

The title of this morning's sermon is, "*In the Hands of the Potter.*"

Let me be clear up front why we're looking at this account...

We are being shaped! The Potter is shaping our lives, nation, and – really – the whole world.

We're going to consider how we should – and shouldn't – respond.

Since we're jumping into this book, I'll give you a little context:

- Jeremiah was the last prophet to the Jews prior to their exile in Babylon.
- He delivered a series of messages to them, but unfortunately they wouldn't listen.
- This is part of his 7th message, which goes through chapter 20.

We're going to be in **chapter 18**, but I want you to see one verse in **chapter 17**.

Jeremiah's been preaching to the Jews for 20 years. **Verse 23** describes their response...

Jer 17:23 Yet they did not listen or incline their ear, BUT STIFFENED THEIR NECK, that they might not hear and receive instruction.

How does this clay look?

Hard and stiff is a good way to describe how the Jews have responded.

This verse is important, b/c it sets up the next chapter. God sends Jeremiah to watch a potter so he can report to the people what happens to clay that hardens itself in a potter's hands.

Look at **Jeremiah 18:1**...

Jer 18:1 The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying: 2 "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause you to hear My words."

More than likely Jeremiah had passed the potter's house many times. This time God sends him to visit, and it provides one of the most well-known object lessons in Scripture.

When Jeremiah arrives he'll hear from God again.

Look at **verse 3**...

Jer 18:3 Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. 4 And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make.

As Jeremiah watched the potter work, he saw that the clay vessel was **marred**. The Greek word is *shachath*, and it means "destroyed or corrupted."

In other words, the vessel wasn't just messed up a little. It was ruined, which is how it's translated in some Bibles.

But the Potter was patient and skilled enough that he could make it **into another vessel [that] seemed good [to him]**.

Look at verse 5...

Jer 18:5 Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: 6 “O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?” says the LORD. “Look, as the clay *is* in the potter’s hand, so *are* you in My hand, O house of Israel!

God makes two important connections in this verse:

- He associates Himself w/ the Potter
- He associates people w/ the clay

Vessels have a purpose. Israel was God's vessel, but they weren't fulfilling their purpose. They were **marred**, but He could make them into something else...and this brings us to Lesson 1...

LESSON 1: THE POTTER IS SOVEREIGN OVER (PART I) NATIONS.

There are quite a few verses I could give you about God's sovereignty over the nations, but here are just a few:

- **Dan 2:21a He changes times and seasons; HE REMOVES KINGS AND SETS UP KINGS**
- **Dan 4:17 The living may know that THE MOST HIGH RULES THE KINGDOM OF MEN AND GIVES IT TO WHOM HE WILL AND SETS OVER IT THE LOWLIEST OF MEN.'**
- **Pro 21:1 The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.**
- **Acts 17:26 He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place. The **their** is nations. God determined the allotted periods of time and boundaries of nations.**

God is shaping and forming the nations like the potter does w/ the clay.

With everything happening w/ the Coronavirus, I think this is important to keep in mind, and here's why...

- Things can look like God is not in control. It can practically look like He has lost control...especially in some of the more devastated countries.
- But God is sovereign and nothing is taking place outside His will.

People might be panicking, but God is on the throne and things are going according to His plan.

And just to drive this point home, God presents two scenarios in the following verses. Look at **verse 7**...

Jer 18:7 The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it,

God's talking about judging a nation, and I would expect Him to say...

“The instant I speak concerning a nation to pluck up, pull down, and destroy it...is the instant it's plucked up, pulled down, and destroyed.”

But instead look at **verse 8...**

Jer 18:8 if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it.

If you write in your Bible you can circle the words **turns from its evil** and write, “repent.” This is a concise description of repentance: turning from evil.

So in this first scenario, God says if He threatens to judge a nation and they repent He will relent.

Anyone think of a great example of this in Scripture?

Jonah 3:10 Then God saw [the Ninevites'] works, that THEY TURNED FROM THEIR EVIL WAY; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.

If a nation repents – or turns from – their sins, then God repents – or turns from – His judgment.

This presents an interesting situation, b/c many verses in the OT state that God is not a man that He should repent:

- **Num 23:19 “God is not a man, that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?”**
- **1 Sam 15:29 [God] will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent.”**
- **Mal 3:6 “For I am the Lord, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.**

So how do we explain God changing His mind if He says He's going to judge a nation, but then He doesn't?

