

What the Clay Can Do with the Potter

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The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying, Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause thee to hear my words. Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel. (Jeremiah 18:1-6)

One Sunday a potter, who also was one of our radio listeners, came to an evening service and put on a demonstration for my church congregation. He brought in a potter's wheel, which was operated by a foot pedal, and on that wheel he put clay. While I was giving the message, he molded the clay into a vessel. It was a very simple experiment, but I never repeated it. The congregation that evening was so intent on watching the potter that I don't think anyone heard my message!

Many years before this, when I was a seminary student traveling from my home in Tennessee to the seminary in Dallas, Texas, I had to cross the state of Arkansas and always passed by a large pottery plant near Arkadelphia. One day we took time out (several other fellows were traveling with me) to stop and see the pottery being made.

There were two very impressive, very striking sights there that I have not forgotten. Behind this plant was the ugliest patch of mud I'd ever seen. It was shapeless and gooey. It looked hopeless to me. But out in front of the plant they had a display room, and in that room were some of the most exquisite vessels I'd ever seen.

We went inside the plant, and we saw many potters at work. There they stood, bent over their wheels, all of which were power-driven. Since they didn't have to use foot pedals, they could give their full attention to working with that helpless, hopeless, ugly, mushy, messy clay. They were intent on transforming it and translating it into objects of art. The only difference between that mass of mud out back and those lovely vessels in the display room were these men, the potters, working over their wheels.

Now it was to such a place that God sent this man Jeremiah. He sent him down to see a sermon. Actually it is a very simple sermon, and it is easy to make identifications in this very wonderful, living parable that Jeremiah gives us. We have no difficulty in identifying the clay; in fact, God does it for us. God is the Potter, and He tells Jeremiah that Israel is the clay. Also, it is very easy to make the application to mankind in general and to each man individually. Man is the clay. If I may be personal, *you* are the clay on the Potter's wheel. Regardless of what else may be said about you today, you are clay on the Potter's wheel—as is every person who ever lived on this earth.

The figure of the potter and clay is carried over to the New Testament. We find Paul in his epistle to the Romans using the same simile:

Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor? (Romans 9:21)

Then Paul used the other side of this very wonderful illustration when he wrote to Timothy:

If a man, therefore, purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and fit for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work. (2 Timothy 2:21)

So we see that this analogy is carried all the way through the Word of God.

There is simplicity about our illustration that may cause us to miss the profundity of the message that is here. The meaning is quite obvious when you first look at it—there is the potter, there is the wheel, and there on the wheel is the clay with which he is working. It seems very self-explanatory, and the danger is to make a surface interpretation that will not really touch upon the deep message that is here.

To avoid this, we will look for three things: the principle, the purpose, and the Person of the Potter. I have attempted to divide it into two great sections, and they belong together like two sides of a coin. First we shall look at the power of the Potter and the personality of the clay. Then we're going to turn that around.

Power of the Potter and Personality of the Clay

O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.

(Jeremiah 18:6)

Power of the Potter

Like a giant potter, God took clay and He formed man. God is the great Potter, the Creator.

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (Genesis 1:26, 27)

And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. (Genesis 2:7)

After man had sinned, God said to Adam in Genesis 3:19,

In the sweat of thy face you shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken; for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.

Now let's go back down to the potter's house and stand with Jeremiah as we watch the potter at work. The potter has a wheel, an old-fashioned one. He works that pedal with his foot to make the wheel turn. As he pedals, his hands are deftly, artistically working with the clay and attempting to form out of it a work of art.

Note, now, the first principle: God is sovereign.

The potter is absolute. That is, he has power over the clay and that power is unlimited. No clay can stop the potter, nor can it question his right. No clay can resist his will, nor "say him nay," nor alter his plans. The clay cannot speak back to him. Do you remember the delightful little tale we heard in nursery school about the gingerbread boy who talked back? Well, this clay can't talk back.

