

The Potter and the Clay
Spilman Memorial Baptist Church, Kinston NC
Dr. H. Powell Dew, Jr.
August 25, 2024

Text: Jeremiah 18:1-11

From God's Hands
(by Irenaues – 2nd Century AD)

It is not you who shape God;
it is God that shapes you.
If then you are the work of God,
await the hand of the Artist
who does all things in due season.
Offer the Potter your heart,
soft and tractable,
and keep the form in which
the Artist has fashioned you.
Let your clay be moist,
lest you grow hard and lose
the imprint of the Potter's fingers.

Purpose: The Lord is closely involved in the affairs of a nation. The Lord molds and shapes the affairs of men. Jeremiah gives Israel the metaphor of the Potter and Clay as an example of how the Lord works with nations. The nations that honor the Lord are blessed. The nations that reject the Lord are judged. The same is true on a personal level. God is involved in molding and shaping our lives. When we repent and yield our lives to the Lord, He molds and shapes our lives. Sometimes we don't understand because we do not see the master design. When we fail to repent, we will face judgment.

At one point during a game, the coach called one of his 9-year-old baseball players aside and asked, "Do you understand what cooperation is? What a team is?"
The little boy nodded "yes."



The coach went on to say, "Do you understand that what matters is that we work together as a team – win or lose?"
The little boy nodded "yes."

So," the coach continued, "I'm sure you know, when an out is called, you shouldn't argue, curse, attack the umpire, or call him an idiot or blind. Do you understand all that?"
The little boy nodded "yes" again.

The coach continued, "And when I take you out of the game so another boy gets a chance to play too, it's not good sportsmanship to call your coach stupid is it?"

The little boy shook his head "no."



"GOOD," said the coach, "Now go over there and explain all that to your grandmother."

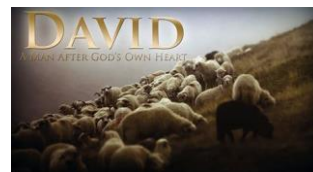
I have seen a few of those at Madelyn's softball games! Parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents can be intense!

At every turn in our world today people are seeking their own way at the expense of others. We have forgotten that our lives are to be yielded to the leading hand of the Lord – our Potter. Olympians have been caught cheating to get an edge over their competition. Eventually they are discovered and awards are removed. Football and baseball athletes take shortcuts to fame by taking performance enhancing drugs to win at any cost. The result is they are banned from playing the game they most enjoy.



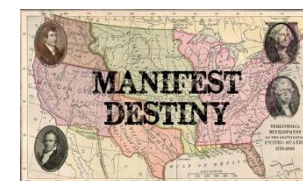
The competitive spirit is alive and doing very well in America. We as Americans elevate those that chart their own course, rule their own destiny, take the bull by the horns, and let no one or anything stand in their way. People like Warren Buffett, Beyoncé, Elon Musk, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Oprah Winfrey, and Michael Bloomberg, are celebrated because of their self-determination and personal success.

Man looks on the outside and chooses those individuals that stand "head and shoulders" above the crowd, while God looks on the inside of a person and examines their heart.



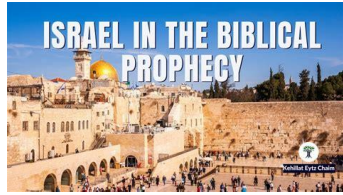
During Israel's early days after coming into the land of Canaan, the people wanted a man like Saul to be their king, and God gave them that man. Later, after Saul refused to be obedient to God, the Lord turned and selected a young shepherd boy named David as one "after God's own heart."

America and Americans have bought into the idea of manifest destiny. It is the ideal that we are captains of our own ship; we are leaders in industry, when we speak the world will listen to and always follow our lead. We have left out God in our deliberations and are seeking our own way without the hand of God leading us.



I believe it is slowly dawning on the conscience of America that we are on a boat and we don't know who the captain is, our industries rise and fall outside of our best efforts, and the world really doesn't care about an arrogant, self-congratulating American anymore. We are over leveraged financially, we are undercapitalized in our pledges to be all things to all people, and the luster of our country's leaders is tarnished among the world community more and more as time goes by. It is as if God has removed His hand from our nation and we will reap what we have sown.

The world has lost its will to stand against the atrocities around the world. At times, it seems as if America stands alone in attempting to right the wrongs perpetrated among



innocent people. Who knows how the events in Israel will play out in Biblical prophecy? Isaiah 17:1 says, “*The burden (prophecy) against Damascus (Syria). ‘Behold*

Damascus will cease from being a city, and it will be a ruinous heap.’” That has been fulfilled once and it may be fulfilled once again.

The Lord has ALL of His creation in the palm of His hands. The Lord will use one nation to reprove another. In the next generation, the Lord will use that same nation that was once defeated to rise and defeat the previous victor. The nations of the earth are like clay in the hand of the Master.