It's not that He's changing His mind, it's just that He's giving nations a choice:

- If they keep sinning, they'll be punished
- If they repent, they won't be punished

Look at the second scenario...

Jer 18:9 And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant *it*, **10** if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it.

Building and planting refer to blessing, so God is saying if He plans to bless a nation, but the nation does evil, then God will relent of the blessing.

So if a nation repents of the good they're doing, then God repents of the good He would do to them.

Now God moves from nations to individuals...

Jer 18:11 “Now therefore, speak to the men of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, ‘Thus says the LORD: “Behold, I am fashioning a disaster and devising a plan against you. Return now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good.”””

A transition takes place w/ this verse:

- In **verse 6** God said, “**O house of Israel,**” b/c in verses 6 through 10 He spoke to the nation of Israel.
- In **verse 11** God said, “**Speak to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem,**” b/c He's speaking to individuals.

And this brings us to the next part of Lesson 1...

LESSON 1: THE POTTER IS SOVEREIGN OVER (PART II) INDIVIDUALS.

God isn't just sovereign over nations. He's sovereign over individuals...

Isa 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.

When it says **we are the work of [His] hand**, the NT equivalent would be **Eph 2:10**, which says...

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

The Hebrew word for **potter** is *yatsar*, and over half the times it's used in the Old Testament it's translated as “form,” “fashion,” or “make.” This is fitting, b/c that's what potters do w/ clay.

The Hebrew word for potter – *yatsar* – is the same word God used when commissioning Jeremiah...

Jer 1:5 “**Before I formed** (*yatsar* – the word for potter) **you in the womb I knew you.**”

The point is:

- As God formed Jeremiah, He forms every individual.

- As the potter had power over the clay, He has power over our circumstances.

In **2 Cor 4:7** Paul calls us **earthen** – or **clay** – **vessels**.

It's fitting for us to be compared w/ clay for a few reasons...

First, clay comes from the ground...like we came from the ground: **Gen 2:7 God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.**

Second, clay is fragile...

When we experience trials – probably more than any other time – we think about how fragile our “clay” bodies are!

Job felt this way during his trials:

- In **Job 4:19** he said, “[We] **dwelt in houses of clay** (referring to our bodies), [our] **foundation is in the dust.**
- In **Job 10:9** he said, “**Remember, I pray, that You have made me like clay. and will You turn me into dust again?**” Job asked God to consider how weak his body was, in the hope it would lead Him to ease his suffering.

We can feel like this during trials too, wondering if God is aware of how fragile we are...

We might pray, “*Do You know how weak I am, and that this suffering seems like more than I can handle?*”

As this account reveals, the Potter knows His clay...

Psa 103:14 For he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.

This means:

- He knows how strong or weak we are
- He knows what we can and can't handle
- He knows what is and isn't best for it

Briefly look back at the end of **verses 3** one more time...

Jer 18:3 Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something at the wheel.

The potter sat before two parallel stone wheels that were joined by a shaft. He turned the bottom wheel with his feet and worked the clay on the top wheel as it turned.

The wheel is a picture of life...

- The Potter controls the wheel and the clay on it...like God controls our lives and circumstances.
- The clay sits on the wheel and goes around and around...like life goes around and around for us...

**Ecclesiastes 1:9 That which has been is what will be,
That which is done is what will be done,
And *there is nothing new under the sun.***

This verse describes how it feels being on the wheel going around...and around...and around.

During this season that we're stuck at home, this is particularly fitting:

- You might feel like life is passing you by...like you're missing out on things
- You might feel like that clay on a wheel going nowhere

But if you see your life and circumstances controlled by the Potter you know you're where He wants you.

Follow me for a moment...

Because of everything that happened w/ Judas when he returned the money, most of us are familiar w/ the fact that potters had fields...

Matt 27:6 But the chief priests took the silver pieces and said, "It is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because they are the price of blood." 7 And they consulted together and bought with them the potter's field.

Why did potters have fields?

To discard their **marred** – or ruined – vessels.

Think about that: it was so common for potters to get rid of vessels they had entire fields for doing so!

You say, "*Why would they discard marred vessels? Why wouldn't they simply remake them?*"

There are two straightforward reasons:

1. First, clay is cheap. Potters could easily get more of it.
2. Second, as is the case w/ many things in life, sometimes it's easier to start over from scratch...than to try to fix something.

But in this account we see the Potter wanted to patiently work w/ the clay until it became a vessel that "**seemed good to [him].**"

Clay is a cheap and worthless material that can't become anything of value on its own; it needs the hands of a skilled potter to form it.

