the northern kingdom fell, the southern kingdom was tempted to go the same way. And God sent one prophet after another to warn them, and still they slowly drifted away from God. In Jeremiah 39, we have the fall of Jerusalem.

And in our passage this morning, Jeremiah will once more warn them. And what I want us to see this morning is that God is a very merciful God. You see, when man is tempted into leaving God, it pulls on God's heartstrings. It is the same as when we, as parents, see our children forsake us. And when that happens God's compassion and mercy is aroused and He seeks with all His being to turn us around and come back to Him. I want to tell us on the full authority of the Word of God this morning that God is a merciful God. And there is something in God, which when we meet certain conditions, His mercy begs Him to do something for us. And that condition that we must meet is the condition of humility and the willingness to repent. It is amazing what man's humility and repentance will do to an Almighty God.

Well, Israel continued to follow the dictates of their own sinful hearts rather than the warnings of a loving God. And so in chapter 18 we have God's illustration (read 18:1-12). Now in this illustration God is saying, "Look, I am seeking to make of you something beautiful, just like a potter does with his lump

of clay. And when I find in you some hard lump that needs to be removed, some matter of sin, some wrongdoing, if you repent I in turn will relent of the destruction I planned for you. I will put you on the potter's wheel again, and I will continue My work. But if I warn you and you do not repent, I will relent of the good I thought to do to you and will fashion disaster against you. So, return now every one from his evil way and make your ways and your doings good."

I propose to you this morning that we are all on the potter's wheel so to speak. God Almighty wants to fashion everyone of us into the image of His Son Jesus Christ. Consider with me briefly Romans 8 (read 28-30). While we are on this potter's wheel, when God finds something in us that needs to go, and there is none in whom He does not find something, He will give us opportunity to repent and make our ways and doings good. And He says we know, not we think, but we know that all things work together for good to those who love God. All things means everything.

Now there is in Scripture a beautiful doctrine called the doctrine of predestination. This doctrine tells us what God wants us to be like when we come off the potter's wheel. And what He has predestined us to, is to be conformed to the image of His Son. I cannot deal with the doctrine of predestination this morning but it is a beautiful doctrine. You can get that message from our church on sermonaudio.com/lhec.

And so, as we begin 2014, let us purpose in our hearts to be the kind of clay God can fashion into that which He wants to fashion it.

I. THE SOURCE OF THE CLAY

Now there is a great message in the clay that God is working here. We want to consider first where this clay comes from. Philip Keller, a great man of God who could illustrate like few others, was sent to western Pakistan to the Patan people. Here a missionary invited him to visit an experienced potter. They found him in his little tumbled down potter's shack. This potter had been trained in China, from where we get the name China Pottery. Keller said to the potter, "I have a lot of time. Show me every thing."

So the potter showed him how it all begins. He took him to the back of the shop and opened a rickety old door into a kind of cave like abode, I gathered, where he mixed his clay. Keller says that as he opened the door a putrefying smell came out of this pit. There in the darkness he felt around for a piece of clay that would suit his purpose. Keller said it was here that an understanding of Psalm 40

was opened to him. The Psalmist David writes like this, "I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay..."

Now our passage does not tell us where God got the clay that He was working with. But other Scriptures do tell us. In Deuteronomy 32:9 it says, "For the LORD'S portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance. He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness..." In Deuteronomy 9:24 Moses says, "You have been rebellious against the LORD from the day that I knew you." Israel too, had come out of the miry clay.

I would remind those of us who have received Christ as our personal Savior that we too were chosen out of the miry clay. God never got a good deal when He chose any one of us. We were sin saturated sinners deserving nothing but the lowest pits of hell. And here in this horrible pit, the Lord found us and took us out that He might make something beautiful out of us. It is to no credit of our own that today we are walking on the highway to glory. We were the scum and off scouring of the devil's putrefying work. Our hearts were filled with every potential of evil and we had already embraced many evils. And there, into the midst of the stench of sin came the spotless Lamb of God, and He brought us up out of an horrible pit, out of the murky, miry clay. We do well to remember that we were nothing but hell deserving sinners, hopelessly lost in ourselves.

