

The Potter and the Clay

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[0:00] Jeremiah chapter 18. Let's ask the Lord to help us again, can we? I know I need to keep asking Him. I need His great help. Dear Lord God, we thank you today for this great privilege that we have to open these pages of Scripture, Lord. It's your very word to it, to your church, that we hold in our hands. These precious pages of this precious book that people bled and died so we could hold and read in our language tonight, today, Lord.

Lord, we thank you for that wonderful joy that we have, the joy, the comfort of the Scriptures and the wonderful power of the Scriptures, the power of the Word of God, the power of the Gospel.

Lord, we thank you today that we can have ears that can hear this message, that, Lord, it might be words that you would help me to speak.

And help us, Lord, to hear from you today, Lord, by your Holy Spirit's help and grace. We cry out, Lord, for your grace and help. I know I need your help, Lord, right now.

And, Lord, as a church, we want your help, Lord. We want your grace to visit us. We want your Holy Spirit to speak to our hearts, to each need, to each life, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

[1:18] Jeremiah chapter 18, from verse 1. It tells us there, God is pictured here as being a potter, a potter working on his people, as a potter who would turn a vessel of clay on a potter's wheel.

So, the Lord is pictured to us, to you, to me, as our great potter, the one who is moulding us and shaping us and fashioning us. He fashions us. He's working on you.

You know, there's a bumper sticker. He's not finished with me yet. You know, he's still working on me. I'm still a work in progress. I'm a Christian under construction.

Every one of you, every one of us, we've not arrived yet. We're on the journey, aren't we? We're on the way. And it's going to be glory to see him. When we do arrive, it's going to be wonderful.

And he's working a work like an artist would work a beautiful picture or a wonderful sculpture like a potter on a wheel. He's working on you. He's working in you.

[2:55] It's a creating of his own plan and design, a picture here of his absolute rule over mankind, over men through history.

He's working through our lives. And he has authority in all the affairs of our life. That's the great illustration that we see in these few verses.

God is a master engineer, a master engineer. He has the end in view of what he is designing, of what he is making, of what is the ultimate end result.

And the wonderful truth is, brothers and sisters today, that he uses raw material like you and me. Isn't that great? We don't have to be perfect for him to work on us.

We just need to be pliable in his hands. Brother, sister, be a pliable, malleable piece of clay today. Be a piece of clay that he can work on.

[4:02] And the truth is that each one of us here this morning are raw materials. That we might be of different substances, different colours of clay, different kinds of clay.

From different cultures and continents and backgrounds. And what does he do? He throws us on that wheel. It would be nice to have a physical lump of clay to demonstrate it.

You know, bang! There he is, bang on that potter's wheel. Bang! Bang! Bang! Pounding it.

Squashing it. Kneading it. Shaping it. Squeezing it. Tearing it. Pulling it. Ripping it apart. And putting it back together again. That's the picture, brothers and sisters, of what God does to us.

He's pushing and pulling and prodding. Bang!! Bang! Bang! Hammering out those lumpy bits, all those lumpy bits. I know I've got a lot of lumpy bits and air bubbles.

[5:04] He's got to really pound me. I need a lot of pounding and a lot of shaping. I've got a lot of impurities in my lump of clay this morning. But that's what God is doing to each one of us as we've been shaped along life's journey, as we tread life's walk.

He's throwing us on that potter's wheel and he's squashing you and changing you. And we see the potter's hand begin its work in Eden, in the very garden, as the Creator formed man in his own image from the clay of the earth.

Man, Adam, Earth. It's the same word, the same essence of who we are. We're just really the elements of the earth put into different physical forms.

And God created man. Genesis 1, 27. He created man. He shapes us. He designs us. He's fashioning us. Some of the lumps of clay this morning are a bit better looking than other lumps of clay.

And some have got beautiful smiles on them on the back row there. And some have got some beautiful, beautiful, shiny silver hair there.

[6:24] And mine's getting a bit nicer every day. A bit cranked. Yeah, some of the... There's a bit of crackpots here and there. And our church is full of crackpots. And, you know, it's wonderful...

