

Today we’re looking at one of the most powerful stories in the Bible. It is a message that came to Jeremiah from the Lord about the potter and the clay. As we look at the significance of Jeremiah’s story, I think we will quickly recognize the powerful spiritual implications of this image for all of us. In Jeremiah 18 the Lord makes reference to Israel being like clay in the hands of the potter. In his letter to the Romans, Paul describes the fate of Israel in this way: *“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?”* (9:20-21)

The Bible alludes to us humans as “Clay in the Potter’s Hands” on other occasions, as in Isaiah 45:9 *“Does the clay say to the potter, what are you making?”* That question got me thinking about when I was in high school and I took a sculpting class. It should have been called the “play with clay” class. During 4th period I would go to my pottery class and work with clay. Throughout the year we were given several different projects, each more challenging than the last. As we progressed, we were supposed to learn how to create something on the 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 I put it down on the wheel and I started the foot pedal, and the clay flew off and hit Gary Fox sitting who was at the pottery wheel next to me.

Additionally, there is a lot involved in the process of making a simple pot. Once we learned the basic ways to work the clay, the pot takes on whatever shape we give it and let me say that in pottery class I made some pretty ugly things—not like the cutting board or towel rack that my mother displayed in her kitchen. She never once put my pottery on display. Clay never says to you what it wants to be. Clay is always totally subject to our design. Thinking about the reference to us being clay I realize there are some significant differences. Clay that potters work with has no will. We are clay, but we’re clay with a will.

There's a big difference. Although God may have a wonderful purpose for our lives, we may never experience this purpose because of our own stubbornness and refusal to do what God wants us to do. *We are definitely not ordinary clay.*

Jeremiah's prophecy is about clay which the Potter can do nothing with. I can think of three kinds of clay that would be hard to work with. Since God refers to his people as clay, I believe each type of clay is relevant to our lives. What kind of clay is hardest to work with? I can think of three:

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 trust in Jesus are soft, moldable clay. Our lives are placed into the Potter's hands. But over time our spiritual lives can dry up. Nothing can penetrate our souls any longer. We have closed ourselves off to spiritual truth. I have known many folks whose lives have become hardened. They are no longer affected by things of the Spirit.

When people become hardened there's not much God can do with them. They seem like clay with a stubborn will to ignore God. There is only one way for a pot or cup like this to be used again, it must be remade and the process of molding must start all over again. The prophet Hosea had a wife who had left him to go out into the world. She turned away from the Lord. This woman also exemplified Israel's relationship with God. They had become people who were hardened. This is why sometimes our loved ones who run from God have to hit bottom before they look up. God can then take a dry hardened pot, so it can be used again.

2. THE SECOND KIND OF CLAY THAT A POTTER CANNOT WORK WITH IS DRY CLAY. Clay that lacks enough moisture still exists as clay but cannot be used. This type of clay is just soft enough to be called clay, but not soft enough to be moldable. This is the place where many Christian people are. They have just enough of a relationship with God to know they belong to God, and they are forgiven. They think they have done just enough to make sure they will be rescued whenever the end comes.

These folks go to church, they love God, they believe in Jesus Christ, they participate in worship, but that's as far as it goes. They never surrender their lives to God. They insist on living life for themselves. They aren't bad people, but they refuse to allow the Potter to mold and shape their lives. There may be millions of believers who God can do nothing with because they won't soften enough to be used. You might think, well, I want to be more moldable, what should I do? Let me ask you what makes clay soft? WATER! In John 4 we hear Jesus say to the woman at the well, "*Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life*" (John 4:14). Throughout Scripture the living God is compared to water, springs of water, living water, life-giving water!

If we look closely we can see those who are soft, we can see that they are empty vessels waiting for God to fill them. If we want to be softened, we can say, "Lord, come and pour out your Holy Spirit on me and use me." One way we can see whether or not we fit into this category is by answering one question. What have I done to serve Jesus Christ lately? Have I served someone else in Christ's name?

3. THE THIRD CLAY THAT IS HARD TO USE IS CLAY WITH HIDDEN AIR BUBBLES. This kind of pottery is completed. It looks beautiful, but the final test will tell the potter whether or not the clay was pure. Only fire can revive the last defect. Every now and then some clay has a hidden air pocket. You cannot see it or feel it. When the potter puts this type of clay into the fire it heats up and the air trapped in between expands and explodes the pottery. You see, it's no different with many believers who by appearance look like they have it all together. They know all the right words to say. They may even be involved in some Christian ministry. To look at these people we would say that person loves God. They look like a finished work of art—a sculpture! But deep in their lives they recognize there are things hidden that have not been exposed to anyone. No one else can see them, but they are there. It could be almost anything—lust, pride, lack of integrity, anger, addiction, or whatever.

Dearest friends: God has ways of turning up the fire in our lives. If we are a vessel God cannot use, turn to God. Proverbs 28:13 says, “*He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy*” (NIV). Jesus constantly called the Jewish leaders “vipers and hypocrites” because on the outside, they looked like a shiny polished vessel, but on the inside they were full of sin. Maybe we have fooled everyone else, but we will never fool God. The setting of the potter’s house—and what Jeremiah sees there—provides an object lesson for the prophet and for his people. The relationship of the potter to the clay conveys some of the truth of God’s relationship to this world. The Israelites had long affirmed that in the beginning God formed people out of the dust of the ground, i.e. clay (Job 33:6). Our relationship to the Creator is first of all about his sovereignty. “*Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?*” the Lord asks in verse 6.

Well, of course, he can. He illustrates his sovereignty over the affairs of nations in statements about *uprooting and tearing down*. Yet God does not capriciously move the nations, according to his whim. The Lord bound himself voluntarily to us by his love, yet we have free will and a measure of self-determination. This, then, is where we cease no longer resemble clay on a potter’s wheel. Even though we can be hardened, dry, or full of air bubbles, the brand of clay that we are has the option to cooperate with the Potter—our Creator—or not.

If the Potter were to exercise full sovereignty, then the only “if” in the equation that remains is, “If the clay conforms to God’s will.” The Potter has graciously given an “if” to the clay itself. This is not a one-way flow of influence. Rather, it involves give-and-take. Whatever the Sovereign Lord chooses to do with each one of us varies in response to how his people have responded to his initiative, in Jeremiah’s day and even today. Jeremiah says that God’s people are invited to *receive disaster or receive good*, depending on their response to the molding and shaping hand of God. That’s true for all of us.

We are *clay in the Potter’s hand!* What kind of clay are you going to be?
Amen.