

THE POTTER AND THE CLAY

BIBLE TEXT : Jeremiah 18:1-12; Romans 9:21-26.

LESSON 394 Senior Course

MEMORY VERSE: "O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?" (Romans 9:20).

BIBLE TEXT in King James Version

Jeremiah 18:1-12

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 thee to hear my words.
3 Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels.
4 And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make *it*.
5 Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying,
6 O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the LORD. Behold, as the clay *is* in the potter's hand, so *are* ye in mine hand, O house of Israel.
7 *At what* instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy *it*;
8 If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them.
9 And *at what* instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant *it*;
10 If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them.
11 Now therefore go to, speak to the men of Judah, and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem, saying, Thus saith the LORD; Behold, I frame evil against you, and devise

Bible References:

I A Lesson at the Potter's House

1. A vessel is moulded, marred, and remade, Jeremiah 18:1-4.
2. Israel as clay is in God's hands, Jeremiah 18:5, 6.
3. The nation that turns from evil remains planted, and the one that continues in evil is rooted up, Jeremiah 18:7-10;

Jeremiah 26:13

13 Therefore now amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the LORD your God; and the LORD will repent him of the evil that he hath pronounced against you.

Proverbs 14:34

34 Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people.

Matthew 15:13

13 But he answered and said, Every plant, which my heavenly Father hath not planted, shall be rooted up.

II The Free Power of Choice

1. God decrees evil against Judah because of their sin, Jeremiah 18:11;

Jeremiah 17:1

1 The sin of Judah *is* written with a pen of iron, *and* with the point of a diamond: *it is* graven upon the table of their heart, and upon the horns of your altars;

Jeremiah 32:23

23 And they came in, and possessed it; but they obeyed not thy voice, neither walked in thy law; they have done nothing of all that thou commandedst them to do: therefore thou hast caused all this evil to come upon them:

Jeremiah 36:30

30 Therefore thus saith the LORD of Jehoiakim king of Judah; He shall have none to sit upon the throne of David: and his dead body shall be cast out in the day to the heat, and in the night to the frost.

Jeremiah 36:31

31 And I will punish him and his seed and his servants for their iniquity; and I will bring upon them, and upon the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and upon the men of Judah, all the evil that I have pronounced against them; but they hearkened not.

2. God calls them to repentance — to be remoulded by the Potter, Jeremiah 18:11;

Jeremiah 6:16

16 Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where *is* the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk *therein*.

Jeremiah 36:3

3 It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the evil which I purpose to do unto them; that they may return every man from his evil way; that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.

Jeremiah 36:7

7 It may be they will present their supplication before the LORD, and will return every one from his evil way: for great is the anger and the fury that the LORD hath pronounced against this people.

Jeremiah 38:20

20 But Jeremiah said, They shall not deliver *thee*. Obey, I

a device against you: return ye now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good.

12 And they said, There is no hope: but we will walk after our own devices, and we will every one do the imagination of his evil heart.

Romans 9:21-26

21 Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?

22 *What* if God, willing to shew *his* wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction:

23 And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory,
24 Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

25 As he saith also in Osee, I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved.

26 And it shall come to pass, *that* in the place where it was said unto them, Ye *are* not my people; there shall they be called the children of the living God.

beseech thee, the voice of the LORD, which I speak unto thee: so it shall be well unto thee, and thy soul shall live.

3. Judah exercises her free will and chooses evil, Jeremiah 18:12, Jeremiah 2:17

17 Hast thou not procured this unto thyself, in that thou hast forsaken the LORD thy God, when he led thee by the way?

Jeremiah 2:25

25 Withhold thy foot from being unshod, and thy throat from thirst: but thou saidst, There is no hope: no; for I have loved strangers, and after them will I go.

Jeremiah 6:16

16 Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where *is* the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls. But they said, We will not walk *therein*.