Wonderful lumps of clay that he's shaping and making who he wants us to be. And he has the right to. He has the right to create you, to remake you.

Just as in the picture here of Jeremiah 18, that the potter... It says there that the... The... The... Vessel...

Was marred. Now, in my little notes down the bottom here, it says... It was injured or damaged so as to make imperfect, less attractive, disfigured, spoilt, ruined.

The vessel was marred. It was ruined. It was... Oh, what a mess. It must have fallen over to one side or something. Like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Or maybe it was... Had a great big air bubble in it.

[7:26] And, oh, the potter thought, No, squash it back down again and start again. That's what the Lord did in that picture of the potter. That it was marred in the hand of the potter. So he made it again.

Another vessel. As seemed good to the potter to make it. He has the right to create us. To remake us. To squash us back down again and start from scratch.

And we are the work of his hands. We are but clay in his hands. We have really no say in the matter. We have little say about the matter. We are his craftsmanship, his property.

And the container is made according to what suits the potter. God, the potter, will make you and shape you how he wants to do that. As suits him.

And it puts it all into perspective, doesn't it? Because we know through life things happen. That, wow, that wasn't how I wanted it to be. That wasn't how I'd planned it to be.

[8:25] Or what I would have liked to have seen happen. Yet the Lord is seeing beyond the present. Beyond the past. He sees the future. He sees what container he is making for his service.

And it puts it all into perspective. So life is not about what suits us. But what suits him. It's about what suits the potter. It's about what he wants to make.

And what he is doing. About his purpose. His will. His plan. And what is God's purpose for our life? What does he intend for us to be used for?

Sometimes we don't really understand, do we? As life goes by. And we know that we don't always understand. What is he really doing? Yet the Lord, the great potter.

His will is to make a work of beauty. And utility out of that which is otherwise marred. That which is flawed. And unsuited for his use.

[9:27] He will take it again. And he'll work on us again. Who wants the Lord to work on them again? Who's feeling like they're feeling a little bit marred? A little bit like, oh. I know.

I feel like that. Very often. And maybe God just needs to start from scratch again. And squash us back down again. And make us who he wants us to be.

You know, maybe that person that you're trying to be isn't really what he wants you to be. And just let him fashion you again. But of course we need to be malleable and pliable clay, don't we?

In his hands. And let him work with us. Be that workable kind of clay that's pliable and wet. So he can mould and shape you. How is your clay this morning? How are you? How is your clay? Is it maybe a bit brittle and hard? Or are you still that lump of wet clay that he can work with?

[10:27] That he can shape? That he can work and shape you? Let your character be shaped by God. So that he can have his way. And the potter here, the image of the potter, it pictures God's wonderful dealings with man.

With people, with men and women. That's the potter asserts his desires. His rights to reform, to remodel. To even discard an entire nation.

As we've seen through history. As God's still working with the nation of Israel today. As we know it's being continually worked upon by God the potter.

And looking back through life's twists and turns. As we see God's shaping, guiding hand. Maybe it's not something we have always understood. And may not yet.

And may not until we see his face. What his guiding hand is all about. Of his provision, of his protection. As he applies the pressure. As he applies the pressure on that wheel.

[11:28] As the clay is being moulded. Kneaded. Pinched. Pounded. As we sit in the potter's hands. We might feel like the pressure is just too hard to bear.

You notice we don't always feel 100%. We all have those days, those moments when we're not at our peak.

We're not feeling our best. And yet God can use those flawed and frail and fallible vessels. As we let the moulding of his fingers do his working. We can relax and trust him.

And as that potter knows. He is the one who's suffered. He's come and he was pounded, wasn't he? He was pierced. He was pressed and pressured and hurt.

We can trust him. The one who's suffered with us. And knows how we feel. And he is working to make us, to make you, into a vessel fit for the master's use.

[12:32] A vessel that is fit, that is fitted, that is worthy for the master to use. And Jeremiah here, as he watched the potter shaping and moulding that clay, he was looking at a picture of himself.

