



SHAPED BY AN ARTIST

Catalog No. 1315
 Jeremiah 18:1-12
 16th Message
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 June 10th, 2001

The prophet Jeremiah was a master of metaphor. The pages of his great book have numerous images, analogies and comparisons that picture our relationship with God. It was God who gave these images to his people through Jeremiah, knowing that a picture is worth a thousand words. Judah had forsaken the fountain of living water for broken cisterns that could not hold water. The nation's spiritual life, moral conscience and social integrity were rapidly deteriorating, and judgment was on the way. Yet God kept speaking to his people, hoping that they might repent and turn from evil. This was why God gave them visual aids — to get their attention and help them realize that what they were doing was utterly foolish.

Chapter 18 has yet another visual aid. This morning we will go down to the potter's house to learn a lesson from the craftsman and his clay.

The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD saying, "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will announce My words to you." Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something on the wheel. But 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. (Jer 18:1-4, NASB)

Clay pots of all shapes and sizes still are very common artifacts in the Middle East. The invention of the clay pot for storage and transportation had huge ramifications for that society. Everyone knew where the potter lived. He was recognized as an artist and a craftsman. Pottery was very much an art form. Clay pots were not only useful, they were very beautiful, too.

In our text the LORD instructs Jeremiah to go down to the potter's house. The prophet observed the potter spinning a pot on the wheel, but then the craftsman took the clay and crushed it and began again. I was obvious that something wasn't right with the pot. It a design defect of some kind. Perhaps a stone or a piece of straw or an air bubble had got into the mix. The clay might have been stiff and resisted the potter's hand. The commonest reason for beginning again was that the pot was not centered. However, the potter didn't throw out the clay; he made it into another vessel, working the lump until it met his specifications. Most pots required several attempts before the potter was pleased.

The meaning behind this scene at the potter's house was obvious to Jeremiah: God was the potter, and the house of Israel was the clay, but the clay had become

spoiled through idolatry and sin. The people of Judah had forsaken God to pursue worthless and empty idols, the gods of their world. As a result, the pot was not turning out the way God had intended. It had spiritual flaws and character defects. So he would crush the clay and begin again. He would remold and reshape his people.

The text has some wonderful truths that we can reflect on and apply to our lives.

1. We are shaped and formed by a Master Artist.

The word potter comes from the same root as the word "form." Throughout the Bible, God applies this term to himself. In the creation story, God took dust (clay) and from it made man. He threw a pot, he formed a vessel. In the Genesis account we read, "Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being" (Gen 2:7).

From the very beginning God has been forming and creating us in the same way that a potter creates a vessel from a piece of clay. God had even told Jeremiah that he had used this same process with him: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you" (Jer 1:5). The prophet Isaiah said, "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" (Isa 64:8).

So God is the potter and we are the clay. Our very existence is the result of a master artist at work. We are molded and shaped by his hands. Certainly, this applies to our physical makeup. Before we were born, we existed in the mind of God. He pictured what he wanted us to look like. We are not just the product of genetic codes and DNA. We are not a mistake, a mutation. We are a masterpiece. Everything about our bodies — the shape of our head, the length of our nose, the size of our ears — is the work of an artist. We might wish we looked different — bigger or smaller, shorter or taller. We would like to make some places rounder and others flatter. We think we have physical flaws, because the advertising media says that we should look perfect. But that is nonsense. We were created by an artist. We are beautiful to God.

And we are being shaped and molded spiritually, too. God, the master craftsman, is shaping our character. He has a vision of what he wants us to become, a purpose for our lives that is unique and significant for each of us. He has designed us to be his holy people.

We are vessels that house something very special – the Spirit of God. Paul wrote, “We have this treasure in earthen vessels.” We may be ordinary clay pots, but God is molding and shaping us for his use — and he uses everything in our lives to accomplish his purposes. God is the potter, we are the clay.

It took me twenty years to figure out a basic difference between my wife and me. Liz is an artist and I am not. She creates things. She notices color, lines, design — everything. She can see all of these things in her mind. It is filled with beautiful pictures, all in color. But I am not an artist. I am an engineer. I see things in black and white. I want things that are practical, new things that work. Creating anything is painful for me.

