

Jeremiah 18:1-12 • The Potter & the Vessel

Introduction

The Bible uses a great many things from the everyday life of those living in the ancient world to teach about the principles and character of God. A recurring illustration throughout Scripture is that of “vessels”: jars, pots, etc. It’s a powerful illustration of the relationship between the Creator and the created, of the purpose and destiny for which the Creator made us, as well as many other layers of meaning including who/what shapes us, who/what we contain, and how useful we are in the course of our life and service to others in our designated roles. This lesson takes the opportunity to explore this theme based on God’s instruction to Jeremiah concerning the potter and the clay.

¹The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD saying, ²“Arise and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will announce My words to you.”

³Then I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was, making something on the wheel. ⁴But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make.

⁵Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, ⁶“Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?” declares the LORD. “Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. ⁷At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; ⁸if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. ⁹Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; ¹⁰if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it.

¹¹“So now then, speak to the men of Judah and against the inhabitants of Jerusalem saying, ‘Thus says the LORD, “Behold, I am fashioning calamity against you and devising a plan against you. Oh turn back, each of you from his evil way, and reform your ways and your deeds.”’

¹²But they will say, ‘It’s hopeless! For we are going to follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.’

[Read v.1-12]

Q: Who is the potter?

A: God is the potter.

Q: Why should this be of comfort to us?

A: It means that we’re not in the hands of “chance” or “blind fate” but in the hands of the Person of God Almighty, who is not just our Creator, but our Father. As our Father, He is personally concerned for our lives and wants to see the best for us.

*But now, O LORD, You are our Father,
We are the clay, and You our potter;
And all of us are the work of Your hand.*

Isaiah 64:8

Q: What kind of power does God the Potter hold over the clay?

A: Clay cannot mold itself, so only God has the power to properly shape and guide our life. The point of v.6-10 is that God the Potter is sovereign over the clay. The clay needs to submit to the Potter in order to be formed into something useful according to His will.

On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

Romans 9:20-24

Q: Does a potter simply make things spontaneously on the fly, without a plan?

A: No. The Potter not only has a perfect plan for the clay but sees the finished product in His mind, setting in motion a perfect plan for our life.

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

Ephesians 2:10

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*For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.
Philippians 1:6*

Point: Although **WE** might not be able to see the finished product, God has already envisioned it and promises the quality of the result.

*but just as it is written,
“THINGS WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD,
AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED THE HEART OF MAN,
ALL THAT GOD HAS PREPARED FOR THOSE WHO LOVE HIM.”
1 Corinthians 2:9*

Q: How would you say that a potter approaches his work? Does he take an assembly line or mass-production approach?

A: The Potter is patient to mold each of His creations into the proper shape, taking the time each one requires to become the object of His will. It takes time to make a worthwhile product.

Point: God may use hands other than His own in the course of the shaping process, such as the hands of parents, teachers, friends, family, fellow Believers, etc. But they are all ultimately guided by His own.

Summary: The Potter is a Person (not a mysterious force of chance), who shapes us over time according to His plan, patiently overseeing the process until it produces His final, intended result.

Q: Who is the clay?

A: In the specific context of Jeremiah 18, Judah is the clay, but as a general application, **WE** are the clay.

Q: What is a common term related to this teaching which the Bible uses to describe Believers?

A: Believers are God's "vessels".

Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His," and, "Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness." Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.

2 Timothy 2:19-21

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves;

2 Corinthians 4:7

But the Lord said to him, "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel;

Acts 9:15

Q: What are the basic ingredients of clay? What might they represent?

A: Dust mixed with water. We as human beings are of the dust (Psalm 103:14), but when mixed with the water of the Spirit of God come to life through faith in Christ.

Q: How valuable is clay just by itself?

A: It's of practically no value whatsoever. It is made valuable only in the right hands for the right purpose. Therefore where God is concerned, no one can actually calculate the potential of another's life.

Q: What is the nature of clay? Can it mold itself?

