

A Pottery Demonstration

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[0 : 00] Let us read from the beginning the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord. Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words. So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel.

And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the Lord came to me, O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?

I don't know if any of you have ever tried making pottery, fashioning clay into something useful. I haven't myself. I've seen people do it.

And it's always wonderful to admire the skill of a potter, starting with a lump of clay and working it with his or her hands into the final vessel that they always had in mind to create.

And if we have ever tried it, it's very difficult until you're actually skilled enough to do it. It's a wonderful gift to be able to create in that way from a lump of clay, a dish or a vase or something beautiful to look at or useful from an everyday point of view.

[1 : 29] And it's especially amazing when you think of what he starts with, a lump of clay just plonked onto the wheel. And when you compare that with the end product, that's when you come to admire the skill and the wisdom that has brought that about.

That's when you come to say, I would certainly say it of myself, there's no way in the world that I could even begin to form that kind of object from such a basic beginning as a lump of clay.

And that's the demonstration that Jeremiah is given here when the Lord commanded him to go down to the potter's house. He was given a demonstration that taught him of the skill of the Lord, of the intentions of the Lord for his people, for the people of Judah.

And that's why the Lord was asking this question through Jeremiah, can I not do with you as this potter has done? And behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

Now remember, Jeremiah was prophesying of a disaster to come, a time of exile for the people of Judah in Babylon.

[2 : 49] And that exile was going to last for 70 years. And they were come back to Jerusalem, once again to rebuild not only the temple, but also rebuild the community of believers in Jerusalem.

So in a sense, it was just as Jeremiah was having pictured for him here, it was the Lord taking them as they came back from captivity and refashioning them into a people for himself.

And this is something that Jeremiah was instructed to present to the people in order that they might come to turn to the Lord, but also be willing to be created by God and fashioned anew into a people for himself.

And if you see in verse 4 there, there is a principle that we can follow through into our own lives as he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.

I think these words are really crucial in understanding not only this passage, but understanding our own relationship to God. As we give ourselves to God, as we give ourselves by his grace into his hands, we're giving ourselves into the hands of the great potter, the one who has the wisdom and the ability to mold us as human beings according to his will as he sees fit.

[4 : 21] Just as it seemed good to the potter to do. And that's especially good to know and important to know when the road is tough, when the going is hard, when you're experiencing things that you didn't expect to experience and wouldn't have wanted to devise for yourself.

It's then that it's precious to know that in the Lord's hands, even through trial and difficulty and suffering and unexpected events, that the Lord is fashioning his people in a way that will finally present them to himself in heaven to his glory.

Well, what is it in this passage that we can use to apply to ourselves and to our life in this world, not only individually, but as congregations or even as a church as well?

Well, two things especially strike us as you go through the passage and just contemplate what's happening, what you're reading about there, as Jeremiah saw this taking place. The first is control. The second is creativity. Because this potter, as is obvious, has control over that lump of clay that he's working on the wheel.

[5 : 42] Even when the vessel just doesn't turn out quite the way it should to begin with, he still remolds and refashions it until it is exactly according to what he wants it to be.

He has total control over that clay. His hands make that clay into an object of beauty or of usefulness. And it's his skill that brings that about.

He has that wisdom and skill to know that that's what he actually is doing. What he's always intended as it seems good to him to do.

And so it is with God as well. If you have God in your life tonight, if God inhabits your heart, if God lives in your soul, if your life is safely in his hand, then you are being moved and manipulated and woven in a way in which he himself sees fit in your life.

He works the clay that you and I are in his hand. Now there's a word in the Bible, it's not used here, but the essence of it is here when it says it's worked as it seemed good to him to do.

[7 : 02] A word which is used of the creation, for example, and it's the word formed. And the creation account we have in Genesis has two words, two important words.

One is a verb that's only used of God in the Bible. That's the word created, to create. And that word in Hebrew, for God creating something, is unique to himself.

It's not used anywhere else except for God throughout the whole Old Testament. The other word accompanying is the word formed. And you remember it says to begin with, the earth was without form.

And God set about giving it form. He brought it into being, he created it out of nothing, and then he began to give it form, to give it shape. He began to shape it into what it is as we know it, as God then created it and formed it.

So formed actually has the idea, indeed, you have it in Jeremiah here where God revealed to him as he called him to be a prophet. When you go back to the first chapter, you find there in verse 5, that word used, And now the word of the Lord came to me saying, Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you.

[8 : 23] Before you were born, I consecrated you. In other words, God is saying to him, I formed you. I gave you a particular shape in the womb. I made you a human being.