Do you see the application for us?

We have about as much chance of turning ourselves into valuable vessels as the clay on the wheel had of turning itself into a valuable vessel.

But in the hands of the Potter, we can become something that seems good to Him.

J. Wilbur Chapman said, *“The clay is not attractive in itself, but when the hands of the potter touch it, and the thought of the potter is brought to bear upon it, and the plan of the potter is worked out in it and through it, then there is a real transformation.”*

I think this is one of the most encouraging passages in Scripture regarding God’s Work in our lives:

- We’re marred vessels
- We’re descendants of Adam, born with sinful natures that leave us ruined

But the Heavenly Potter keeps working on us!

And I don’t say this b/c of this account. I say this b/c the NT says this...

Phil 1:6 [We] can be confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in [us] will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

We might feel marred, disfigured, or flawed, but instead of discarding us, God can reshape us into vessels that are precious and valuable.

Now let’s see if that’s what happened w/ the Jews. Look at **verse 12**...

Jer 18:12 And they said, “That is hopeless! So we will walk according to our own plans, and we will every one obey the dictates of his evil heart.”

This is an almost unimaginable response.

Let me give you an elevated view of the book of Jeremiah to help you appreciate what’s happening...

The book is not arranged chronologically. It’s arranged topically.

I mention this, b/c since this is chapter 18 and there are 52 chapters, you might think that Jeremiah hasn’t been preaching that long. But this takes place during the reign of Jehoiakim, which means Jeremiah’s been preaching to the Jews for 20 years.

When you consider this, you can see what happened...

- They became so hardened in their sin they actually said the possibility of repentance was hopeless.
- They got to the point that they were even comfortable stating their position honestly: no excuses, blame shifting, or hypocrisy.

It reminds me of students I used to teach:

- I would say, “If you’ll shape up and do what’s right, you’ll stop being punished.”
- They’d say, “It’s hopeless. I’ve always been this way. I can’t change.”

I hope none of the kids in our church are like this:

- Your parents try to speak truth into your life.
- But you say, “It’s no use. I’m going to continue doing what I’ve been doing.”

If this does describe you:

- Today can be the day of repentance for you.
- You can turn from your sin to Christ and cry out to Him to deliver you.

And it’s not just kids that can be like this!

Have you ever met people who were so chained to their sin the idea of repentance seemed hopeless to them?

Maybe people habitually engaging in:

- Porn
- Drugs
- Alcohol
- Anger
- Bitterness
- Deceit

They can also think repentance is hopeless.

This is what the kingdom of Judah was like!

Instead of repenting they said would follow **their own evil plans** and **the dictates of [their] evil hearts.**

It’s interesting to read these words considering what’s written in the previous chapter. Look at **Jer 17:9...**

Jer 17:9 The heart is deceitful above all things, And desperately wicked; Who can know it?

The Jews want to **obey the dictates of their hearts**, but God says **the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.**

Their hearts were the last thing they should be following!

Now here’s an interesting question...

God can remake marred vessels into vessels that seem good to Him...but what happens to marred vessels – like Judah – that harden themselves and prevent the Potter from remaking them?

Those are the vessels that get discarded...and this brings us to Lesson 2...

LESSON 2: THE JEWS' HARDNESS MADE THEM DISCARDED VESSELS.

When clay is marred and it hardens itself in the potter's hands, it's good for nothing but being discarded.

This isn't my opinion. This is exactly what happened. Look at **chapter 19:1**...

Jer 19:1 Thus says the LORD: "Go and get a potter's earthen flask, and *take* some of the elders of the people and some of the elders of the priests.

So Jeremiah was told to go get a vessel from a potter. More than likely he took one from the Potter's House in chapter 18.

Jeremiah was told to bring **elders** with him, b/c they'd be credible witnesses who could report back to the people what happened w/ the vessel.

Considering how unpopular Jeremiah was w/ the Jewish leaders, I bet this was an interesting trip. My suspicion is the **elders** probably weren't friendly and respectful of Jeremiah's ministry while this took place...and it got even worse at the end.

We don't have time to read all the verses. Skip to **verse 10** to see what Jeremiah does w/ this vessel...

Jer 19:10 [God said], "Then you shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, 11 and say to them, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts: "Even so I will break this people and this city, as *one* breaks a potter's vessel, which cannot be made whole again; and they shall bury *them* in Tophet till *there is* no place to bury.

