

The Potter and the Clay

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[0 : 00] to me, O house of Israel, can I not do with you as the potter has done, declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

God in his word uses many ways and illustrations to describe his relationship with his people. He speaks about familiar things that people would see around them and that they could relate to.

He uses the illustration of the shepherd and the sheep on a number of occasions, both in the Old and in the New Testament. He uses the relationship between a husband and a wife.

He uses the relationship of a father to his children. These are just a few of the different ways in which God describes the relationship that he has with his people.

And all of these ways of describing these relationships, they teach people both when the hearers then, but also ourselves today. Things about life and how we live.

[1 : 08] Things about ourselves, how we are and our different needs. But they also teach us about our Lord and his ways towards us. So he uses many different ways.

He uses the sheep as an illustration of how being protected and provided for by the shepherd. He uses his people as a wife and God as the husband in that relationship of love and a love so often described as steadfast and unconditional.

He uses the illustration of his people as children, relying on the father for his loving care and his watch and also at times his rebuke.

So he uses all of these different relationships. And here in these verses, we're given another way of describing the relationship of God towards his people. A relationship that was shown to Jeremiah when he was told to go down to the potter's house.

And there what he saw God used to describe his relationship to the people. And even though it's, as it says, the clay, as it was being worked on, didn't work out the first time.

[2 : 24] What he saw was the potter taking that same lump of clay and reforming it and working on it into what he wanted it to be.

That's a great reminder to ourselves as it was to the people who Jeremiah was speaking to.

Jeremiah was speaking to the people of Judea and Jerusalem at the time, describing their relationship with God in this way that the lump that has been spoiled, it's like they're wandering away from God, turning away from him.

But the God's longing and desire is to bring them back and to shape them into what he wants them to be. And the idea of this vessel, this pot of clay, is that it would be useful to God, be a servant of God once again.

But they had to yield. They had to put themselves into the potter's hands and allow him to work. So it may have been spoken to the people in the days of the Old Testament, but it still speaks to us alongside other passages throughout the scriptures of this special relationship that God has with his people.

And especially as we come into the New Testament, where we see God giving his son and our greatest relationship being with him and our dependence on him.

[3 : 53] It's like a reminder that Jesus gives in John 15, that great passage that speaks of another way of describing the relationship of God to his people.

In John 15, verse 1, it says, I am the true vine, and my father is a vine dresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away.

And every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you.

As a branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.

But apart from me, you can do nothing. So there's similar kind of reminders to us in both the potter and the clay and the vine and the branches.

[4 : 57] We can do nothing apart from God. And so there's so much importance in our relationship with God. As we well know, when our relationship is not right with God, we know we suffer.

But God longs for us to come to him and lean upon him and always to depend on him. So the theme is of the potter and the clay.

God making a people once again to be his servants. And that is what we long to be ourselves or should long to be too. The clay in the potter's hands.

That the God would shape each and every one of us to be a useful vessel, a useful servant for God. And we should never let ourselves think that we can do it on our own strength.

Apart from him, we can do nothing. And so Jeremiah is speaking here, God's word of the potter and the clay. And just two things we want to take from this this evening.

[6 : 02] First is the potter's intention. The potter's intention. And then secondly, the potter's message. The potter's intention and the potter's message.

So firstly, we think of the potter's intention. What does a potter want to do? When a potter has a lump of clay, he's got it for a specific purpose.

He plans to take that clay and from that clay produce a vessel. He wants a vessel that will be useful, that people can use.

And so when we think of how the potter here is being described as God and the clay as his people, what does God want? What's his intention with his people then and with his people now?

It is that we will be shaped and molded by him. That we will be found useful by being in his hands.

But you think of what the potter has to work with.

[7 : 12] In order to make a vessel of good use, the potter must work with material that when you first look at it, it leaves little to be desired.

A lump of clay isn't much to look at. And in the hands of the wrong person, that lump of clay is useless. But in the hands of the right person, that lump of clay can be made into something beautiful.

And that's the same as God's relationship with his people. When we look at ourselves, we are far from perfect. We are just like a lump of clay.

Useless, sometimes in our own eyes and in the eyes of many others. We are in our sin. We are worthless to God in our natural condition. But you know, as the potter is being described here with the clay, the potter was working on the clay initially, but it was spoiled.