But before that, I knew all about you. Same as you have in the psalm that we sang, Psalm 139, where so precious to the psalmist, he was able to say that God knew him before he was born. Not only did he know him before he was born, he knew him in a way that knew everything that would be in his life as well. That obviously has an important connection that I'm not going to go into to the life of the unborn and to the principle of protecting unborn life, which sadly we see all too neglected in our generation.

But God forms us in the womb. He gives us that human shape, that of a human being. And so when you're seeing God represented as, or illustrated as, the potter, that's what you're actually seeing. He begins with something that does not have form. And he begins working it in such a way that it eventually has the form that the potter always intended it to have.

[9 : 44] And that means that everything that happens in the life of a Christian is an element of God bringing about a form that will be pleasing to himself.

You know, sometimes we have events in our life that leave us asking many questions. And things that we know of and experience, especially that give us pain, losses, illnesses, bereavements, sorrows, disappointments, all the things that hurt us in the providence of God.

And we do very often ask, well, why is this? Or, even like the psalmist, how long, Lord, are you going to forget me? Will it be forever? There are all of these painful episodes in the experience of Christians.

but they all form part of God's forming of us. He takes even the difficulties of our life and He uses that as part of His forming of us into what we will finally be.

And it's so important for us to actually carry that with us. Remember that Paul said in writing to the Romans, Paul wrote in Romans chapter 8, For we know that all things work together for good to

those who love God and to those who are called according to His purpose.

[11:12] Now, that really takes you into the essence of God forming us for Himself. We know that all things, not some things, all things work and they work together, He's saying, for our good.

They are co-working for our good. You never look at the more difficult things in an isolated way, apart from the things that give you comfort and delight. They are co-workers in our lives as God uses them.

All things work together, co-work for our good. To whom does that apply? To those who love the Lord. But He doesn't leave it at that.

Those who are called by Him, the called according to His purpose. What is His purpose? His purpose? His purpose is in designing for them something which will ultimately reflect His glory and working them and shaping them finally into that form.

Just as it says here in verse 4, as it seems good to the potter to do. All things.

[12:19] are you and I content tonight to leave the forming of our life to God? Are we content to say to God, Lord, there are things in my life I don't understand, but help me to accept them as part of your program for me.

Help me to believe that you have placed me on your will like the potter and that you are moving me and molding me and shaping me into that final image that you've always had in mind for me.

Are we content tonight to know that we are safely in the hand of God? Are we fighting against that? Are we saying, I'd rather be left to my own devices?

Surely not. because to be in the hand of God the great potter is to have the privilege of being shaped in a way that will be to His glory.

In a way that removes the ugliness of our sin, of our sinful defilement and our sinful shape and bringing us at last into the image of Christ perfectly.

[13:31] And everything that the potter does, as we say, you can say is under his control. Nothing happens in the program that God has for His people of which you can say, well, that's completely out of God's control.

He must have lost control of my life. It's never like that. Maybe it seems like that, but it's never like that because God is the sovereign potter, the one who molds us according to His wisdom and sees that which we will always be forevermore.

So here tonight our privilege to know of God's work going on in our lives through Christ, through the Holy Spirit, fashioning and molding us like the potter is an illustration of into a vessel that will be to His praise, to His glory.

So it's the matter of control, but secondly, you can see here the matter of creativity. Creativity, the potter is actually creating something.

He's not just doing this and bringing about any sort of shape. He is creating something. He's bringing something about by His skill in a creative way.

[14:48] And that's what God does in the life of His people as well. He's assuring Israel here, or Judah, people of Israel, that even their exile in Babylon is not outside His control.

they're still on the potter's wheel as they're spending 70 years in Babylon. And when they were brought back, when they're coming back by God's grace, when He brings them back, the prophets were assuring them that, yes, it was a new beginning.

They were being remolded. A new community was beginning in Jerusalem. The temple was going to be rebuilt. Sacrifice again offered. The wall of Jerusalem being rebuilt.

All of that is part of God's refashioning or remolding of them by His creative hand. Now, there's something quite wonderful going on.

As you see the potter working on his clay, what you're really seeing is a transfer of what's in the potter's mind and intention to his hands.

[15:54] He's always had a picture in mind of what that finished vessel is going to be like, whether it's a plate or a vase or whatever, but it's already in the potter's mind.

Before he ever starts handling the clay, he has this in his mind and what he has in his mind is what through his hands and his skill with his hands actually comes to be.

It's the same for somebody, of course, if you're designing a house, for example, or an architect that might be designing a street or a small town. It's already in the mind and he transfers it from the mind onto the paper, to the plan, or perhaps more likely onto the computer where the plan is then set out and all the details are added and all the regulations are kept, hopefully.

And there is the architect, the designer of this building or this village or this street and he's put it all down. It's come out of his mind and it's now in a way that can be followed by the builder.

