

Although it may not sound like it, today we are looking at one of the most powerful stories in the whole witness of the Bible. It is the account of Jeremiah’s trip to the potter’s house. References to the potter and the clay are made on numerous occasions in the Bible. As we begin to study the significance of Jeremiah’s story, I think we will quickly recognize the powerful spiritual implications of this image for us all. [Read Jeremiah 18:1-11]

In this story the Lord makes reference to Israel being like clay in the hands of the potter. We should listen again to Paul as he describes the fate of Israel in Romans 9:20-21: *“But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’” Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use?”* (NIV)

As I said, the Bible makes reference to humans as clay in the Potter’s hands on many occasions. Like in Isaiah 45:9: *“Does the clay say to the potter, what are you making?”* That question got me thinking about an art class that I took when I was in high school—a sculpting class. It should have been called the “play with clay” class. During 4th period I would go to my sculpting class to work with clay. Throughout the grading period we were given several different projects, each more challenging than the last. At some point in the class we were to graduate to using a pottery wheel. How many of you have ever worked on a pottery wheel? It’s not that easy. The very first time I sat down, I took a lump of clay and put it down on the wheel and I started the foot pedal, and the clay flew off and hit Gary Fox who was sitting at the pottery wheel next to me.

There’s a lot involved in the process of making a pot. Once we learned the basic ways to work the clay, the pot took on whatever shape we gave it and I’ll admit that in that class I made some pretty ugly things. Never once during my pottery experience did the clay ever say to me what it wanted to be. The clay was totally subject to my design. As I begin to think about actual clay and the

reference made to us being clay, I realized that there are some significant differences.

Yes, we are clay, and that's OK, but we're clay *with a will*. Clay that I worked with in my art class had no will. There is a significant difference, because although God may have a wonderful purpose for our lives, we may never see this purpose come about because of our own willfulness and disobedience. *We are definitely not ordinary clay*. Jeremiah prophesies about clay that the Potter can do nothing with.

If we were all potters, there are three kinds of clay that we would find hard to work with. Pastor Jeff Seaman has identified these types of clay in a sermon he titled, "What Type of Clay Are You?" Since God refers to his people as clay, and since each type of clay I am about to mention is relevant to our lives, I'm basically saying "We're clay and that's OK." **WHAT KIND OF CLAY IS HARDEST TO WORK WITH? THERE ARE THREE DIFFERENT KINDS.**

**1. CLAY THAT IS HARDENED.** This is clay that at one time was soft and moldable and pliable. All of us as believers when we first come to Christ are soft and moldable clay; our lives are placed in the Potter's hands. But over a period of time there are those who allow their spiritual lives to dry up. Nothing can penetrate their outer shell. They have closed themselves off to spiritual truth. I have known many folks whose lives have become hardened. They are no longer affected by the things of the Spirit. When people become hardened God cannot do much with them. (They are clay that stubbornly ignores God) There is only one way for a pot like this to be used again, it must be completely flattened so the process of molding it can start over.

The prophet Hosea had a wife who left him to go out into the world. She completely turned away from her husband. This woman exemplified Israel's relationship with God; they had become a hardened people. This is why many times our loved ones or friends who run from God have to hit rock bottom

before they will look up. That is because God is taking a dry hardened pot and he is softening it, so it can be used again.

**2. THE SECOND KIND OF CLAY THAT A POTTER CANNOT WORK WITH IS DRY CLAY.** Clay that lacks moisture is still clay, but it can't be used. The clay is just soft enough to be called clay, but not moldable enough for the potter's use. This is the place where many Christians seem to be. They have just enough of a relationship with God to know they are forgiven. They think they have done just enough to make sure they are rescued when the world comes to an end. These are folks who go to church, love God, believe in salvation by grace, even participate in ministry. But that's as far as it goes, they never surrender their lives to God. They basically live life for themselves. They aren't bad people, but they refuse to allow the Potter (capital P) to mold them. Yet, they will no doubt turn to God when their world begins to fall apart.

Christian friends, there may be millions of believers who God can do nothing with because they won't soften up enough to be used. You might say, well, I would like to be more moldable, what should I do? What is it that makes clay soft? WATER! Jeremiah 2:13 says that the cracked cisterns which the people dug could not hold water. And all throughout Scripture the living God is compared to water, springs of water, living water, life-giving water.

Sometimes merely by people watching we can tell those who are soft, who are empty vessels looking to be filled with God's goodness and love. If we want to be softened, we must ask the Lord to come near and to pour out his Holy Spirit afresh on us. One way we can determine if our clay too dry is by answering one simple question: Have I served someone in Christ's name recently?

**3. THE THIRD CLAY THAT IS HARD TO USE IS CLAY WITH HIDDEN AIR BUBBLES.** Perhaps this type of pot went through every process just fine. The potter threw it on the wheel and completed the pot. It looks beautiful, but one final test will tell the potter if the clay is pure. Only fire can detect this. Now and then clay has hidden air pockets. We cannot see them or feel them.

When the potter puts the clay into the fire it heats up and the air trapped in between expands and explodes the pot. That's sort of like believers who look like they have it all together. They know all the right words to say; they know how to give the *appearance* of faith. They may even be involved in Christian ministry. To look at these people we would say that's a person who loves God. They look like a finished work of art, a sculpture! But those individuals know that deep within them are hidden pockets of sin that they have not confessed to God. No one else can see them but they are there.

Of course, God has ways of turning up the fire in our lives. Proverbs 28:13 says, "*Whoever conceals their sins does not prosper, but the one who confesses and renounces them finds mercy.*" Jesus called Jewish leaders vipers and hypocrites because on the outside, they looked like a polished vessel, but on the inside, they were full of sin. Maybe we can fool everyone around us, but we will never fool God. The potter's house—and what Jeremiah sees there—provides an object lesson for God's people. The relationship of the potter to the clay captures something of God's relationship to us. Israel should have known this because the prophet Isaiah says, "*Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker, those who are nothing but potsherds among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?'*" (45:9).

This relationship is first about God's sovereignty. "*Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?*" the Lord asks in verse 6. Of course, he can! But God does not capriciously move *nations or people* like pawns on a chess board—on a whim. Rather, he has bound himself voluntarily to his people by his covenantal love for them. We are granted free will and a measure of self-determination. This is where the analogy of clay on a potter's wheel breaks down, even though we can still be hardened, dry or have hidden air bubbles. Whatever kind of clay we are, we are free to cooperate with the Potter or not. This is not a one-way flow of willpower. Rather, it's a collaboration. What the Sovereign Lord chooses to do varies in response to the behavior of his people—both then and now. Jeremiah says that we are all invited to *reform* our ways as God *re-forms* us, because we are clay. And that's OK. Amen.