Now, it wasn't that the clay, that the potter made a mistake. The fault was in the clay. But that same clay, the pot was able to take and remove the blemishes and make it into something useful.

[8 : 34] So God has these things to work on. He's got this lump of clay being described here, and he's got his people, imperfect people. People, as we see here with Judah and Jerusalem, God's people of Israel, who have gone away from him, who have done wrong in his eyes, strayed away from him, and yet God is still able to use them.

And it's a reminder to us of how today God has his people, imperfect people, people full of blemishes, but yet Jesus came to save us from our sins.

And it's such a great reminder to us, I don't know if you've ever watched a potter working on clay, of the patience involved in it.

The patience to work in that clay, to make it into something useful. We don't often have that patience ourselves. I remember trying to make something in school out of clay on the wheel, and I just wasn't up for it.

It was going to take too long. I didn't have the skills. But there was others who could do it. And that is the way God is. He can do with us whatever he wants.

[10 : 03] But he's patient with us, and thank God he is. Because some of us take more work than others. Some of us maybe have more blemishes to be ironed out than others.

But God just works away patiently in us. We're never immediately the finished product. We're not just bought off the shelf, as it were, ready for any purpose.

It takes time. The potter takes time to shape us. Indeed, he's always shaping us. Always working in us.

Because as we see, even in the potter's hands, things can go terribly wrong. There are times when, even in the best of care, the vessel can go out of shape.

Because of faults in the clay. But God continues to work in us. And the potter can sense in the clay itself just where the blemishes are.

[11:08] He instantly knows when there is a problem. He senses a change in the clay. And he takes steps to address that. And that's the way God has worked with his people down through all the generations.

Being with his people through highs and lows. Times of blessing. Times of hardship. But God always knows what his people need.

And when they need it. He knows, as we so often come with prayers, asking for the Lord to help in times of trouble.

He knows all of these things. So we bring our prayers to him in confidence. But he also knows the flaws and faults in our attitudes.

The things that need correction. So just as he provides in our needs so often, so he provides when we go astray, when we're going wrong. He corrects us.

[12:06] We cannot hide anything from God. Psalm 139, at the beginning of it, describes that for us. How there's nothing that is hidden from God.

And so we are. And the best thing we can do is to just allow ourselves to be responsive to his touch. To yield ourselves to his active work in our lives.

The sooner we reach the place he desires us to be, the sooner he can use us for his glory. So this is talking about servants of God.

Being useful servants of God. And that's the potter's intention. God so often shows in remarkable ways how he is able to change people's lives.

Some of you may have heard of a man called Bill Gilvere. Or read his book. It's called Rough Diamond. A story of his testimony of how God brought him from darkness to light.

[13:19] Bill Gilvere was a man in Glasgow in the 1940s. Who was much to be feared. His father died when he was young. And he became a member of the Glasgow gangs.

Youth gangs first. On the fringe of the main Glasgow gangland scene. They were young men who didn't carry on in school.

They left school as soon as they could. Or even before they were even allowed to leave. They didn't go into employment. Instead, they just went round the streets of Glasgow. Much to be feared.

Looking for trouble all the time. And Bill Gilvere himself acknowledged that he would carry weapons with him wherever he went. Designed to either scare or scar.

It was best to be on Bill Gilvere's good side. Yet this unlikely character, if you like.

[14:23] He became used by God in wonderful ways. He became a nurse in the Navy. He was a missionary to Africa at one point.

He obtained medical qualifications. Both in French and in English. He worked back in Scotland to help seamen involved in the Falklands conflict.

He became a great evangelist. Praising God and telling others about the glory of God wherever he went. So what was it that caused this turnaround?

Well, he went from one danger of conviction in the sense of going to court for his crimes. To instead becoming convicted by God.

Convicted of his need for forgiveness. And turning to a loving and gracious God. He found in him one who was able to forgive his past.

[15:25] And use him wonderfully in so many different ways. His book was called Rough Diamond for a reason. Because God had to shape him.

Just like the potter and the clay. God worked on him in a wonderful way. And it's a great reminder to us. If we ever needed.