And if you should be here today and you are not saved, such is the description written over your life. If all our righteousness is as filthy rags in the eyes of God, what does the rest of our life look like? So Jeremiah writes in 17:9 that our heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. It is so wicked we cannot even know it ourselves.

But it has happened that people got saved, they had been brought out of an horrible pit and they walked with God and they delighted in the Lord and then one day a little sin entered, and then a little more. Slowly views changed and by and by, once more they slipped into the horrible pit. But Almighty God did not give up. He sought again and again to bring them up out of this horrible pit, and in my Christian life I have heard of those who fell back and who once more were brought out of an horrible pit.

Then there are others. You can see them in the back where one of our prayer meeting couples has put pictures of those

who did not slip back but stood up for the Lord. And the Devil's henchmen got a hold of them and put them in a horrible pit. There is one such man who is now in an Iranian prison where they put Christians that they want to disappear. I have had the privilege of traveling with those who were brought up out of just such an horrible pit.

II. THE PLACEMENT OF THE CLAY

But I want us to consider for a moment now where the potter puts his clay when he begins to work with it. Look at verse 3 (read). The potter puts the clay on the wheel. Ryrie says of this wheel, "On a vertical axis were two circular stones; the lower one was spun by the potter's feet, causing the upper one to rotate also. The clay was placed on the upper wheel." I quoted these words from Psalm 40 earlier, "I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay..." But Psalm 40:2 continues like this, "He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps." Phillip Keller said that the potter's wheel is made out of stone and when he has chosen his clay he takes endless time centering the clay on the stone wheel. The Lord God too has set us upon a Rock and that rock is Christ. Instead of groping, slipping, sliding in miry, messy clay; He sets our feet upon a rock and establishes our steps. Yes, and here we will be formed, step by step, into that which God wishes us to be.

There is never any hope of becoming anything for the Lord until our feet are placed on the Rock and our steps are established. But I want to remind us this morning, that God is still working with smelly, faulty clay. And while He has us in His hands He is following a pattern. He has a pattern that He is seeking to mold us after and that pattern is His only Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me remind you of an illustration I have used numerous times in the past. It is that of the rock polisher. When you put rocks in a rock polisher, those rocks too, are chosen rocks. And they are predestined rocks. They are predestined to become something beautiful. And when you polish rocks, there are three simple ingredients. These are water, grit, and other rocks. Let me briefly refresh your memories. I liken the water to the Word of God. By the way, the potter also uses water. And in rock polishing, the ingredient of which there is the most, is water. But into that water grit is placed. I liken that to the circumstances of life. And at first the grit is rough. It

takes off large lumps and sharp jagged corners of the rocks. When we get saved, it is like that too. The first things to go are the larger, more obvious things.

But when that stage is finished, the rocks are removed and new water and finer grit is placed in the polisher. By now the polisher has made thousands upon thousands of rounds. And now it begins all over again; round and round; and round and round. And the grit gets between the rocks and they wear down more and more. But now they are getting smoother and smoother.

The third ingredient is the rocks. Oh how those rocks rub on one another! And I liken those rocks to other believers. You see, the Lord puts believers together. They are not to forsake the assembling of themselves together. But these rocks wear away at one another, and it is necessarily so. You see, if we do not gather with other believers, the polishing process comes to an end. You cannot polish single rocks in a polisher. They must rub on one another and knock lumps off one another.

And by and by, the rocks are removed once more. Again new, clean water is added, but now finer grit and the now somewhat smaller and smoother rocks go back into the polisher. You see, now the rubbing of the rocks is not nearly as rough. They have learned to work together. And now, the transformation of the rocks is very slow. But when you open that polisher for the last time and wash the dirty water off, there lay these beautiful shiny gems! That is a picture of being conformed to the image of God's Son.

The potter and the clay process is like that too.

III. THE FAULT OF THE CLAY

Now look at Jeremiah 18:4 (read). The potter Jeremiah went to see that day when God was teaching him this lesson had already chosen his piece of clay. He had placed it on the rock and he was turning the wheel and working on the clay. And as he was shaping the vessel something very disappointing happened. The vessel was marred in his hands. Keller relates that the potter he went to observe was gazing intently on his work. And as a goblet began to take shape, suddenly the wheel stopped. The hands of the potter had met with some resistance in the clay. The potter removed a piece of grit from the clay. But now the vessel he was working on was marred. So he had to begin again. And now something else was just beginning to take shape, and then it happened a second time. And then the potter's

shoulders slumped and a look of dismay crossed his face. In the vessel was a deep gouge, caused by something in the clay. To Keller's dismay, the potter took the beautiful vessel that was beginning to take form and crushed it so he might start all over again.