And of every man and woman of every nation. God knows exactly what he's doing. As we can look back and see the godly heritage of parents, of life's testings and learnings, of the mistakes that we've made.

The potter was there. The potter was there. Still there. Maybe as those air bubbles came to the surface, as those lumpy bits had to get squashed back out and pressed and shaped again.

As the imperfection in the clay spoiled it in the potter's hands and the potter crumbled it up again and began anew the process. He knew what was going to be the ultimate objective.

Master Potter. Friends, the picture really is that we have a potter who's bigger and better and wiser than us. And we need to just rest in his hands.

[13:42] Brothers and sisters today, he is the one who has the skill. He has the design. He's got the ultimate picture in his mind of what he is shaping, of what he is making in your life and your loved ones.

And sometimes that which masks the design and spoils the work, the potter's just got to squash it back down again and spoil. It looked like it was so beautiful.

Why did the potter have to start from scratch? Because the potter knew that he had to get those lumpy bits out. And brothers and sisters, that's like it with us too.

And as the wheel is turning constantly, the potter was there pressing the lever or the pedal to make that wheel turn. Turning constantly.

Life's a bit like that, isn't it? You feel like you're going around in circles and the circumstances of life, it seems like you're in a spin, going around and around and around.

[14:41] But the potter is working, he's removing the impurities. And friends, we just need to be that lump that the potter is working on. It says, humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God.

He's so mighty, he's so huge, he's so massive. We just need to be potters, we need to be a clay that can be shaped. As the circumstances, the wheels of circumstance bring us again and again

into contact with the potter's hand.

And life brings us in touch with the pressure of the moulding fingers of the potter, so that he shapes the vessel according to his will, according to the image that the potter has in his mind.

So let him fashion you. Let him fashion you. Just be a lump that he can work on. And don't resist. Don't resist. Don't arch your back.

Don't hold yourself back from his moving. Let him fashion you. Secondly, let him fire you. Let him fire you.

[15:49] That's that vessel as the potter has perfected it and fashioned it and shaped it to that beautiful end result that he wants to make. Next thing the potter does, he gets some film of glaze or silica, some cloudy kind of mixture that he paints around the edge of the vessel.

And it doesn't look anything special. It's just some cloudy kind of water, watery substance that he puts upon the pottery. And then he places that pot within the kiln, within the furnace.

And when it's in the kiln, the temperature is fired. It's nearly 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. It's roughly the same temperature of heating metal to the point that impurities are separated from the metal.

Now, Julie and I, we lived in Mount Isa. And we visited a place where the mine had this massive vehicle that they had this huge vessel, a huge massive crucible, a bowl, a massive crucible that they put the slag, they called it, the rubbishy offscourings of the process, of the mining process. And it was heated in this huge crucible on the back of this truck. And every few hours or so they used to pour it out.

[17:20] And we used to phone the mine and find out when the next slag pour was what they called it was going to be. And then we drove out there and there was like a little railway line where this special vehicle with this great big crucible on the back.

And it came to a certain point and then it started to tip and it started to pour out as they tipped it sideways into this great big empty area.

And this slag, this molten material was a brilliant colour. It was glowing and bright. And yet it was the impurity of the mine.

And yet it looked so beautiful, so glowing and bright. And you could feel the heat as they poured it.

And I was filming it and it went pop as it hit some water in the ground.

And I had to jump back thinking it was going to fall on me. And I've heard it said that apparently as they pour this molten mixture, that sometimes if it explodes high enough that the cars along the road can get some big holes put in.

[18:32] You might have a, what do they call it? What do they call cars that have those things? Sunroof. You might have an instant sunroof put in your car as this molten material showers down on the cars that are parked alongside.

And it's just a picture of the heat that the kiln is heating that material. That the impurities are then poured out as they pour it off and then the pure metal is left underneath.

And friends, like that too, as the potter puts the pot in the kiln, it's purified. It's heated. It's heated. It's heated. It's heated.

And yet if the temperature is too high, the pottery will begin to warp and twist. But if the heat is too low, the pottery is never right. It's never finished. It's never completed.

