

"The Potter and the Clay"

Jeremiah 18:1-12

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Introduction:

This morning I would like for us to continue in our series of lessons from the Old Testament book of **Jeremiah**, and I would like for us to consider a rather interesting illustration that the prophet Jeremiah uses as he tries to warn the nation of Israel about the coming destruction of Jerusalem. We know that some of God's prophets have used some rather unusual items to make a point. We can think about the basket of summer fruit that was used (in the book of **Amos**) to prove that Israel was ripe, that Israel's time was nearly up. We remember the builder's plumb line that was also used in the book of **Amos**. God was comparing Israel to that perfectly straight line, and Israel was shown to be less than perfect, to say the least. We remember the locusts that were pictured in the book of **Joel**, as Joel warned about the coming destruction, if the people refused to listen to the word of God.

Over in the New Testament, Jesus used physical objects in the same way. We remember the parable of the man who went out to sow seed and the lessons that Jesus taught from that very vivid illustration. We remember the parable of the mustard seed, and the fig tree, and the merchant who found the pearl of great price, and the shepherd who went out looking for the lost sheep, and the candle under the bushel basket, and the picture of a camel trying to squeeze through the eye of a needle.

We remember the prophet Agabus from **Acts 21**, as he took Paul's belt and bound his own hands. His message was, "***In this way the Jews at Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.***"

Over and over again, therefore, God's prophets have used physical items to help illustrate a spiritual message. The same is also true in the book of Jeremiah. Perhaps you may remember the pot of boiling water that is pictured back in **Jeremiah 1**. God was making the point that evil would pour out on the nation of Israel, starting in the north. We might also be familiar with the story of the belt in **Jeremiah 13**. God told Jeremiah to go hide a belt by the banks of the Euphrates River. After many days, God told Jeremiah to go get the belt, which Jeremiah did, but the belt was ruined. And God used that vivid picture as an illustration of the fact that the nation of Israel had also been ruined by going out and serving other gods.

There are many other similar pictures in the book, but this morning I would like for us to focus on several verses in **Jeremiah 18**, as God tells the prophet Jeremiah to

go spend some time in a pottery shop. **»PPT»** If you are using the pew Bibles, the passage is found on page 1212.

So far in this series, we have looked at the call of Jeremiah as a very young man. We have looked at the danger of accepting substitutes as the people of Israel had done, by swapping the fresh mountain stream for a broken cistern. And then last week we looked together at the value of considering the ancient paths. But this morning, I would like for us to consider one of the most memorable illustrations found anywhere in the book of Jeremiah. We will focus our attention on **Jeremiah 18:1-12**...

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." 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. 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. 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. 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. 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."' 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.'

As we look very carefully at these twelve verses, the picture that Jeremiah paints for us is very clear, because...

I. ...to start with, Jeremiah tells us very clearly that GOD IS THE POTTER.

»PPT»

We picture God in many different ways. Most of us think of God primarily as a Father. We address Him as our Father in Heaven. We also think of God as being our Creator. We think of God as being our Lord and Master. We think of God as leading the armies of heaven, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. We think of God as a Shepherd. We picture God in many ways, but at least in **Jeremiah 18**, God is portrayed as the potter.

And as the potter, God is interested in His people. He is making something on the wheel, and it gets spoiled. He does not throw it away, but He starts over, and He molds the clay over and over again. As the potter, we find that God is interested in shaping the future. As the potter, we find that God has absolute authority. As the potter, God has the right to deal with the clay in any way that He wishes. Whatever He wants to do He can do. He is completely in charge.

We also find here that God is creative. In fact, creativity is an attribute of God that we can find all the way back in **Genesis 1**. In **Genesis 1:3**, God says, "**Let there be light.**" In **verse 6**, He says, "**Let there be an expanse.**" In **verse 14**, He says, "**Let there be a light in the expanse of the heavens.**" But something very interesting happens when we get to **Genesis 1:26**, there is a shift that takes place. Instead of saying, "Let there be this or that," for the first time, God says, "**Let us MAKE man in our image....**" He spoke the light, He spoke the fish and all of the creatures, but when it came to man the Lord gets especially creative. He makes man, He shapes man. Do we remember what God made man out of? He made us out of dirt. God was playing in the dirt! God was being creative with the clay—all the way back in the Garden of Eden.