I want to propose to you this morning that God is very merciful, slow to anger and of great patience. As long as there is hope He will start all over again. And I propose that He has to crush us again and again, because the clay He is working with is of such poor quality.

The Scriptures contain numerous illustrations that give us the picture of what a person is like that God finds workable. Jeremiah 4:3 talks about breaking up the fallow ground. God challenges us to make the hard soil soft. The good soil of Matthew 13 is soft soil. It is crushed soil. When there is in us sin, sin of any kind, it makes us hard and God cannot work with us. When we have any pride in our hearts, we become hard and God cannot work with us. Sometimes he has to take out some hard piece, and crush us and start all over again.

IV. THE RARE QUALITY OF GOOD CLAY (6-8)

Now let us go to verses 6-10 to find the rare quality of good clay (read). The Lord is speaking of Israel. Israel is the clay and Almighty God is the Potter. Israel has been on the wheel for some time and now the vessel is marred. A deep gouge can be seen in the vessel and like a potter who finally gives up, God decides to get rid of the whole lump. But look at what He says in verse eight, "...if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it." There we find that wonderful quality of good clay. It pictures repentance, a change of mind, a turning point. And here is the incredible thing about repentance. It removes un-moldable hard lumps and leaves soft pliable clay. When the clay is once again soft and pliable the Lord can begin to remold the clay.

Job was a man who pictured this kind of clay. Job, Scripture tells us, was blameless and upright and he feared God and shunned evil. He was a good man. And one day when God had him on the potter's wheel, He found this hard lump in the clay. All unknown to Job, a tumor was growing in him. Read through the book and underline everywhere where Job speaks of himself and you will probably see this. And God had to do something to get that lump out. It was a very dangerous lump. It was the cancer of spiritual pride.

And so God said to Satan, "Have you observed my servant Job. My what a man he is. There is nobody like him. He is blameless and upright. He fears God and shuns evil." Have you ever wondered why God did not leave well enough alone there? I think it was because it was not really well enough. Satan did not realize that God would allow him to help remove a tumor out of Job. Satan did all he could to destroy Job, but like Joseph of old, God meant it for good. And so Job began to undergo divine surgery. And he said, "Oh, if I could only come before God and present my case, I would teach Him a thing or two."

Pride and self righteousness are very horrible things. When God finds anything like that in the clay, He has to remove it. And so He allowed Satan at Job. Then He allowed his friends at him. But Job maintained his position of righteousness. Then in Job 38 God finally breaks the silence with Job. Job is now ready for further surgery. Job has wished to come before God so he could give Him a piece of his mind. And now God allows him that opportunity. And God says, "Well, now Job. If you are so bright, I have a few questions for you." And so God asks Job one question after another. A whole chapter of questions. But Job has no answers. Then another whole chapter of questions follows. Still more questions, and still no answers. Now look at Job 40 (read 1-3). All Job can do is lay his hand over his mouth and say, "Behold, I am vile; what shall I answer You?"

"Well", and I am putting this in my own words, God says, "Job, if you can make proud man humble, then you are so great that you do not need Me to save you. You can save yourself. Let me tell you how big your ability would be. You would be able to take behemoth, that huge dinosaur and you would be able to put a ring in his nose and lead him about. You would be able to go to the sea, cast a fishing line in the ocean and hook this 60 ton leviathan, and pull him into shore. If you can make proud people humble, you don't need me any more. You can save yourself." Now look at Job 42 (read 1-6). The lump has been removed. There is now good clay to work with.

And when Job humbled himself, God was now able to refashion him and give him twice as much as he had before. You see, God had found in the clay of this righteous man a hard lump. I believe it was nothing less than spiritual pride, and it came out very hard. God had to gouge a hole in this beautiful vessel, crush it, and start over again. But in the end, in this case, He had a vessel even more beautiful

than before.