And it should be that that final building exactly corresponds towards the architect's mind. It's come from the architect's mind through to the plan and onto the finished product.

[17 : 13] That is with God exactly the same spiritually. We are in his mind in his devising of our salvation. The plan of salvation in Christ was always in the mind of God before Adam fell.

And when Adam fell, the plan that was in the mind of God came to be acted out by him in this world by blessing his people, by bringing about salvation through his son, Jesus Christ.

That was not something that God suddenly thought of as something that needed to be done after man fell into sin. No, God always had the design for his people before we were ever created.

And he applies that by the work of his Holy Spirit. In other words, there's no discrepancy between what's in the mind of God and what comes to be the final product of his grace.

no discrepancy at all. It's perfect, a perfect image. And like the potter, God has different ways of handling us.

[18 : 28] If you've ever watched a potter working the lump of clay, as you look at it closely, you can see he's using his thumbs, he's using his fingers, and he's using them in different ways.

And sometimes you'll find him taking the lump of clay and just digging his thumbs into it, and then taking up if he's doing a vase or a vessel like that, digging his thumbs into it, and then up comes the sides of the vessel.

And when he's finished with that, he begins to smooth them off with his fingers until it finally takes the shape and the smoothness that he's satisfied with. Well, God uses, if you like, with all due reverence, he uses his thumbs sometimes to dig into your life.

And it hurts. And it's not easy to accept when God comes with painful things to you. But he's molding the clay.

He knows the end product and he knows this is the way to get to it. And that's how it's demonstrated here to Jeremiah by the way the potter works the clay.

[19 : 42] And you remember in Ephesians that Paul uses a description there which fits very closely with what you have here. Where in Ephesians chapter 2 verses 8 to 10 and of course Paul is demonstrating that we're not saved by our own works.

We're saved by the grace of God through Christ. We're saved by faith in Christ. We're justified by faith in Christ. But this is how Paul puts it in verse 10.

For we are his workmanship. We are his workmanship. What is workmanship? Well workmanship is just like the potter with the clay.

Workmanship is the skill of the workman bringing about the final product. And we are Paul says his workmanship. Tonight as a Christian you're the workmanship of God.

The church of God that he's putting together as he begins with the misshapen clay that we are as sinners. As he puts us together. As he joins us together. As he makes us into his people.

[20 : 50] So you find we are his workmanship. And it's always important to notice how often Paul uses the plural. He's not just saying I am his workmanship.

Even though that's true of every individual who's in Christ. Because Paul so often wants us to really appreciate the fact that we are together formed into a people of God.

And that for all our differences and backgrounds and personalities God's hands if you like like the great potter as he's putting us together he's working that clay that we are in such a way that puts us together not just as individually shaping our lives but the whole body of Christ forming us into what he himself will be praised by for all eternity.

God's grace God's power God's design bringing about that final product that will be to his glory.

Aren't you tonight thankful to be in the hand of God?

To be under the total control and the creativity of this God? This God who transfers what's in his mind through his work of grace to us as a people to make us into what he himself always intended us to be.

[22 : 20] And of course you know that in most cases certainly when there are important potters or painters or whatever they always put their signature or usually put their signature on the product that they're actually creating.

Very often you come across programs you see on television whether it's an antiques road show or whatever else it will be and the objects brought about let's say it's a lovely vase that's been maybe

many many years ago and somebody brings it along for the expert to examine it and one of the things the expert will do he'll say well he'll tell you what it's made of but then he'll say let's see if there's anything on the bottom of it let's see if the maker's name is on it or the maker's mark and he'll turn it around and say ah yes there's a let's say a Clarice Cliff!

Don't know much about it but I hear the name Clarice Cliff famous potter and with her name on it it's so valuable compared to something without her name even if there's a copy that matches it exactly it's not a Clarice Cliff it doesn't have the same value and God puts his name on every individual that he recreates in Christ how do I know that?

well the Bible tells us when you go to the book of Revelation you can see towards the end of that book when there's a description of heaven and the inhabitants of heaven one of the things it says is his name shall be in their foreheads they will be marked as belonging to him whatever that means literally it certainly means spiritually that they will be known as belonging to God and they are precious to him because they carry the maker's mark they have his signature they are his workmanship he has brought about that which has always been in his mind for them they're stamped in his image they are remade into objects of beauty and there's that transfer from the mind of the potter to his hands for the final product but secondly in the creativity not only is there that transfer but also this transformation you see the transformation taking place before you as the potter handles the clay in a way in which he skillfully does so it's misshapen it's distorted to begin with you can see that even in verse 4 as well one of the clay vessels didn't turn out the way the potter had it designed so he reworked it into another vessel and cannot