It has to be just right. And the word of God tells you in 1 Peter 4, verse 12, Now, brothers and sisters, God allows a measure of suffering into our lives.

[19:56] It isn't something strange. It isn't some strange misfortune. It's not a mistake. It's not something interfering with the master potter's plan.

The heat is part of his plan. God allows a certain amount of fiery trials into our lives for things to be developed, for our character to be learnt, and for our lessons to be learnt.

Notice in this verse in 1 Peter 4, Beloved, beloved, God very lovingly and tenderly works within us. And still he allows sometimes trials, unpleasant things, fiery trials, things that we might not expect or predict, yet things that will challenge us and make us stronger and bring us closer to that character that he's developing.

And the children whom he loves, he chastens and corrects. You know, my dad loved me a lot. He used to have to tell me off all the time. And, you know, the father has to chasten us, doesn't he? He has to discipline us and correct us to make us more as he would be pleased with. And God will be with us through the child.

[21:13] God knows the exact degree that can benefit each of us as his children. He knows you. He knows each of us inside and out. And he watches very carefully, monitoring, as the potter would have looked at the kiln and seen, just the right amount, just the right need, just the right exposure.

That it will not be too severe. As we know, the word tells us that we'll not be given something that is beyond our capacity. But he will give us the strength to endure it.

And after that pottery has been in the kiln, although it has the exact same shape as it had when it went in, the chemical properties of the pottery has changed.

The clay has been changed. Something dramatic has happened to that pottery. It's no longer porous. Now it can hold water indefinitely. And that clay is actually a lot more like stone than like clay.

A transformation has taken place. Properly fired pottery will never break down nor disintegrate even after thousands of years.

[22:24] Pottery has that strength to it that has happened. The kiln has brought a beautiful strength and a beautiful utility that that vessel never had before.

If it had just been clay, porous clay, it would never have served a useful purpose. And yet, as that fire piece of pottery, even thousands of years after it's been buried in the ground, it's got a beautiful quality to it.

Like that too, God is forming his character in you. He's forming Christ in you. And in the intense heat of this kiln, 2000 degrees, that dull glaze that was painted upon the pottery has changed also. A chemical change has happened. Where there was no colour there before, now there's a beautiful colour. There's a beautiful shine. It often takes on a glass-like satin finish.

A shine. There's a beauty there that wasn't there before. And it's the kiln that brought that. It's that place of heat and testing that's brought out a beautiful beauty that wasn't there before.

[23:40] Being in the fiery oven of life is going to change you. It's going to change you. It's going to test you. It's going to stretch you. It's going to make you.

Through those severe trials, they're going to change you for the better. Sometimes we're never quite the same as we've learnt through life. As tests come, we've experienced something that is life-changing for us.

At the time, it wasn't very pleasant. Yet, he is firing you. As a pot is fired in a kiln. So, he's fashioning you.

He's firing you. And lastly, he wants to fill you. To fill you. In 2 Timothy 2, we see a great house. Paul tells Timothy, there's many vessels there.

Vessels of gold and of silver, of wood and of earth. Some to honour, some to dishonour. And Paul tells Timothy, God wants you to be a vessel that's purified, fit for the master's use, useful for the master.

[25:02] The potter has a purpose in mind. And the skill and the ability to fulfil it. No matter how many times, he may have to make the vessel over again. What is he doing?

He's making a vessel. A vessel for his master, for his use. In Judges 7, we're told of some vessels where Gideon came. There were 22,000 men.

God pruned it right down, this volunteer army, to 300 people. And God's strategy was to overcome the Midianite nation, the oppressors there, with just clay pots and lamps inside.

Clay pots that had to be smashed and broken in order to let the inner light shine through. The vessels had to be broken. It's a bit like our brother shared earlier, isn't it?

And tellingly enough, we talked along the same line last Sunday morning too, of the alabaster box had to be broken. The vessel had to be broken for the fragrance to come out.