A: It **yields** to being shaped and molded. Where we're concerned this can either be by the hands of God or the hands of another.

Point: *When it comes to the will of God, there's no such thing as a "self-made Christian".*

Q: What is the wheel? How does it ultimately relate to both the potter and the clay?

A: The wheel is life, spun alone at the control of the Potter in order to properly arrange the circumstances to successfully mold us. Our lives are not controlled by chance or luck, but by the Potter.

Q: Is it possible that the clay might wonder whether or not the circumstances are, indeed, right for the ultimate purposes intended?

A: From the clay's point of view that's very possible. It must come to realize the truth that comes from trusting wholly in the Potter regardless of the perceived circumstances.

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.

Romans 8:28

Q: What is the most important characteristic of the wheel? Is it the size?

A: No, the most important thing is that it's on center so that everything is properly balanced. One's life must be properly centered on Christ.

But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Matthew 6:33

[Re-Read v.11-12]

Q: Keeping to the potter/vessel theme, what is wrong with the vessels as described in v. 4 and expanded on in v.11-12?

A: Having not submitted wholly to the Potter, they are imperfect or described as "spoiled" vessels.

Q: What was the cause of the damage? Whose fault was it?

A: The fault is with the clay because of their disobedience, "we are going to follow our own plans".

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Q: What does it mean to us that instead of throwing out the clay and beginning again with a new lump, the Potter re-makes the clay again?

A: It's a picture of God's grace He may use difficult tests or even discipline to get us to yield, but in the end we will become a useful vessel in His image.

Q: Who are some of the biblical examples of people God gave a second chance?

A: David, Jonah, Peter, etc. With God there is always the opportunity to become what He originally intended in spite of ourselves, to still be properly shaped and molded to His ends.

Q: What tool would you expect to find in a potter's workshop which seems to be obviously missing, yet probably implied?

A: There is no mention of a furnace which is crucial to the finished product. No clay vessel is worth anything until it's gone through the furnace.

Q: What would this represent in biblical terms?

A: Trials.

*"But He knows the way I take;
When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.
Job 23:10*

*"Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver;
I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.
Isaiah 48:10*

*Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you,
which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange
thing were happening to you; but to the degree that you share
the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the
revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.
1 Peter 4:12-13*

Point: When it comes to trials, we must yield to the Potter, allowing Him to have His own way in order to become the vessel destined.

[Read Jeremiah 19:1-2 and 10-11]

¹Thus says the LORD, "Go and buy a potter's earthenware jar, and take some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests. ²Then go out to the valley of Ben-hinnom, which is by the entrance of the potsherd gate, and proclaim there the words that I tell you...

¹⁰"Then you are to break the jar in the sight of the men who accompany you ¹¹and say to them, "Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Just so will I break this people and this city, even as one breaks a potter's vessel, which cannot again be repaired; and they will bury in Topheth because there is no other place for burial.

Q: What is significant about the place where this takes place?

A: This valley is called "Gehenna" in New Testament Greek and becomes the word used for "hell". It is one of the places of Israel's greatest sins right outside of Jerusalem, turned into a constantly smoldering garbage dump by Josiah. It is the very picture of what one's unaddressed sins look like now and will inevitably lead.

Q: What does the breaking of the vessel represent?

A: God's judgment. Having brought and smashed a finished vessel, the message is that there are some things which cannot be repaired, a spiritual "point of no return" if you will.

*If anyone sees his brother committing a sin not leading to death,
he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit
sin not leading to death. **There is a sin leading to death; I do
not say that he should make request for this.***

1 John 5:16

Point: *It is important to yield and allow yourself to be continually molded. If one ceases from that attitude, they can become hardened and unshapable into anything but what the wrong hands have formed them into. The most important thing is to remain available, clean, and empty for His will and ways.*

*Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.
2 Timothy 2:21*

Overall Application

To what degree are you submitting to the hands of the Potter?