America needs to be aware and sensitive to the leading of God in the circumstances we are facing today. We do not need to move forward as if God is not in control.



There is always a conflict brewing around the world. We do not need to enter into another war around the world without seeking the face of God. As the nation goes, so goes its people. If God’s judgment falls upon our nation, or any other nation for that matter, then the people are the ones that receive the brunt of judgment.

- We as God’s people – need to pray like our nation’s future is at stake.
- We as God’s people – need to examine our hearts to see if there is any un-confessed sin in our life.

- We as God’s people – need to yield our hearts and lives to the Master Potter so we may be conformed to what He would have us to be and do.



Our passage of scripture that we read this morning is not the only metaphor found in scripture using the potter and the clay to represent the Lord and His people. It is a common theme in scripture.

Isaiah 29:16

Surely you have things turned around! Shall the potter be esteemed as the clay; For shall the thing made say of him who made it, “He did not make me”? Or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it, “He has no understanding”?

Isaiah 41:25

“I have raised up one from the north, And he shall come; From the rising of the sun he shall call on My name; And he shall come against princes as though mortar, As the potter treads clay.

Isaiah 64:8

But now, O Lord, You are our Father; We are the clay, and You our potter; And all we are the work of Your hand.

Lamentations 4:2

The precious sons of Zion, Valuable as fine gold, How they are regarded as clay pots, The work of the hands of the potter!

Romans 9:21

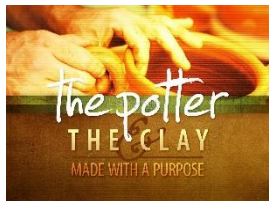
Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?



Clay is refined dirt that is molded and shaped by the potter. Once the clay is formed, it is placed into an oven to harden the clay and turn it into something useful. After coming out of the fire the first time, a glaze is often added and it is placed back into the fire again. It is the glaze that allows clay to be able to hold liquids. That lump of clay, once fired and glazed can become a useful cup, a plate, a bowl, a pitcher, or any number of useful utensils.

A. The Sovereignty of God – The Potter and the Clay¹

Jeremiah's passage of scripture speaks of the relation between the potter and the clay as seen at the potter's house. Jeremiah 18:1-6 reminds us that the Lord is sovereign over creation.



¹ *This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD:*
² *“Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message.”* ³ *So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel.* ⁴ *But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.*

⁵ *Then the word of the LORD came to me.* ⁶ *He said, “Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?” declares the LORD. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel.*

1. Men are Under the Absolute Power of God, Like Clay in the Hands of the Potter.



The potter has the power over the clay. If the potter wants that lump of clay to serve as an oil lamp he can. If he wants to make that lump of clay into a beautiful decorative lamp, he can. He can mold and shape it into some of the finest china or into a soup ladle. Just as God has power over the clay, He also has power over our nation, our church, and our lives.



God is almighty. God is sovereign over His creation – both on a national level as well as an individual level. No divine purpose can be eternally frustrated by man.

Some people may look at this example of God's sovereignty and say we are simply puppets in the hand of God. Some would go so far as to say we have no voice in what happens in our life. That is far from the truth. God who is all sovereign also is all compassionate and loving. He has given us free will to yield to God or to be judged by



God. The Lord is not a heartless God issuing random acts of destruction on His creation. He is actively engaged with everyone, everywhere.

God rules over His creation with care and concern. He is gracious and extends love and compassion to all that turn to Him.



At the heart of God’s nature is righteousness and holiness. Just as the heart of a good mother is tender loving kindness towards her children, so is the love of God. Psalms describes the love of God as *‘hesed.’* The steadfast, tender mercies of God.

A potter seeks to perfect the clay by working with it – by molding it – by shaping it – by kneading it – by cutting out the lumpy parts – by keeping it soft by applying water often so it can be pliable – the potter is working out his plan for the clay.

The Lord is working in your life by keeping His hand upon you. He is molding you and shaping you. He squeezes you to get out the air bubbles so when the time for the kiln comes, you will not break. He cuts things out of your life sometimes to make what’s left better. He allows the tender tears of sorrow to enter your life to mold you and shape you to what He wants you to be.

2. Men Cannot Attain a Worthy End in Life Without God Any More than the Clay can Become a Shapely Vessel Without the Potter.



If the clay were to simply remain as it were, it would only remain a lump of clay. The lump of clay cannot self-will itself into something beautiful. For something to be created, it must have a creator. It cannot self-actualize itself into something beautiful. It cannot evolve from a lump of shapeless clay into a useful vessel.