It's not hard to figure out what's going on, is it?

- The shattered vessel illustrates God's violent judgment that's coming against Judah b/c of their unrepentance.
- God is going to use the Babylonians to shatter them the way Jeremiah shattered this vessel.

This is what happens to hard, stiff, clay!

Listen to this important verse...

1 Cor 10:11 Now all these things happened to [the Jews] as examples [for us], and they were written for our admonition.

So this happened to the Jews as an example for us to learn from.

The question is not: does this have application for us?

The question is: what is the application for us?

The answer brings us to Lesson 3...

LESSON 3: WE MUST BE SOFT IN THE POTTER'S HANDS.

Every time I read this account it reminds me of the importance of being sensitive to the Holy Spirit.

These verses are so important b/c we live in a world that tells us to be assertive, independent, and strong-willed.

But if this translates into our relationships w/ the Lord it's going to make us hard, stubborn clay.

Here's what's interesting...

I've told you many times before that handling Scripture often requires finding the right balance.

This is one of those instances!

We've talked about the sovereignty of God quite a bit up to this point, which is fitting b/c it's emphasized in the passage.

But look back at **Jer 18** w/ me...

- **Jer 18:8** if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil
- **Jer 18:10** if [that nation] does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice
- **Jer 18:12** They said, "That is hopeless! So **WE WILL** walk according to our own plans, and **WE WILL** every one obey the dictates of his evil heart."

What do you see in these verses?

- You see the free moral agency of man
- You see the responsibility that rests on the clay's shoulders

So there's the sovereignty of God...and the free moral agency of man.

How does these work together in this account?

We can't change ourselves any more than the clay on that wheel could change itself.

BUT...

We can be soft in the Potter's hands so He can change us.

Listen to this warning:

Isa 45:9 “Woe to him WHO STRIVES WITH HIM WHO FORMED HIM, a pot among earthen pots! Does the clay say to him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’ or ‘Your work has no handles’?”

We shouldn't strive with – or work against – the Potter.

Here's what I'd like you to think about...

We don't literally feel God's hands on our lives, but we do feel the many things God uses to form us.

The potter's hands formed the clay, and there are many “hands” God uses to shape us:

- Parents
- Siblings
- Teachers
- Authors
- Discipline
- Elders
- Trials
- Presently He's using the Coronavirus

But here's the difficulty...

- Being formed doesn't feel good! Often our flesh doesn't like it!
- When the Potter shapes us on the wheel of life it can be uncomfortable and even painful.

And unlike the clay on the wheel – which has no free will of its own – we choose how we respond in the Potter's hands.

We can respond one of two ways, and both ways are illustrated for us in the NT...

In **Rom 9** Paul looks back to this chapter in Jeremiah and draws on the analogy of the Potter and the Clay:

- He gives us a perfect example of someone who hardened himself in the Potter's hands...and that's Pharaoh.
- Pharaoh demonstrates the painful consequences of clay that stiffens itself against God's will.

If we become hard and stiff in the Potter's hands, then:

- We're acting like Pharaoh in Moses' day
- And we're acting like the Jews in Jeremiah's day

And we're setting ourselves up for judgment.

And why's that?

Because when clay becomes as hard as Pharaoh and the Jews, it can no longer be formed. It is good for nothing but to be discarded like the vessel in Jeremiah 19.

What's the other response?

We can have soft, pliable, submissive hearts!

Then God will make us into something that [seems] good to [Him] as it said in **Jer 18:3**.

And this isn't my opinion. Listen to these other NT verses...

2 Timothy 2:20-21 In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter (which is to say, has a soft, submissive heart), he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work."

This is just like **Jer 18:3** and God making us into vessels that seem good to Him.

Let me close by asking you to think about how this applies to us today...

Considering everything taking place around us, what does it mean to be soft in the Potter's hands?

It means:

- Not giving into fear...trusting the Potter regarding our circumstances.
- Striving to be content...trusting that if there are things we're going without, it's b/c the Lord knows it's best for us not to have them.
- We're spending a lot of time with our families. For many of us, having soft hearts means being humble and gentle in our homes.
- Being good stewards of the time God's given us...**Eph 5:16 Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.**

While we're separated from each other, it means lifting each other up in prayer.

Woodland Christian Church, my hope is that this sermon ministers to your hearts and encourages you to be soft in the Potter's hands.

Picture yourself being a pliable vessel this week on the Potter's wheel spinning around and around as you're being shaped by Him and for His glory.

Let's pray.