Even in the New Testament, we find that Jesus also did something quite amazing with a little bit of clay. You might remember from **John 9** that Jesus spit in the dirt, he made clay with His spit, he applied that clay to the eyes of a blind man, and the blind man was able to see. God is creative. He is the potter!

As the potter, God has a plan for our lives. As He sits down at the wheel, He knows what He would like to see at the end. He knows what He would like to accomplish through us. Sometimes we are tempted to think that we are coasting through life, that God does not really care, but what we sometimes fail to realize is that God is spinning the potter's wheel.

In **verse 3**, we find that the potter was sitting at his wheel. Some of you might have a footnote on **verse 3**. The word that we translate here as "**wheel**," literally refers to, "**a pair of stone discs**," or, as the footnote in the NIV puts it, "**two stones.**" Hopefully all of us have had the privilege of watching a potter do his or her work. It is a beautiful process. I remember the pottery unit in art class at Lundahl Junior High School down in Crystal Lake, Illinois. As I remember it, the art teacher brought in a potter's wheel. There was a large heavy disc almost right on the floor. It was connected by a shaft to a smaller disc up on top, and there was a seat in between the two. And so to make a piece of pottery, we would sit on the little bench and we would get the wheels moving by basically kicking that stone down there on the bottom. Once it got going fast enough, we would throw a piece of clay on top of that top wheel, we would dip our fingers in water, and we would very slowly shape that clay.

And so it is very interesting, with that picture in mind, to discover that God is a potter. Not only is He creative, not only is He in charge, but we also find that God (as the potter) is incredibly patient. We find that when He discovers some kind of problem with the clay, He does not just toss it aside. He does not just throw it away,

but He throws it right back on the wheel, and He works at remaking it into something different.

I am reminded of a brand new hair salon opening up for business right across the street from the old respected barber. This new salon put a huge sign out front: We Give \$7 Haircuts! Well, not to be outdone, the old master barber thought about it a little bit, and he put his own sign out front: We Fix \$7 Haircuts! God has a lot in common with that old, respected barber. He does not give up, but as the master potter He starts that process over again. He fixes the damage that others have done.

So first of all, then, we find that God is the potter.

II. As we look back at Jeremiah 18, we find a second lesson from Jeremiah's visit to the pottery shop, and that is, WE ARE THE CLAY.

»PPT»

We know that there are all different kinds of clay—different colors, different consistencies—but when we get right down to it, clay is basically dirt. I know a real potter would argue with me on this point, and that's okay, because the point is: Clay is not very glamorous. Clay comes from the earth. On its own, clay is not very valuable. And so it is interesting that we are pictured as clay!

You might remember some of what God said when He cursed Adam for eating the fruit of the forbidden tree, He said, ***"By the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."*** As human beings, we are dust. We are nothing but clay. We are wet dirt.

This past week, a news story caught my eye, and maybe it caught your eye as well. It was about a new way of disposing of the human body after death. The article explained that for thousands of years there have basically been two options: Burial or cremation. But there is a new process known as **"resomation."** According to the recent article in the Washington Post, the process involves, **"...dissolving bodies in lye and flushing the brownish, syrupy residue down the drain."** My first reaction was, **"EEEWWWW!"** Apparently, the process, **"...uses lye, 300-degree heat and 60 pounds of pressure per square inch to destroy bodies in big stainless-steel cylinders that are similar to pressure cookers."** We might think it is rather unusual, but literally, the human body is basically clay.

Jeremiah, though, was speaking more in a spiritual sense. Not only are we literally clay, but we are also compared spiritually to being clay in the hands of God! God has plans for us. God is slowly shaping us in a certain direction. The key here this morning is to understand that we are the stuff being worked on! We are the ones who are compared to lumps of clay on the potter's wheel. And as lumps of clay, we are not the ones who need to decide how we will be formed, but we choose whether we will cooperate with the potter. God is in charge!