4. By the word of the Lord Judah is to be broken and cast out, Jeremiah 19:1-2

1 Thus saith the LORD, Go and get a potter's earthen bottle, and *take* of the ancients of the people, and of the ancients of the priests;

2 And go forth unto the valley of the son of Hinnom, which *is* by the entry of the east gate, and proclaim there the words that I shall tell thee,

Jeremiah 19:10-11

10 Then shalt thou break the bottle in the sight of the men that go with thee,

11 And shalt say unto them, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Even so will I break this people and this city, as *one* breaketh a potter's vessel, that cannot be made whole again: and they shall bury *them* in Tophet, till *there be* no place to bury.

III God the Potter and Man the Clay

1. The creation of man was the "Potter's" perfect vessel,

Genesis 1:26-27

26 And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

27 So God created man in his *own* image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

Genesis 2:7

7 And the LORD God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

2. The vessel was marred in the fall of man,

Genesis 3:6

6 And when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, and that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make *one* wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

Genesis 3:17-19

17 And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed *is* the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat *of* it all the days of thy life;

18 Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field;

19 In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return.

3. The vessel is remade through salvation,

1 Corinthians 15:20-22

20 But now is Christ risen from the dead, *and* become the firstfruits of them that slept.

²¹ For since by man *came* death, by man *came* also the resurrection of the dead.

²² For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.

Ephesians 4:24

²⁴ And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

Colossians 3:10

¹⁰ And have put on the new *man*, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him:

IV Pliable Clay to Be Vessels of Honour

1. Mortal men, all from the same clay of creation, are permitted to be vessels of honour or dishonour, Romans 9:21.

2. God is long-suffering with sinful men, Romans 9:22;

1 Peter 5:6

⁶ Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time:

3. "The children of the living God" are those remade by salvation — vessels of honour, Romans 9:23-26;

2 Timothy 2:20

²⁰ But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour.

2 Timothy 2:21

²¹ If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work.

Notes:

The Potter and the Clay

Jeremiah was instructed by the Lord to go to a potter's house and there, through watching the potter in his work, the Lord would give him a spiritual message for Israel. While Jeremiah was watching the potter mould a vessel on the wheel, a flaw or defect developed; and rather than finish the vessel in that condition, the potter crushed the clay back into a lump and started over to make his vessel. Then the Lord said to Jeremiah, "As the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel."

Man's Free Will

In Paul's writing to the Romans he said: "Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour?" (Romans 9:21). Paul seems to refer to the incident that Jeremiah saw, but at first reading it might appear that God indiscriminately takes from the same clay to make some vessels for honour and some for dishonour. However, with a closer study, we find that Paul uses the history of the nation of Israel to prove that it was God's desire that every vessel be a vessel of honour. In God's great plan Israel was to be a spiritual nation — in fact a nation of priests. When they disobeyed God and His commandments, God actually endured with much long-suffering those who disobeyed. It was God's will, even though they had disobeyed, that they should be pliable in His hands and be remade, a vessel unto honour. God asked the question, "Cannot I do with you as this potter?" Not all clay is exactly the same. Some clay may be very pliable and plastic and easily moulded into a perfect vessel. Other clay is less yielding, and though the potter may try time and again to mould it into a perfect vessel, this is impossible due to the condition of the clay.

National Application

God told Jeremiah that if a nation, though under sentence of

destruction, would turn from evil, God would not destroy it. In other words, that nation could and would be remade by the great Potter. By the same token, if a nation that had had the blessing of God and had obeyed His voice, should turn from that good, then God said He would repent of the good wherewith He had promised to benefit them.

Jeremiah was then instructed by God to go back to the men of Judah and Jerusalem and tell them: "Behold, I frame evil against you, and devise a device against you: return ye now every one from his evil way, and make your ways and your doings good." Judah had departed from the worship of God and had turned to idolatry and all kinds of sin; but here now was their opportunity. Here was mercy extended to them, a call to repentance. The great Potter wanted to remould them into a vessel of honour, and Jeremiah was to carry back the message; but the next verse tells us: "And they said, There is no hope: but we will walk after our own devices, and we will every one do the imagination of his evil heart."