That God can have anyone. Take anyone. Bring them up. And use them for his glory. But so often. First we have to be brought down. We have to be brought down to realize. Our need of God. And that's the situation. That Jeremiah was speaking into here.

Israel being brought down. Down. Down from dependence on self. And trusting in self. To being brought to a place of trusting in God.

[16:23] But we see in verse 12 that they weren't there yet. It says. They say that is in vain. We will follow our own plans. And will everyone act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.

They weren't ready yet. But God was bringing them low. So that he could rebuild them. Reform them. Dwight L. Moody. Once when he was visiting Scotland.

He was with Andrew Bonner. A Scottish preacher. And he was talking to Andrew Bonner. About the sheep. In the highlands. And how strange they seemed to be.

At times and places that they would go. And Andrew Bonner started talking to him about this. And why they would often go into places where they shouldn't be. He said.

They would always go where the grass looks good. And they would go into places. And get into places. But then all of a sudden find themselves they couldn't get out of. He said.

[17:23] You would often find sheep. Up on the hills. And they jumped down onto a ledge. Because the grass looked so green and lush. And they would stay there. And eat the grass.

But once the grass was done. They'd realize there was no more. And then they'd realize. They couldn't get out. And they would start bleating. And Dwight L. Moody was asking.

Andrew Bonner. Why don't the shepherds just go down. There and then. And take them up. And Andrew Bonner explained. Well. If you're a shepherd. You know that that's not going to work.

You see. If they're fit. And strong. And healthy. And you try to go down. They're so stupid. He said. They're just going to jump off. And die. Jumping off the cliff. He says.

You have to leave them. Until they're so tired. And weak. That they're unable to do anything. And then. You go down. And put a rope around them. And take them up.

[18:19] And he said. That is just the way it is. With men. They won't go back. Will God. To God. Until. They're at their very lowest ebb. And sometimes.

God has to leave them there. Until they're so tired. And weak. And then. He is able. To work. That's so often the pattern. You find in scripture.

That God allows. His people. To go a far. Far away. To a point. When they realize. They can do nothing. And then. He brings them back.

He has his intentions. For his people. We've looked at this recently. The plans. Here we see again. The idea of. Our own plans.

Are to go away from God. God. But God's plans. And intentions. Are to work. In his people. To bring them back. And to use them. For his glory.

[19:16] So the potter's. Intention then. Is to use. His people. For his glory. The second thing. We see here. Those. The potter's.

Message. And the potter's. Message. What the word. That was coming. Through Jeremiah. The word of the Lord. To the people of Israel.

Was to put yourselves. Into God's. Hands. And that's the message. To ourselves. As well. And there's two aspects.

To this message. The first is this. It's a message. About. Control. That God. Is in. Control.

In verse six. It says. Oh house of Israel. Can I not do with you. As the potter. Has done. Behold. Like the clay. In the potter's hand. So are you.

[20:12] In my hand. Oh house. Of Israel. God is in. Control. And as we went on. To read. You see. In his hands.

He can do good. And bless. When we return. Turn. Or he can bring. Us down. If we don't. If we do not yield.

Into his hands. Both sides. Are there before us. But the message. Of the potter. Here is. To come and yield.

Ourselves. Into his hands. He is in. Control. He can do. What he wishes. With his people. But surely.

We want. Blessing. From him. And yet. So often. As we see. And this was prayed. Before. Our nation. And nations. Of the world. We just put God.

[21:08] Away. But he is still. Calling us. Back. To himself. But we think of it. Even individually. As well. It's not just about looking.

Beyond these walls. It's about looking. In ourselves. And asking of ourselves. What are we. In the hands. Of God. Are we putting ourselves.

And all our desires. And all our needs. Into the hands. Of God. That God has a purpose. For all of his people. We are all. Lumps of clay.

We are all. Able to be made. In God's hands. Into servants. From him. You think of the variety. Of different kinds. Of pots.

That the. The potter would make. Some are made. For everyday use. And a constant use. Others are more delicate. And expensive. There's such a variety.

[22 : 04] Of things. And so it is. With God's people. A variety of people. Used for different purposes. But all.

Useful instruments. In the hands. Of God. And so the message is. That God is in control. That God. Is building.