The clay has to go through transformation under the hand of the potter before it is to become something beautiful. It must yield itself to the work of the Master’s hand. It must embrace the pounding, squeezing, pinching, casting away, watering, spinning, before it is placed in the fire. Once it comes out, if all of the impurities are removed, and the air bubbles pressed out, the clay becomes useful to the Master.



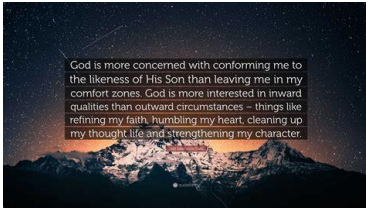
The same applies to our lives as well. God must work a work in us if we are to ever be what He wants us to be. We may have started out as clay, but God has breathed His spirit in this lump of clay and is still working on me to make me what I ought to be. I know the Lord is still working on me.

If we have become anything useful for the Master, it is because He has wrought that in us, not we ourselves.

3. God Has a Purpose for every Life Just as the Potter Has with the Clay

The providence of God is a vast thought. God is deeply involved in every person, of every age, in every place. He has a purpose for each and every person that has ever lived.





God is shaping us and molding us into what He deems most fitting. God does not shape us all alike. Some he has called to be pastors and teachers. Others he has called to be evangelists. But He has called all of us to be conformed into the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ. The experiences in life mold us and shape us.

If we focus on the shape our soul is taking (our inward walk with God), we would not become so



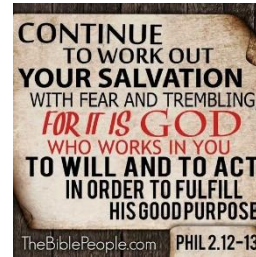
concerned about whether God is making us into a simple brown jug or a beautiful vase. It is who we are on the inside that counts with God. We need to focus on what He wishes for our life. The first question we need to ask is not what we are to do, but what we are becoming. Are we being molded by the Master or are we like the lump of clay that wants life on its own terms?

Every piece of pottery made by the potter has a purpose.

The Bible tells us that all of us are fearfully and wonderfully made by the Lord Himself. If we are molded and shaped by God, then we can say God has a purpose for me.

What a revolutionary thought! God has a purpose made especially for me!

The Apostle Paul admonished the believers in Philippi (2:14) to *“work out your salvation.”* I don’t believe he was



saying we needed to work to obtain our salvation – rather, he was saying we need to work out our relationship with God – and the work in which He has called each of us to be involved with. It is as if Paul is saying, position yourselves before God like clay and let the Master work a work in you to be what God would have you to be. We need to yield ourselves to the molding and shaping of the Lord.

4. God Shapes Our Lives by the Discipline of Providence, Just as the Potter Works the Clay upon the Potter’s Wheel



Can you imagine the clay looking up at the Master and saying, *“Stop spinning me! I am dizzy from all that you are putting me through!”*

Isn’t that what we do at times in life? As time marches on, as the potter’s wheel continues to spin, molding and shaping us, we cry out to God and lament our situation.



From the clays perspective you cannot see what the Potter is doing. You do not understand why some parts are cut away and some other pieces of clay are pinched on. You don’t understand why the Potter continues to knead the clay, and why it gets rolled out in various shapes.

We don’t understand why God removes some things from our life and why some things are grafted in. We do not see the grand design because we are the clay – and the Lord is

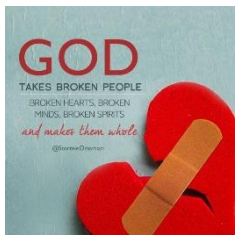
the Potter. God's ways are higher than our ways. We have to come back to the Lord with the understanding He is molding and shaping us. We need to yield to the gentle touch of the Potter in our life.

5. God Will Ultimately Accomplish His Purpose in us Even though it May Seem to Fail at First.



Many a person has come through life feeling as if it is over for them.

- It could be a sin that they committed, and they feel as if their relationship with God cannot be restored.
- It could be a divorce a person is experiencing, and they feel as if a part of their life has been cut away and now there is no hope.
- It could be a person has lost a loved one due to death: maybe a parent, a spouse, a child, a neighbor, or a friend – and you cannot make any sense of why it has happened.
- It could be a relationship you thought was so precious, has now been broken for various reasons, and you feel like a part of you has been taken away.



I want you to know that the Lord is working in our lives to mold us and shape us into the likeness of His Son. If we yield our spirit, our will, our lives back to God – He can make the broken, removed, detached part of our lives whole again.

Those things that were removed may not be able to be restored. But God can use what is left and mold it and shape it into something beautiful.

There is a children's song that reminds me of this truth:

“He's still working on me, to make me what I ought to be.
It took just a week to make the moon and stars, the sun and earth, and Jupiter and Mars.
How loving and patient He must be, He's still working on me!”