I do with you says God as the potter has done and he's putting that question to you tonight and to me whatever our life has been up to now God is saying can I not do with you as a potter does with the clay and fashion you into an object of beauty and praise to God of course he can the answer to the question is yes but there's more to it than that isn't there because we're here tonight not as inanimate lumps of clay this is an illustration of what God does spiritually but we are different to lumps of clay in this sense that we are thinking beings we are human beings with the ability to respond to his word we are able to think through what we're told what we're taught we're able to read the

[26 : 26] Bible for ourselves and apply what we read applying it to our own lives in other words when God is saying such things to us as this question for example can I not do this with you he expects a response on our part he's not talking to inanimate lumps of clay he's talking to human beings and you have a responsibility and I have a responsibility tonight to answer God as he addresses us through his word he requires our response because remaking us spiritually it's not exactly the same way in every way as you see a potter fashioning a lump of clay into a vase of beauty we're required to give a response to God that's why he's saying here in verse 11 behold I'm devising a plan against you the Lord is saying return everyone from his evil way and amend your ways and your deeds yes it's good to know that

God reshapes people's lives into objects of beauty but you and I will never be an object of beauty if we don't repent if we don't turn from sin if we don't seek God if we don't come to God with confession of our sin with a confession of our need that he creates remember how we sang or will sing rather in psalm 51 where David as a believer certainly came to God having fallen so grievously into sin and came with this confession that psalm 51 is his confession of sin and one of the things he says is create in me a clean heart oh God he realizes that he cannot create that clean heart himself he doesn't have the ability to create that clean heart but he knows that God can do it for him but he doesn't stand at a distance and say well if

God will do it he'll do it he comes to him and says Lord do it please create a clean heart in me restore a right spirit within me in other words he's really saying in effect refashion my heart recreate me take me as a vessel fashion me again to your glory for I've become broken and every broken life tonight need not in any way despair that God cannot remend them I may have mentioned this before it comes to my mind just now of a practice that it's really a Japanese way of mending broken vases broken pottery and what they do is a process called kinsukuroi where they take the broken pieces of the vessel let's say it's a vase and they put it together but they use a type of glue to which they've added gold dust and instead of trying to hide the joints where the pieces have been joined together as very often you would if somebody was restoring a vase you wouldn't want the joints to be seen if at all possible it's the opposite with kinsukuroi they leave the joints so that the paste with the gold dust just is thickly seen through these cracks these joints that have been where the pieces

have been put together and when you see the finished object put together again you have all of these joints and the gold gluey stuff it's just protruding through thickly and the philosophy behind that in the

Japanese kinsukuroi apparently is that because of that and that way of mending it that object is actually more beautiful than it was before it was ever broken and so it is with our lives what we end up with as we are recreated by God we are more beautiful than before we come to be mended by God's creative power in a way that shows his beauty in the work that he has done moment moment reshape them and refashion them, what was their response? No, they will say, this is in vain. We will follow our own plans. We will everyone act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart. And you can find the same in their response to Jeremiah himself in verse 18. Then they said, Come, let us make plots against Jeremiah. For the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, let us strike him with the tongue. Let us not pay attention to any of his words.

[32 : 25] Well, sadly, some people do that with the gospel, with God's words, with God's appeals. They will say, I hear what you're saying, but I prefer to do it my way.

I prefer to try and live my life according to my own ability and my own wisdom. And what is God's address to that sort of mindset?

Well, Psalm 95 is one. And remember what Psalm 95 says, where the appeal is there as God speaks it. For he is our God.

And we are the people of his pasture and the sheep of his hand. Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your heart.

God, in other words, is saying, let me recreate you. Let me make you an object of beauty. Put yourself in my hands.

[33 : 34] Let me be the great refashioner and former of your life. Just as they brought the few loaves and fish that fed the 5,000.

What did Jesus say to them when the disciples said, we have only here such a small amount. How are we going to feed all these people? What did Jesus say?

Bring them here to me. Put them in my hands. That's what he's saying to you and to me tonight. Why should you not put yourself in his hands? Let him refashion you. Let him make you and I objects of his beauty.

Can I not do with you as this potter has done, declares the Lord. The control, the creativity of our God.

[34 : 31] The wisdom, the wonder, the power. That brings us sinful lumps of clay. And fashions us into objects of great beauty.

Another illustration I heard I finish with this. Somebody was saying that on holiday at one time they came across a place where certain things like pottery were being made and vases and objects like that.

And there was a sign outside the place where they were being sold. And the sign said, workshop downstairs. Showroom upstairs.

Friends, the workshop that God uses is here in this world. Our life's experiences are in his workshop. In the potter's hands.

But the showroom is upstairs. The showroom is in heaven. For all those who have had their lives refashioned.

[35 : 40] And will forevermore shine to the glory of God. Let's pray.