His church. That we as his people. Are to be. Like the vine. In John 15. We are to abide. In him. That he may abide.

In us. For apart from him. We can do nothing. He is able. To bear fruit. Through his people. So God. Is in control.

But the second part. Of the potter's message. Is about compliance. It's about. Being faithful. Not being stubborn.

[22 : 59] Or turning away. But being faithful. And obedient. To God. The duty of the clay. Is one. To be in.

The potter's. Hands. Because that is. The best. Place. To be. Because he is. The only one. Who is equipped.

To make us into what he wants us. To be. To use us. For his glory. Wherever we are. And wherever we may go.

We are to be. In the potter's. Hands. Because if we place ourselves. In the hands. Of the potter. Then. He is able.

To work. Then he is able. To work in us. And honor. Use us. To his honor. And to his. Glory.

[23 : 56] That's what Jeremiah. Was seeing. In the potter's house. A reminder. Of where the people were. But also. Where they could be. If they would yield.

Themselves. Into the hands. Of God. And again. It's just a reminder. To us. That in everything. We seek. To do. For the Lord.

We are to yield. Ourselves. To him. Many years ago. In the days. Of horse and cart. There was a man.

And his wife. Driving along. A narrow. And dangerous. Stretch of road. Just the two of them. Sitting on the cart. Beside each other. The woman. Became.

Afraid. As they were making away. Their way. Along this road. And in her fright. She went to grab. One of the reins. That her husband. Was holding. She grabbed it off him.

[24 : 52] And took it. Into her own hands. The husband. Remained calm. And just very gently. He stretched over.

And says. Do you want. Do you want. Do you want. The other rein. And the woman. In her fright. Said. Oh no. I can't. Take them both. I could never.

Manage that animal. Alone. Well then. Said the husband. Gently. You must make. Your choice. It's either you. Or it's me.

We can't. Both drive. The same horse. And the frightened wife. Soon. Just quickly. Gave back. The rein. To her husband.

And they carried on. Safely. Along. The road. I'm pretty sure. Similar things happen. In cars. Today as well. Both directions.

[25 : 46] People panicking. Beside each other. But when we think. About this. In the eyes. Of God. It's so often. The way we live. Our lives. Where we want.

To be in control. Or to have some control. Over our lives. Because we're not. Compliant. We're not fully.

Trusting. In God. We think to ourselves. I'll take control. Of this. Part of my life. But God. Is like that husband. He's saying.

It's either you. Or me. Which do you want? And that's what he was saying. To the children of Israel. Here as well. The potter.

And the clay. He's saying. What do you want? Do you want your plants? Or do you want mine? Are you going to go your own way?

[26 : 43] Or are you going to comply. With me? And so God continues to challenge. His people today. Yourself and myself. What do we want with God?

His way. Or are we? We are to put ourselves. Into his hands. To yield to him. As the pot.

That he would make us. To be. His servants. In 2nd Corinthians 4. Verse 6 and 7. There it speaks. Of another way.

That the treasure of clay. If jars and clay. Is described. Says for God. Who said. Let light shine. Out of darkness. Has shone 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 jars of clay. To show the surpassing power. Belongs to God.

[27 : 39] And not to us. We are mere servants. Of the king. And whatever we do. We do for his glory.

Can we say today. I am yielded. To God. I am putting myself. Into his hands. Or are there places still.

We want to be in control. That we haven't fully given. To the potter. Perhaps the potter. Still has work. As he does with us all. To mold.

And shape us. Iron out the blemishes. As it were. But let us be a people. Who are willing. To put ourselves.

Into his hands. That he will make us. To be his people. For his glory. Here. And wherever. He might place us.

[28 : 36] May God bless. His word to us. Let us pray. Our father in heaven. We do thank you. For your patient work. In our lives.

We thank you. That though we are so imperfect. As it were. Just lumps of clay. In our sin. We thank you though. That you have brought us. From the pit.

That you have raised us up. That you are the one. Who is shaping us. And molding us. And we know Lord. That there is so much work. Still to be done. But help us.

That we would yield. To you. And put ourselves. Over into your hands. That you might take us. And use us. For your glory. Lord continue with us.

We pray. Pardoning all our sin. In Jesus name. Amen. We're going to conclude.