I recall the whimsical story of a little boy who was playing in the mud down by a brook. He was attempting to make a man. He worked on him and had gotten pretty well along when his mother called him. They were going downtown and he must come along. He wanted to stay, but she insisted that he come. By this time he had finished his mud man except for one arm, but he had to leave. As he was in town with his mother and father, he saw a one-armed man. The little boy eyed him for a while. Finally he went up to him and said, "Why did you leave before I finished you?"

The clay on the potter's wheel can't get up when it wants to. The clay on the potter's wheel is not able to do anything. It can only yield to the potter's hand.

Nowhere, I repeat, nowhere will you find such a graphic picture of the sovereignty of God as this: man, the clay upon the Potter's wheel, and God, the Potter. You won't find anything quite like this.

Our contemporary generation resists the idea of His sovereignty because this is the day of the rights of man. We hear a great deal today about freedom, and every group is insisting upon its freedom—freedom to protest, freedom to do what it chooses. Today we permit murderers to plead the Fifth Amendment because we must protect their rights. We permit students to deface their schools and torment their classmates because they must have their rights.

But what about God? Doesn't He have some rights? I say to you that God has incontestable authority. His will is inexorable, it is inflexible, and it will prevail. He has irresistible ability to form and fashion this universe to suit Himself. He can form this little earth on which we live to suit Himself. He can take the nations, which He says are a "drop in a bucket," and do with them as He pleases. And, my friend, you and I as individuals can be nothing but clay in His hands. He has power to carry through His will and He answers to no one. He has no board of directors; He has no voters to whom He must respond. He is an absolute dictator. He is *God!* He has not been able to see something that you and I see every day—He has never seen His equal. You and I live in a universe that is running to please God, and the rebellion of little man down here on this speck of dust that we live on is a tempest in a teapot! Our little earth, as we see in the pictures taken from the moon, is just a speck in the infinity of space. And, my friend, God rides triumphantly in His own chariot.

You will find that the Word of God has some very definite things to say about this:

Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor? (Romans 9:19-21)

It was Johann Bengel who wrote, “The Jews thought that in no case could they be abandoned by God, and in no case could the Gentiles be received by God.” And Dr. Lange, the great German expositor, said: “When man goes the length of making to himself a god whom he affects to bind by his own rights, God then puts on His majesty, and appears in all His reality as a free God, before whom man is a mere nothing, like the clay in the hand of the potter. Such was Paul’s attitude when acting as God’s advocate in his suit with Jewish Pharisaism.”

God is absolute!

Personality of the Clay

Now for a moment let’s look at the personality of the clay. I realize someone will say, “You have a mixed metaphor here! You mean to tell me that the clay has personality? Clay is formless, it is shapeless, it is lifeless, it is inept, it is inert, it is incapable, it is a muddy mess.” The psalmist wrote, “...He remembereth that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14). Dr. George Gill used to say in class, “God remembers that we are dust, but man sometimes forgets it and gets stuck on himself. And when dust gets stuck on itself, it’s mud.” We do sometimes forget this, but God remembers we are dust. I look at the clay on that wheel down at the potter’s house. That clay has no wish; it has no rights; it has no inherent ability. It is helpless and it is hopeless.

The Scriptures confirm this. For example, although Paul is writing to the Ephesians, verse 1 of chapter 2 can apply to you and me as well: “And you...were dead in trespasses and sins.” That’s man. Then he amplifies this later on in the same chapter: “...having no hope, and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). That clay on the potter’s wheel is no different. And Paul said to the Romans,

For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.

(Romans 5:6)

This is not a very pretty picture.

Very possibly, right now, you are resisting. I don’t blame you. Candidly, if this were all that is here, then I would be doing violence to this living parable of the potter’s house! If I were told only of God’s sovereignty and the fact that I am hopeless and shapeless clay, I would not only tremble, but I would rebel! I wouldn’t like it. And if that were the whole story, I would turn my back on God.