Recently we were in Florence, the city of art and artists. We visited a lot of galleries, and I had my guidebook in hand to check off my list the things I was supposed to see. But my wife had no list. When a painting or a piece of sculpture caught her eye, she would almost go into a trance, enraptured by its beauty. Once she asked me what we had just seen. I couldn't remember, but she had a vivid imprint on her mind that she would be able to retrieve later. She enjoys and appreciates art in a way that I can't.

When we think about ourselves or others, either spiritually or physically, we need to appreciate that everything about us is the work of a master artist.

2. *When necessary, God begins again, reshaping and remolding us into his design.*

At times, sin and failure spoil what God is creating us to be. We all have character flaws and weaknesses. We are tempted, and we succumb to patterns of sin. But God doesn't throw out the clay. Even though our sin may frustrate his purpose for us, he is never discouraged. He doesn't give up. He simply takes the lump of clay and begins working with it again. He starts over, remaking us into something more beautiful and more special, and he keeps working with us until he is pleased. That phrase at the end of verse 4 literally means, “until we are right in His eyes.” God has a vision of what we are going to be. He is an artist, and like most artists he is not satisfied with something less than what he wants to create. So he molds, shapes and remolds until he gets it right, until we become what he is creating us to be.

God is in the business of taking men and women with impurities and blemishes, spoiled vessels, and skillfully shaping them into something useful. He knows our flaws and our possibilities and, like a true artist, he creates something beautiful out of us. This is the story of Simon Peter, Saul of Tarsus, Rahab, David, Ruth, Matthew, and so many other figures in the Bible. John 9 records the story of the time when Jesus approached a blind man. Jesus spat on the ground and made clay, and put the clay on the blind man's eyes. The man went away and washed his eyes, and when he returned he could see.

This is the miracle of our life and the story of our spiritual journey. Sometimes that can be a painful experience. God has to apply pressure, like a potter does with the clay. It hurts when he has to work out the blemishes in us or remove a stone. Our circumstances on the wheel of life may not be pleasant at times, but we have to remember that God the artist is at work.

Ray Stedman often quoted these lines:

When God wants to drill and skill a man,
When he wants to mold a man to play the noblest part.
When he yearns with all his heart to create so great and bold a man that all the world will be amazed.
How he ruthlessly perfects whom he royally selects.
How he hammers him and hurts him and with mighty blows converts him into trial shapes of clay which only God can understand.
How he bends but never breaks when his good he undertakes.
How he uses whom he chooses and with every purpose fuses him;
By every act induces him to try his power out.
God knows what he's about.¹

3. *We must never forget that God is sovereign over the clay.*

Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, “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. (Jer 18:5-6)

The Scriptures have many similar word pictures:

You turn *things* around!

Shall the potter be considered as equal with the clay,

That what is made would say to its maker, “He did not make me”;

Or what is formed say to him who formed it, “He has no understanding”? (Isa 29:16)

Woe to *the one* who quarrels with his Maker—

An earthenware vessel among the vessels of earth!

Will the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you doing?

Or the thing you are making say, ‘He has no hands’?” (Isa 45:9)

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? (Rom 9:20-21)

God is the potter. We are not. Sometimes we get that confused. In our arrogance and pride we want to control the course of our own lives, because we don't like what God is doing to us and how he is molding us. But God has the right and the ability to mold us and shape us the way he desires. When he is not pleased with what is being formed, he has the right to determine

what shape our lives will take. This is one of our greatest problems. Many Christians are not satisfied with what God is doing or not doing in their lives, so they take matters into their own hands. They start shaping their own lives, trying to become who they want to be instead of what God wants them to be.

This leads us to our last principle.

4. Our obedience and teachability is very important in the process of letting God shape our lives.

In the closing verses, God speaks a word of judgment on Judah.

“At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; if 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. 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.”’ “But 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.’ (Jer 18:7-12)

In this word about judgment, God informs the people of Judah that their response is very important in determining his actions. God may have plans to destroy a nation, but if that nation repents, he will relent or change his mind. This is what happened with Nineveh in the days of Jonah. Another example is Israel in the days of Hezekiah. If God plans on doing good to a nation but that nation does evil, then God will send judgment instead of blessing. God informs Judah that he is planning on calamity, but his exhortation is to repent.