[26:06] And sometimes life, you know, I don't like to be broken. And yet, sometimes he has to break for us to, for the fragrance to be released, doesn't he?

And for him to use us despite us, we need to come to that place of brokenness and emptiness, so that we can shine the light. As Gideon and his army broke those clay pots, and what a dazzling spectacle.

The pots had to be broken, brother. Sister, the pot has to be broken for the light to shine out. And likewise, Paul talks in 2 Corinthians chapter 4, he talks about, For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, in clay pots, that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of ours.

You know, the minute we start to think the excellency is of ours, then we fail, don't we? I thank the Lord that I'm not a very good guitar player, so that the excellency isn't of me this morning, but the excellency is of Him.

[27:24] The excellency is of Him this morning. It's not of our own doing, of our own ability, of anything any of us can do. The excellency is of God, not of ours.

And God is the creator of the universe. He wants to get the glory today. He wants to get the glory in your life and mine. Just let Him have His way with you. Let Him have His way as a potter on a wheel to fashion you, as a potter in the kiln to fire you, to firm you, as a vessel on His table, to be purified and fit, cleansed, purged, made meat for the Master to use, to be His vessel, for Him to fill with Himself, for His own good pleasure, that we are and were created.

And friends, the potter has the absolute right over the clay. We're just a lump. And non-believers as well, as believers, are shaped and moulded by God for His purposes, whether they realise it or not. God uses people with or without their permission. We don't need... He doesn't have to ask our permission to throw us back on the wheel again. He knows He's got to do it again.

And we've just got to be submissive to what He wants to do. And in grace, allow Him, allow the potter to fasten your humanity, to use your weakness, your frailty, your inadequacy, to use that flawed life that is yours and mine.

[29:01] And we have that wonderful privilege that one day we'll be vessels worthy. Vessels worthy of the Master's highest use.

And it's been said that the body of man is the housing or container for the spirit and soul and supremely the temple of God.

It's not that little building over the way. That's just brick and mortar. But He dwells not in temples made by hands. He dwells in human beings like you and me.

Frail, unworthy, lousy, stinking, rotten, vile creatures such as we that yet He can come and reshape and refashion, renew, make us alive again, make us His new creations, His new creatures.

And the vessel is not nearly as important as the treasure that is contained therein. Friends, do you know Him? Do you know Him? I urge you, I press you, I implore you, I plead with you to know Him.

[30:11] Whom to know is life eternal. There is none other that can help you today to save your soul. He's the only saviour of the world and He is looking for worshippers.

He's looking for people who will be willing to be shaped in His hand. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we thank You, dear Lord God, that we love You, Lord.

We love You so much. We love You, Lord, for the love that You gave to us. We love You for the love You loved us with when we were unlovely, when we were yet Your enemies. We love You, Lord, for reaching down Your hand into this miry clay and lifting us out who are but pieces of clay still and making us vessels to use, to shape, to fill.

Help us, Lord, to not shy away from Your fashioning and firing. Fill us, Lord. Help us to find that wonderful joy of salvation for any who know it not yet.

They'll know it today by Your grace. They'll know what it is to trust Your hand. And life, Lord, as we face it through its twists and turns, as it spins us around and we get slammed back down again and refashioned, Lord, help us just to submit to Your will, to submit as clay would submit to the potter's hand.

[31:36] Lord, to know You know best what You're doing and we can just rest that the ultimate is going to be worth it all. Lord, we thank You for the ultimate day when we'll see Your face.

We'll know, as we are known, we'll know all the mysteries of life that we've yet to unravel, we've yet to fathom. Lord, we'll know then that it's all been worth it all.

Everything You've done in us, through us, to us, and our families and loved ones. Lord, that we'll know that, yes, Lord, we've just had to trust. That's all we had to do. We thank You for that trust You give to each one.

Help us, Lord, for our friends and families, loved ones we care about, we're concerned for, people on our hearts and troubles in our own lives and hurts and needs that each may have today.

Help us, Lord, just to rest, just to place our lives in Your hands, just to put that trust and squarely in You today. We pray in Jesus' name.

[32:36] Amen.