But, my friend, I won’t turn my back on God because that is not all. Let’s turn the coin over and take a look at the other side.

Power of the Clay and Personality of the Potter

This is the other side of the coin:

And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it. (Jeremiah 18:4)

There is not only a principle here, which is that God is sovereign, but also there is a purpose.

Power of the Clay

Look now at the power of the clay, that clay on the potter's wheel. This wheel, to borrow Browning's words, is "this dance of plastic circumstance." It is the wheel of circumstance.

I do not believe that life's big decisions are made in a church sanctuary. I believe they are made out in the workaday world—in the office, in the school, in the workshop, at the crossroads of life—that is where the Potter is working with the clay. There is the place He is working with you, my friend.

You and I live in a world that seems to have no purpose nor meaning. Multitudes of people see no purpose in life whatever; they find confusion on every hand. Someone has expressed it in a little jingle:

In a day of illusions and utter confusions,
Upon our delusions we base our conclusions.

Author unknown

How true that is of life today!

Look away, for a moment, from the potter's wheel. Behind him we see shelf upon shelf of works of art. Those objects of beauty were at one time on the potter's wheel as clay—clay that yielded to the potter's hand. Once they all were a shapeless mass of mud. What happened? That lifeless clay was under the hand of the potter, and as the wheel of circumstance turned, he molded and made them into the vessels that now stand on display.

I outlined the Book of Jeremiah for our *Thru the Bible Radio* program while my wife and I were staying in an apartment for a few days in Fort Myers, Florida. Every morning we would eat breakfast in the apartment, I would work for a few hours on Jeremiah, and then we would go over to one of the islands and hunt for shells. I discovered something: There are literally

thousands of varieties of shells. My wife bought a book on shells, and we identified some of them. I never dreamed there were so many! Anything God does He does in profusion.

In my hand I am holding a beautiful little shell that I picked up on Sanibel Island. I had been working on the eighteenth chapter of Jeremiah that morning, and when I found this, it occurred to me that the Lord was trying to say something to me. God started with just a little animal, a tiny mollusk, and around it He formed this exquisite shell. I thought, *Well, since the great Architect has spent all that time with a little shell at the bottom of the ocean, what about man today?*

Look again at those works of art which the potter has lining the shelves behind him. Don't speak disparagingly of the clay! I'm sorry for what I said about it. It has marvelous capacity and resilience. This, my friend, is what our Potter wants—clay. He doesn't want steel, He doesn't want oil, and He doesn't want rock. He wants clay. He wants something that He can put in His hand and mold and fashion. This is the stuff He is after—clay. God wants to work with human beings.

Someone may say, "Yes, but here is where that analogy breaks down. The distance between God and man is greater than that between the potter and the clay." I disagree with that. Actually God is nearer to man than the potter is to the clay.

This is what I mean: The clay on the wheel down at the potter's house has no will. I do! That clay cannot cooperate with the potter. I can! I quoted the Genesis account of the creation of man for a purpose—God created man in His own likeness. He took man physically out of the dust of the ground; He made man. Then He breathed into his breathing-places the spirit of life and man became a living soul. The clay has no will, but you and I have free will, and we can exercise it. We can cooperate with the Potter.

Now I want to ask the Potter a question: What is Your purpose in putting me on the potter's wheel? Why do You bear down on me? Why do You keep working with me? Why, Potter, do You do this? I'm not being irreverent, but I am like the little gingerbread boy—I talk back. Why, O Potter, do You do this? What are You after?

Well, I go back to the potter's house. Follow me now very carefully. I do not discover here the purpose for my life, but I learn something more important than that. I learn that the potter has a purpose, which is more important to know. I watch the potter there. He is serious; he means business. He is not *playing* with the clay. This is his *work*. He is giving his time, his talents, his ability to working with the clay. Notice again Jeremiah 18:3 and 4:

Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.