Does this mean that God changes his mind? We have been taught that God does not change, that that is one of his attributes. However, we must understand that God’s relenting or changing his plan as a result of our response to his word is part of his unchanging character. We would be wise to understand this. Our obedience, repentance and submission are crucial to how God molds us and shapes us. He does not delight in judgment; he puts it off as long as possible. What he delights in is showing compassion and granting a blessing instead.

Verse 12 indicates that Judah had no intention of changing her evil ways, however. She wanted to follow her own plans and was unwilling to turn from the stubbornness of her evil heart. So we have the dramatic epilogue to the analogy of the potter, in chapter 19:

Thus 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. Then 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, (Jer 19:1-2)

Jeremiah did as the Lord commanded. He pronounced the judgment that was coming on Judah as a result of her unwillingness to repent.

“Then you are to break the jar in the sight of the men who accompany you and 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;

Judah had become so hardened there was nothing left for God to do but to break the pot. A spoiled vessel can be reshaped on the potter’s wheel, but once it becomes hardened it is beyond reconstruction and is fit only for breaking.

The word for us is that we are to remain soft and pliable, receptive and teachable. That is how we allow God to shape us into the vessels that he desires. When God brings difficult circumstances into our lives we are not to resist, grow bitter, become resentful or fight against the pressure; we are to accept them and remain moldable. The only thing God can do with a hardened heart is break it.

It is so much easier to be shaped into what God wants us to become when we are young, when the clay is fresh and soft. As we get older, however, we tend to become more crusty, more set in our ways, more resistant to change. We need to remember that God’s artistry will be with us all our lives. We need to continue to be teachable and moldable. We must never say it is hopeless and grow stubborn and hardened. As long as there is life in our bodies we can be shaped, re-shaped and changed.

So let us remain humble and moldable. Let us place ourselves back on the wheel so that God can get his hands on us. Remember Paul’s word to Timothy: “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 Tim 2:20-21).

God wants to make us into vessels of honor. It is never too late to start. Everything depends on how receptive we are to his work in our lives.

In the year 1501, Michelangelo was commissioned to work on a great statue of David. The artist had been surveying a piece of marble for the work, an enormous block that had been spoiled by Master Agostino and abandoned. It was reported that Michelangelo couldn’t take his eyes off of it. Every day he would walk to where it had been sitting for many years, behind Santa

Maria del Fiore, and there he would touch it, measure it and caress it.

He would make of it, not a statue like the others who wanted it, but a giant. Studying that marble he had realized that he could actually exploit the mistakes of the first rough-hewer, even the holes bored between the legs. And by removing only the indispensable, he would be able to retain the colossal proportions.²

At last Michelangelo was selected to do the work over Leonardo, and the marble was assigned to him.

Two years of cloistered retreat in the courtyard of the Opera del Duomo passed, with no news filtering to the world outside. Although Michelangelo revealed nothing, it can be guessed that he worked incessantly on the giant, at least in the first three months; day and night, without rest, without a pause, to delete all the chisel marks left by Master Agostino, especially in places where so little marble remained that he could only smooth and polish.

Like a dark insect buzzing around an immense plant, up and down on the scaffolding, his homely face beside the magnificent features that were emerging from nothing, by daylight and by candlelight, his hair turned gray by the marble dust, as if nourishing his creation with his very breath, Michelangelo lived and consummated in solitude, to the end, the conception and birth of his masterpiece.³

This is how God works with us. He is a Michelangelo, we are a David. We are spoiled and flawed, abandoned and unwanted, but God chooses us anyway. He has a vision of what we can become. He hides us away and works on us night and day, molding and shaping, remolding and reshaping. God is an artist. He is creating a masterpiece.

The Potter fashioned the cup
With whirling wheel and hand;
Hour by hour he built it up
To the form that his thought had planned.
'Twas broken and broken again,
Marred by a flaw, a crack, a stain,
Marred, so he made it again and again;
Shaped it with joy and labor and pain.⁴

—Annie Johnson Flint

1. David Roper, *The Strength of a Man* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1989), 48.

2. Bruno Nardini, *Michelangelo, Biography of a Genius* (Florence: Giunti Gruppo Editoriale, 1999), 52.

3. Nardini, 54.

4. David Roper, *In Quietness and Confidence* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House, 1999), 113.

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