He's Still Working On Me

Chorus
He's still a working on me!
To make me what I ought to be!
It took Him just a week
to make the Moon and the stars
The sun and the earth
and Jupiter and Mars
How loving and patient He must be
'Cause He's still working on me!

Now there really ought to be
a sign upon my heart
Don't judge me now
There's an unfinished part!
But I'll be perfect
just according to His plan
I'm fashioned by
the Master's loving hands

“Now there really ought to be a sign upon my heart
Don't judge me now, there's an unfinished part!
But I'll be perfect just according to His plan
I'm fashioned by the Master's loving hands.”

B. God's Actions are Determined by Man's Conduct

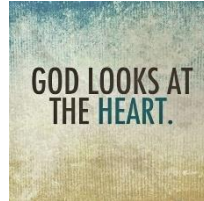
Jeremiah 18:7-11 gives us the hope that there is still mercy waiting to be given by the Lord when we repent and turn to Him. Even though this passage in Jeremiah is directed to the nation, it can also apply individually.



7 If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, 8 and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. 9 And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, 10 and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

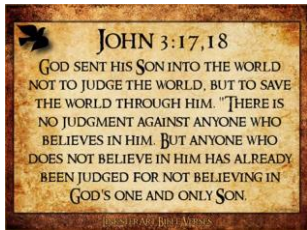
¹¹ “Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, ‘This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.’”

1. God determines His actions according to the conduct of man.



God does not act blindly towards a nation or an individual. God is always in search of someone that has a heart turned toward Him. When we turn from our sinful tendencies, and repent from our sin, God will modify His plans of judgment and destruction and replace it with mercy and grace.

We are children born in sin. We have sinful tendencies and we often act upon them. Since God is Holy, and all sin must be punished, we all face condemnation for our sin.



I am reminded in John 3:17-18, “*For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not*

believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

God will act to save us from condemnation when we repent and believe in God’s one and only Son. If we do not repent from our sin and believe that Jesus is sent from God to redeem us from our sin, then we will remain in our state of condemnation.

2. A Change on Man’s part from rebellion to penitence Will be met by a change on God’s part from wrath to mercy.



Even though we deserved judgment, God has foreordained us to be children of God – IF we repent. When we do, the wrath of God will not fall on us like we deserve. Instead it will be met with the mercy and grace of God. We sing of the mercy and grace of God in songs like:

- “Amazing Grace,” how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.
- “Grace, Grace, God’s Grace,” grace that is greater than all our sin.
- “To God be the Glory” great things he has done, so loved He the world that He gave us His Son. Who yielded His life an atonement for sin, and opened the life gate that all may go in.
- “Mercy, there was Great, and Grace was Free.” Pardon there was multiplied to me; There my burdened soul found liberty at Calvary.

3. A Change on Man’s part from fidelity to apostasy Will be met by a change on God’s part from mercy to wrath.



Once we have tasted the grace and goodness of God, we do not have a license to turn back to the pig pen of sin and not face the consequences.

As a nation, Israel repented and God forgave them. When the next generation came up, they slipped back into the same old pattern of sins their fathers practiced. The strong hand of judgment returned and the people faced the judgment of God again. The cycle of sin, repentance, and forgiveness was repeated over and over between Israel and the Lord.

I believe that the Lord also does that on an individual level as well. When we come to the Lord and repent of our sin, He fully and completely forgives us. If we are genuinely saved and consider our relationship with the Lord as precious, we will not abandon the Lord to return to the world of sin once again. The Lord will convict our conscience and if we don't harden our heart toward the Lord, we will come back to Him again.

"What is the cause of most backslidings? I believe, as a general rule, one of the chief causes is neglect of private prayer."
-J.C. Ryle

There are some people that have turned from following the Lord after tasting forgiveness and grace. This has commonly been called "backsliding" in the Christian

community. J.C. Ryle said, "The chief cause is neglect of private prayer." I do not know another person's heart. I don't know the circumstances that first called them to come to the Lord. I don't know if they were genuinely saved – or if they simply came forward to be baptized just like all of their friends were doing. I don't know if their salvation experience was genuine or not.

As my professor at Campbell once told his class, "The faith that fizzles at the finish, was faulty at the first."

If you are a child of God, loved and forgiven, you will not forsake your relationship with the Lord and walk away from worshipping the Lord and being involved in a church, a community of likeminded believers.



At times, we look around the church and wonder where everyone is. We cannot be accountable for those that are not here. We can only be accountable for ourselves.

Are YOU saved? Have YOU asked God to forgive you of your sins? Have you taken the step of making that profession of faith public by being baptized? Have you followed that up by being involved with a community of believers?

Our lives can be molded into something beautiful if we yield our lives to the Master Potter's hands!



LET US PRAY

Notes:

¹ Outline from the Pulpit Commentary, Vol. XI, page 444-446