Friend, this is not a cat-and-mouse operation. This is not the potter's avocation, it is his vocation. This is not his hobby. This is not something with which he is amusing himself. He knows what he is doing.

This tells me that God is not playing with me today. He is not experimenting with us. He has purpose. And, friend, that comforts me. This is the second great principle we see here: The Potter has a purpose.

As an onlooker, I stand with Jeremiah, and I ask, "What's he going to make?" Jeremiah says, "I don't know. Let's watch him." As we observe, we cannot tell what the finished piece will look like, but the potter knows. He has a plan. He knows what he is doing. The onlooker does not know his purpose, nor does the clay.

But, friend, someday we will know. When God puts us on the plastic wheel of circumstance, He means to accomplish something. He has a purpose.

The psalmist says, "...I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness" (Psalm 17:15). Someday I'll be like Him!

Beloved, now are we the children of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

That's going to be a fair morning, it's going to be a new day! And God will be vindicated—He was not being cruel when He caused us to suffer. Someday, some glorious day, we'll see that the Potter had a purpose in your life and in mine.

Notice again how Paul writes to the Ephesians. He began the second chapter with the doleful words which I have already quoted:

And you...were dead in trespasses and sins. (Ephesians 2:1)

And if that is all, then I'm through too. But, my friend, there is more:

That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:7)

In the ages to come we'll be a demonstration. We'll be yonder on display, revealing what the Potter can do with lifeless clay. He gets the glory. It will be wonderful to be a vessel in the Master's hand.

Personality of the Potter

In conclusion let us consider the personality of the Potter. This is the most important and wonderful thing of all. To do this we must take one final look in the potter's house.

I say to Jeremiah, “The potter is a kindly looking man.” Jeremiah answers, “He is. He doesn’t want to hurt the clay. He wants the clay to yield so that he can make something out of it.” I gaze into the face of the potter. Oh, how intent he is. How interested he is in the clay.

Oh, what a Potter God is! If I could only see my Potter! But the Scripture says I cannot see God. Philip asked the question, which I certainly would have asked, when he said to Jesus,

... Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us. Jesus saith unto him, Have I been such a long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.... (John 14:8, 9)

My friend, let us look at the Potter very carefully now. See the Potter’s feet as He is working them on the pedals, turning, turning that wheel of circumstance. See the hands of the Potter as He deftly, artistically, oh, so intently and delicately, kindly and lovingly works with the clay. I look at Him. Those feet have spike wounds in them. And there are nail prints in those hands.

That’s not all.

I turn over to Matthew’s Gospel and read:

Then Judas, who had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? See thou to that. And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself. And the chief priests took the silver pieces, and said, It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because it is the price of blood. And they took counsel, and bought with them the potter’s field, to bury strangers in. Wherefore, that field was called, The

field of blood, unto this day. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremiah, the prophet, saying, And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him that was valued, whom they of the children of Israel did value, and gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord appointed me. (Matthew 27:3-10)

Two verses, 7 and 8, startle me:

And they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field, to bury strangers in. Wherefore, that field was called, The field of blood, unto this day.

They probably did not know what they were doing when they called it the Field of Blood, but I hope you don't miss it. This Potter is more wonderful than any other potter. He shed His blood that He might go into that field and take those broken pieces and put them again on His potter's wheel to make them into another vessel.

Recently I talked with a woman who has a broken home and a broken life. Is God through with her? Absolutely not. He is patient and willing to rework the marred clay. Is He through with us when we make a failure of our lives? Oh, no. He is not through with us—that is, if the clay will yield to Him. All that is necessary is the clay yielding to the Potter. He paid the price for the field. It's a field of blood. You may look back on your life and say, "Oh, what a failure! I don't think God could ever use me." My friend, He is working with those broken pieces today, and He will work with you if you'll let Him. He has already paid the price for your redemption. You can't make anything out of yourself for Him, and I can't either, but He can take us and put us on the wheel of circumstance and shape us into a vessel of honor.

We are the clay.

He is the Potter.