I propose to you this morning that the rare quality clay is the soft pliable clay, and that it is an illustration of a repentant heart. As long as we are repentant God continues to fashion us into a vessel fit for His use. We may have strayed so far that God has to make something else than He originally planned, but if we are repentant, He will do just that. Forming man into that which God has purposed is a long process, for what God has in mind for us is a vessel that looks just like His Son Jesus Christ. And there are few in whom He does not meet with considerable resistance. And when God finds resistance in our lives, areas that will not budge, he eventually has to do surgical work and remove a hard area from our lives. And since removing these hard areas causes a gouge in us, He sometimes has to crush us and begin again.

The potter Keller was watching placed the crushed clay back in the center of the wheel and now he fashioned something entirely different. The potter's first intent was to make a goblet that would go into the home of a nobleman. Now he made a finger bowl used by peasants. Then the missionary said to Keller, "What are you going to be?"

CONCL: In conclusion this morning, I ask, I ask you this morning, has God found some resistant hardness in you that will not budge, some area that refuses to be molded? I ask you, will you repent so He might continue what He has planned for you? Or is the hardness such that the Lord will have to poke a hole in the clay and remove the lump? May it be that He will not be able to complete what He had originally planned? May He have to settle for something less?

"Where is each one of us in the illustration of the potter? Have we been taken out of the miry pit yet? That is, are we saved? And if that is so, then we are now in the process of being molded by God. God is seeking to make us like Christ. May I ask, Is God at work in your life? Has He found some hard lumps? Are there victories over sin in your life? May I ask each one of us, are we soft and pliable and moldable? Or could it be that God has discovered some hardness and we are not willing to yield? Could it be that the Lord is seeking to remove some bit of hardness? Has the Lord shown you such an area this morning?

As I go along in the Christian life, more and more I find what a wonderful thing repentance is. As to repenting, it is one of the hardest things to do. I have found it so in my own life and have observed it in others. But real and true repentance, when we do not cover or hide our sin in any way but openly expose and

repent of it does absolute wonders. It is amazing how patient God is. As long as there is hope, God's mercy endures.

May I ask each one of us this morning how much we desire to be like Christ? I can tell you if that is our hearts desire the Lord will reveal things in our lives and if we desire it enough we will repent of those things He exposes. When we are repentant God can do wonderful things in our lives. Let me also share that if we want to be like Christ, and we really desire it, we will learn how far from like Him we are. And when He begins to expose us, we may sometimes wish we had never desired to be like Christ. Sometimes we would like to get out of the rock polisher for a while. Sometimes we would like to get off the potter's wheel. Jeremiah has told us that the heart is deceitful above all things. That is my heart. That is your heart. I believe that to make us like Christ is a greater challenge to God than to keep this universe under control.

I ask you, can we honestly say this morning, "Search me O God, and see if there be any wicked way in me." Now there is no use asking that if by that we do not mean that we will repent and amend our ways if He does show us some wicked way.

Micah 6:8 says, "He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God?" To walk humbly with God is the picture of clay that is soft and pliable. A humble man will repent when the Lord points out sin. Scripture says God gives grace to the humble, but He resists the proud. For this year of 2014, no matter at what stage we may be on the Potter's wheel, let me encourage us to maintain soft, pliable, repentant hearts.

THE POTTER'S HOUSE

To the Potter's house I went down one day,
And watched Him while molding the clay;
And many a wonderful lesson I drew,
As I noted the process the clay went thro'.
Trampled and broken, down trodden and rolled,
To render more plastic and fit for the mould;
How like the clay that is human, I thought,
When in Heavenly hands to perfection brought.
For self must be cast at the dust of His feet,
Before it is ready for service made meet;
And pride must be broken, and self-will lost-
All laid on the altar, whatever the cost;
But lo! by and by, a delicate vase of wondrous beauty and
exquisite grace.

Was it once the vile clay? Ah, yes; yet how strange,

The Potter has wrought so marvelous a change!
Not a trace of the earth, nor mark of the clay,
The fires of the furnace have burned them away.

Wondrous skill of the Potter-the praise is His due,
In whose hands to perfection and beauty it grew;
Thus with souls lying still, content in God's hand,
That do not His power of working withstand.

They are molded and fitted, a treasure to hold;
Vile clay now transformed into purest of gold.

Selected