The Doom of Judah

The Lord commanded Jeremiah to take a potter's earthen bottle and take with him the representatives of the people and the priests and go unto the valley of the son of Hinnom. He was to break the bottle in the sight of these men, and then say to them: "Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaketh a potter's vessel, that cannot be made whole again; and they shall bury them in Tophet, till there be no place to bury." (**Jeremiah 19:1-2** ¹ Thus saith the LORD, Go and get a potter's earthen bottle, and take of the ancients of the people, and of the ancients of the priests; ² And go forth unto the valley of the son of Hinnom, which is by the entry of the east gate, and proclaim there the words that I shall tell thee, **Jeremiah 19:10-11** ¹⁰ Then shalt thou break the bottle in the sight of the men that go with thee, ¹¹ And shalt say unto them, Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Even so will I break this people and this city, as *one* breaketh a potter's vessel, that cannot be made whole again: and they shall bury *them* in Tophet, till *there be no place to bury.*)

Observe now that this potter's bottle was not in the formative and easily moulded state of clay but was fully hardened. We have here not a process of manufacture but the destruction of a finished product, which had proved to be a failure. The clay had been made into a bottle and its quality as a vessel was irrevocably fixed. It was no longer possible to remould it, and therefore no further pains were taken to make something of it. It was broken into fragments which were cast into the refuse heap that had accumulated in the unclean Tophet.

In both the case of the clay and in the case of the earthen bottle the Lord stated clearly that this represented the house of Israel. However, each was in a different stage of development. The clay denoted Israel's early years when the Law was given and while they obeyed God. Later Israel had failed God and turned to idolatry, but if they would now receive the expostulations and admonitions of the prophet and repent they could yet be made into a new vessel because they would still be pliable as clay. However, in spite of the entreaty of God and His prophet, the people hardened themselves in defiance and stubborn rebellion against Him, and they thereby passed from the soft and easily moulded condition of clay into a hard, fixed, and unimprovable state -- a whole baked vessel which did not answer its purpose. As nothing else could be made of them they would be cast out as worthless and consigned to destruction.

Other Examples

Israel had had plenty of opportunities to see examples of those who had hardened their heart against God and His commandments. Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, had seen many miracles and had been remonstrated with by Moses, but Pharaoh hardened his heart. Pharaoh chose not to take the word of Moses or the Word of God, and we are told that God then finally hardened his heart and brought ultimate destruction upon him and his armies.

Saul, the first king of Israel, had been a humble man and God gave him a new heart and blessed him as long as he was obedient: but when he disobeyed and would not receive correction, he became a hardened vessel, no longer usable, and brought upon himself destruction.

The Jews as a whole repeated this condition many hundreds of years later in the time of Christ. For three and one-half years, under the ministry of Jesus, they could have been as clay in the potter's hands. But the people as a whole elected to reject Jesus as their Messiah and to crucify Him, thereby turning the clay into a worthless piece of pottery too vile for ornament, too imperfect for use, and too hard to be remoulded — only fit therefore to be cast out and broken into fragments. Judas himself might have been made by the Divine Father into a vessel of honour and been known as the Son of Consolation, but instead he chose to betray his Lord for the things of the world and has ever since been known as the son of perdition.

Opportunities and Their Limit

Today the same God sits as the Master Potter and pleads with every human soul who is yet unconverted. Much of one's life may be wasted and debauched by sin, yet if there is a prompting from God (though it may be as faint as a spark of the smoking flax, or feeble as the strength in the bruised reed) there is hope that He can mould it anew into a vessel of honour, a trophy of His grace, of whom it may be said, "There shall they be called the children of the living God." But if there be continual rejection of God's mercy and love, and one passes from this world without repenting, there is no possibility of change, for the clay is no longer on the wheel but the God-given opportunities of repentance are forever past.

QUESTIONS

1. Explain the operations of the ancient potter.
2. If a vessel was found with a defect in the moulding, what was done with it?
3. Would we be safe to say that the potter always intended to make a perfect vessel? Why were the vessels not always perfect?
4. What is the spiritual meaning of the potter, the clay, and the vessel?
5. What free choice did Judah make?
6. What was the result of that choice?
7. Explain in what way we can become vessels of honour, meet for the Master's use today, also vessels of honour throughout eternity.