Unfortunately, ancient Israel often had it all backwards. A hundred years earlier, the prophet Isaiah said, **"You turn things around! Shall the potter be considered as equal with the clay, that what is made would say to its maker, 'He did not make me'; or what is formed say to him who formed it, 'He has no understanding'?"** And as he goes on to say in **Isaiah 45:9**, **"Woe to the one who quarrels with his Maker—an earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth! Will the clay say to the potter, 'What are you doing?' Or the thing you are making say, 'He has no hands'?"**

If we take that kind of arrogant and stubborn attitude, God can do nothing. In contrast, we are to approach God with humility. Our attitude needs to be the same as that of Mary in **Luke 1:38**. After the angel told her that she was pregnant and would have a Son, Mary said, **"Behold, the bondslave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word."**

Like Mary, and like a good lump of clay, our hearts need to be soft and pliable. If clay dries out and gets all hard and crusty, it is no good—it cannot be molded on the potter's wheel. If clay dries out it becomes like the roadside soil in the parable of the sower—the evil one comes and snatches away the seed before it ever has a chance to sprout.

We see this all around us. Sometimes we explain the gospel to people, and they do not care. The seed bounces off and does no good. But other people hear the word and respond to it with joy—they obey the gospel and they are faithful to the Lord. First of all, I know that the seed is not the problem! In the parable of the various soils, Jesus went on to explain that the seed is the word of God. But the Lord also explained the difference with the productive soil. In **Luke 8:15**, the Lord said, **"But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance."** The good and honest heart is a heart that is willing to accept the fact that God is the potter and we are the clay.

If there is some command that we just do not agree with, if there is some part of our life that we are going to shield from God, then our hearts are not as soft as they need to be. If we are living in sin, if we are protecting ourselves from God, then we need to open up about that. We need to soften ourselves in the hand of God.

We need to think again about the fact (in **verse 4**) that **"...the clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter."** The word **"spoiled"** can also be translated, **"decayed, ruined, corrupt, disfigured, or wasted."** And yet even though this is true, God did not throw it away, but he kept on working with it. We think of Old Testament men like Abraham, the man of great faith. Abraham lied about his wife and got in some serious trouble, but God gave him a second chance. Abraham's heart was soft! David also sinned horribly in the eyes of God, but again, David's heart was ultimately soft, and he allowed God to have his way. In **Psalms 139:23-24**, King David said, **"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way."** In the New Testament, Simon Peter denied the Lord, but again,

his heart was also soft. He opened up to God, and God put that lump of clay right back on the wheel and kept on working! God fixes \$7 haircuts!

Conclusion & Invitation:

Perhaps someone here this morning feels like a lump of clay that has just collapsed on the potter's wheel. Maybe you know you are not in a right relationship with God. Maybe you know that you are living a life that does not live up to what you know God expects. The message from Jeremiah is, "**God is not finished!**" God can forgive your sins! God can start over again! But the key to starting over is that the clay must be soft. Our hearts must be open to change.

Too many times, people get involved in sin, and then they decide to disagree with God's command. Perhaps they decide that the cost of following God is too high. And so then they wall off this section of their life from God—this is a section where God cannot go—I am good with God everywhere but here, and that is okay with me. Good friends, the Bible describes this as "**hardness of heart.**"

In **2 Timothy 2:20-22**, the apostle Paul was talking about sin and wickedness, and he makes an interesting point. He says, "***Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work. Now flee from youthful lusts and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.***" The key to pleasing God is to put aside all forms of sin and to, "***...pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart.***"

We are inviting you to open your heart to the word of God and to join us in pursuing what is right.

The Bible tells us that God gave His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins. We respond to that sacrifice with faithful obedience, motivated by our love for God. We do whatever it takes to approach God with hearts that are soft. We publicly profess our faith that Jesus is the Son of God, and we allow ourselves to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have any questions, we would love to talk with you after the service, but if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing the next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org